

# A Theory of Moderation



by **Jeff Atwood**  
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We believe deeply in community moderation. That's why we appoint [Pro Tempore Moderators](#) and, ideally, [democratically elected community moderators](#) for every site in our network. But what do community moderators do? The short answer is, **as little as possible!**

From the very first version of [Stack Overflow faq](#) way back in mid-2008, our goal has always been to give power back to the community:

*Stack Overflow is run by you! If you want to help us run Stack Overflow, you'll need reputation first. Reputation is a (very) rough measurement of how much the Stack Overflow community trusts you. Reputation is never given, it is earned by convincing other Stack Overflow users that you know what you're talking about.*

We designed the [Stack Exchange network](#) engine to be mostly self-regulating, in that we amortize the overall moderation cost of the system across thousands of teeny-tiny slices of effort contributed by regular, everyday users. Specifically, per the [reputation privileges](#):

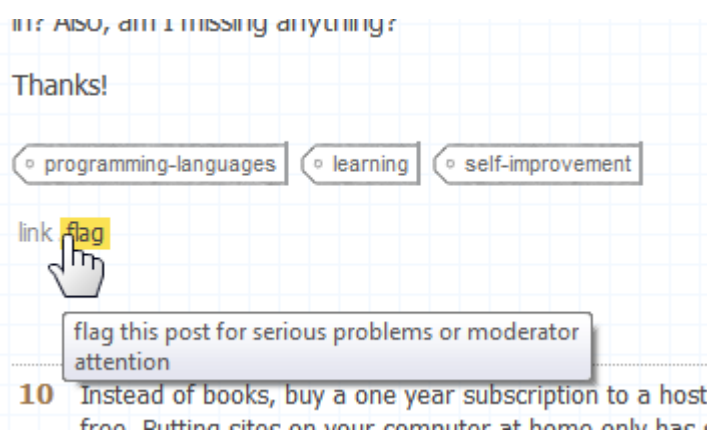
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- Users with 15 rep can flag posts.
- Users with 500 rep can review posts from new users.
- Users with 2,000 rep can edit any question or answer in the system.
- Users with 3,000 rep can cast close and open votes.
- Users with 10,000 rep can cast delete and undelete votes on questions, and have access to a moderation dashboard.
- Users with 15,000 rep can protect posts.
- Users with 20,000 rep can cast delete votes on negatively voted answers.

Even with active community self-regulation, moderators occasionally need to intervene.

**Moderators are human exception handlers**, there to deal with those (hopefully rare) exceptional conditions that should not *normally* happen, but when they do, they can bring your entire community to a screaming halt -- *if* you don't have human exception handling in place.

The most common moderator task is to follow up on [flagged posts](#). Every post contains a small **flag link**, which anyone with 15 reputation can use.



Posts can be flagged as spam, offensive, or just general "needs moderator attention" with an explanatory comment or link.

## I am flagging this answer because

☒ it needs ♦ moderator attention

☐ not an answer

This was posted as an answer, but it does not answer the question. It should possibly be an edit, a comment, another question, or deleted altogether.

☐ low quality

This answer has serious formatting or content issues and might not be salvageable.

☐ other

Something not quite right? Let us know about it, and please provide relevant links if possible.

☐ it doesn't belong here

☐ it is spam

☐ it is not welcome in our community

[cancel](#)

24 inform moderator flags remaining

Flag Answer

Once flagged, a post increments a flag count that shows up in the topbar for every moderator.



If you see anything in the system that is evil, weird, or in any way exceptional and deserving of moderator attention for any reason... **flag it!** That's the primary job of a moderator: to look at every flagged post, and take action if necessary.

Moderators also have some special abilities necessary to handle those rare exceptional conditions:

- Moderator votes are binding. Any place we have voting -- close, open, delete, undelete, offensive, migration, etc -- that vote will reach the threshold and take effect *immediately* if a single moderator casts a vote.
- Moderators can lock posts. Locked posts cannot be voted on or changed in any way.
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- Moderators can [protect questions](#). Protected questions only allow answers by users with more than 10 reputation.
- Moderators can see more data in the system, including vote statistics (but not 'who voted for this post') and user profile information.
- Moderators can place users in [timed suspension](#), and delete users if necessary.
- Moderators can perform large-scale maintenance actions such as merging questions and tags, tag synonym approvals, and so forth.

So in summary, if you are a community moderator on a Stack Exchange site, here's what to expect:

1. As a moderator, your actions now represent the community, so you will be held to a higher standard of behavior. You are an ambassador of trust, with the same sorts of rights that the official development team and community coordinators have.
2. Your goal is to **guide the community with gentle -- but firm -- intervention**. Respect your fellow community members at all times; demonstrate fairness and impartiality in your actions.
3. Whenever possible, **try to leave frequent comments on posts where you've taken (or considered taking) a moderator action**, explaining the reasoning. This is important so that community members can learn the norms of the community and the moderation policies.
4. Keep the site reasonably on topic by **closing, migrating, or removing blatantly off-topic questions**.
5. Regularly check for **flagged posts**, and decide if further action is warranted.
6. In the case of serious disputes, **communicate directly with users via email** to help mediate and resolve those disputