**Class Conduct Policy**

This document describes appropriate online behavior. The requirements for your grade on discussion assignments are described in the document Discussion Forum Grades

**1. Rationale**

Physicists make progress by creating hypotheses and testing them through experiments. Philosophers make progress by clearly articulating reasons for believing claims and then having others come up with objections.

In a philosophy class, if we are not disagreeing, we’re doing it wrong. If someone sees a flaw in our reasoning but doesn’t feel comfortable bringing it up, we don’t make progress. We don’t learn. We waste our time.

Therefore, it is essential that every person in the class feel comfortable offering and receiving criticism.

In an in-person class, my class conduct rule is 1 sentence: Don’t be an asshole. That works because there’s immediate feedback in-person both verbal and non-verbal (e.g., people gasp, tones of voice change) so we all quickly develop a shared sense of the boundaries. Plus, I’m right there and can intervene / mediate as soon as things start to become problematic.

None of those mechanisms are available for our online class. Thus we need a more formal policy and clearer expectations.

More importantly, the nature of an online class demands that all of us exercise more care in how we express our ideas than would be required in an in-person class. Think about a time when you put your foot in your mouth during a conversation. The other person’s reaction let you know what you had done. You correct the mistake/apologize right there. But here, you’ll post your comments and come back a couple of days later only to find that they weren’t understood as you intended. That’s worse for you and worse for the rest of us.

## 2. Obligations

Each member of this class has all of the following responsibilities:

1. You must not engage in any activities prohibited by the StudentConduct Code(http://www.csun.edu/catalog/policies/student-conduct-code)
2. You must contribute to the discussion. You are required to put forward your ideas. When you think you see a flaw in someone else’s reasoning, you must bring it up. When you have a question about someone else’s post, you must ask it.
3. Prior to submitting any post or peer review assignment, you must read it carefully and ensure that it complies with this policy.
4. You must take action to ensure that our discussion forums are an environment in which everyone feels able to contribute. If you see a post which you believe violates our policy, regardless of whether it is directed at you, you must take the actions described in section 5.1.
5. If you submit material which someone else identifies as violating this policy, you must take the actions described in section 5.2.

## 3. General rules

## 3.1 Stay on topic

If there were no constraints on acceptable topics, it would be impossible to design a comprehensive conduct policy. Fortunately, this is a class. We are discussing specific questions and specific arguments regarding their answers.

Simply keeping to the topic at hand should prevent most problems. I cannot imagine any portion of this class in which it would make sense to bring up different crochet techniques. Nor can I imagine any portion where it would be appropriate to imply that straight white men should have more[[1]](#footnote-1) rights than others. We don’t even need to make judgments about where the lines of offensive vs. poor taste lie. They are off-topic and thus not contributing to everyone’s learning.

## 3.2 Talk about ideas, not people

We are focused on exploring arguments and reasons for claims. Anytime you are tempted to express a judgment about a fellow student, you’ll be doing that because of something they wrote. If you stick to what they write, you can still run into trouble. But if you start making claims about other students, you’re potentially creating more problems for yourself with no gain. The best case scenario involves misinterpretations which you’ll have to spend time correcting. That wastes our time and yours.

## 3.3 Negative labels

There will be very few occasions where attaching a negative label to something someone in the class has written is beneficial. Suppose someone makes a claim which you find ridiculous. You could say, “That’s stupid point.” But remember that to receive credit, you always must give us reasons for believing your claims are true. Clearly, you disagree with the point and think it is wrong. If you want to get credit for this view, your next sentence will need to explain why the point is misguided.

So, what would labeling the point as ‘stupid’ add? It may make you feel good about yourself to put others down. How you make yourself feel good on your own time is up to you. But this is a class. The rest of us aren’t here to make you happy. We are here to learn things; you may not hijack that purpose.

More importantly, calling the point ‘stupid’ likely makes the author experience negative emotions ⎯they’ll feel angry, sad, defensive, et cetera. Strong negative emotions make it harder to actually listen to what you’re saying. Had you just explained why you believe the point is misguided, they would’ve be able to take in your criticism and either agree, revise their claim, or explain what you’re missing. So, by adding the label ‘stupid point’, you’ve reduced their ability to learn and potentially cut yourself off from learning something from them.

## 3.4 Political labels

The following concerns political labels (democrat, republican, liberal, conservative, et cetera). Please note that I am not talking about political beliefs, ideas, or ideals. Those are up for debate as long as they are on topic.

If a political label can be omitted without loss of content, don’t use it. Before you hit submit, delete the word/phrase, fix the grammar, and read it to yourself. If your post still makes sense, leave it out. If you feel you can’t make the same point without the label, you must ensure that doing so does not harm our class environment.

Please see the rationale for this rule in Appendix xxx.

## 4. Prohibited conduct

Like everything human, there will be gray areas. That doesn’t mean everything is gray. Let’s close with an incomplete list of some things which are obviously never acceptable

1. Offensive comments including those related to gender, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, disability, mental illness, neuro(a)typicality, physical appearance, body size, race, ethnicity, religion, national origin, veteran status, or age.
2. Unwelcome comments regarding a person’s lifestyle choices and practices
3. Deliberate misgendering (e.g., if someone identifies as male, referring to him as ‘her’)
4. Gratuitous or off-topic comments about sex or sexual behavior
5. Simulated physical contact (e.g., textual descriptions like “\*slap\*”, “\*hug\*” or “\*backrub\*”)
6. Threats of violence
7. Incitement of violence towards any individual, including encouraging a person to commit suicide or to engage in self-harm
8. Deliberate intimidation
9. Comments which suggest an intent to engage in stalking or following
10. Sustained disruption of discussion
11. Pattern of inappropriate social contact, such as requesting/assuming inappropriate levels of intimacy with others
12. Continued one-on-one communication after requests to cease
13. Deliberate “outing” of any aspect of a person’s identity without their consent
14. Publication of non-harassing private communication

[Add section on good communication practices, e.g., framing in terms of “I feel that\_\_\_” vs “You are\_\_\_”?]

**5. When violations occur**

There will be problems. How they are handled makes a big difference.

It is perfectly possible to make legitimate points in an illegitimate way. We all have different values, and styles of communicating. It’s likely that there will be a few instances where people step over the line purely by accident. When that happens, it is essential that we acknowledge what’s happened and repair the situation.

## 5.1 What to do when you believe someone has violated our rules

## 5.1.1 Contact

If the post threatens harm to anyone, contact the CSUN police department immediately. [INSERT PHONE #] Then contact me.

If the post is seriously disruptive, contact me immediately. You still need to raise the concern as described below, but get me in the loop right away. If someone else has already raised the concern, you should still contact me. Don’t assume I know what’s going on.

If the post is not threatening or seriously disruptive, you are not required to contact me. Still, it is a good idea to keep me in the loop. If I get behind on grading, I may not know of the problem until a lot of time has passed. Remember, you need to raise the concern on the forum in addition to contacting me.

## 5.1.2 Anger management

First, even if you feel personally offended or hurt, remember that it remains your duty to protect the class environment. If you respond to an illegitimate remark in an illegitimate way, you are now also violating our policy.

That will often be hard to do. If the misconduct was directed at you, you’ll probably feel angry. Give it a bit of time; grumble about the poster to your roommate; yell at the screen; whatever helps you calm down. Even if you weren’t the target, check in with what you are feeling. It’s a good thing that we often feel upset when we see someone doing something we believe to be wrong. However, you still need to protect the class environment.

## 5.1.3 How to call out violations

It’s not going to help to just say “I think that post violates our rules!” The person posting probably thinks their post was fine, so they will have no idea which rule you believe they violated.

Since calling out perceived violations will often be uncomfortable for everyone involved, it will help if we have a standard way of doing this. You should use the following template, and not go beyond it:

I am concerned that saying \_\_\_\_[ quote what they said, do not paraphrase it] \_\_\_\_\_\_ is problematic. I feel it violates \_\_\_\_[describe the rule]\_\_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_[why the post violates that rule]\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. [Optional: This makes me feel \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.]

## 5.2 What to do when someone believes that you have violated our rules

No one likes being accused of doing something wrong. It is perfectly normal and fine to feel upset. It is absolutely not acceptable to vent those feelings on Canvas. Your first task is to let yourself calm down. Do not respond until you have calmed down.

Once you have calmed down, you need to do 2 things: fix your post and fix the situation.

## 5.2.1 Fixing your post

If you agree that the post was problematic and can’t be fixed, delete it. Or, delete the text and write “Working on replacement”. Now you have time to think. Draft your response in a document or on a piece of paper so that you will not be tempted to hit submit until you are ready.

If you disagree and believe that your post was consistent with our policy, you should update your post with an explanation of why you believe this is the case. You need to begin by getting your head around why your colleague thinks you’ve violated the policy. Fortunately, they have told you exactly what about your post they believe violates which portion of our policy. Putting yourself in someone else’s shoes is always tricky, it’s especially difficult in a situation like this. However, you need to try your best to understand where they are coming from. My appraisal of the situation and whether penalties are required will depend heavily on whether it seems to me you have attempted to do this.

## 5.2.2 Fix the situation

No matter what your intention was in writing your post and no matter how justified you believe the charges are, you must try to remedy the situation. In many cases an apology will be warranted.

If you messed up and posted something you shouldn’t have, apologize for doing so. But in other cases, you may think that they are overreacting. You may genuinely not understand why your post caused offense or hurt. That's often normal. We're all sensitive to different things. But you didn't mean to offend them or hurt them, right? (If the answer is no, you do not belong in this class.) So, apologize for causing offense and tell them that it wasn’t your intention. (It’s probably best to say something like: “I didn’t realize my post would be upsetting, I’m sorry that it caused you to feel upset.” rather than “I’m sorry you felt upset” which can seem like you’re blaming them.)

## 6. Penalties

In most cases, if everyone follows the guidance in Section 5, there will be nothing further that I need to do to remedy the situation. This section describes how I will impose penalties should they be necessary to deter future violations.

## 6.1 Ordinary violations

When it appears a remedy is needed, I will normally employ the least severe grade penalty likely to be effective to deter future violations.

## 6.2 Significant violations

I will not hesitate to take severe action against any student whom I judge likely to continue damaging our ability to learn from each other. At a minimum, I will quarantine the violator in a discussion group by themselves until I am confident that they will not engage in violating conduct. As they are the only member of that group, they will receive 0 points for all graded discussions and all peer review portions of assignments. Discussions and peer review are very large portion of the course grade; quarantined students will be given no opportunity to make up those points. I may also pursue further action with the Dean of Students as provided for in the Student Conduct Code.

## 7. Agreement

By remaining enrolled in this course, you acknowledge that the nature of the online course format requires more careful attention to your conduct than in-person classes, and you agree to conduct yourself in accordance with this Class Conduct Policy and its revisions.

## Appendix: Political labels

Why is it okay to talk about political ideas but the associated labels are strongly discouraged? The following describes my concern and will help you judge what’s appropriate.

Human beings are deeply tribal creatures. Throughout most of our evolutionary history our survival depended on very close ties to other humans in our group. Thus we are wired to respond differently to in-group members vs out-group members. Sometimes that’s harmless ⎯Go Dodgers! Boo other teams!—sometimes it isn’t ⎯ahem, Twitter.

There’s good psychological / political science research that once an issue, position, or idea gets identified with a political label, it becomes extremely hard to think critically about it. If we show you a new policy proposal that’s not related to a common partisan hot button issue and don’t tell you who is proposing it, you’ll probably try to assess it on its merits and your own personal values. If we tell you it comes from the opposite political party, all the negative parts will jump out at you. If we tell you it comes from your party, all the positive parts will jump out at you. That’s perfectly normal. The nice thing about rational minds is that we can with effort overcome those biases. But it requires effort.

Thus I am concerned that the use of political labels unnecessarily impairs critical thinking and discussion. Critical thinking at the level this class requires is hard enough; the obligation to ensure an effective classroom environment effectively means an obligation to ensure everyone can engage in critical thinking. When you attach political labels to ideas you impair critical thought. That’s why I urge you to omit political labels whenever they aren’t absolutely necessary.

1. Or less [↑](#footnote-ref-1)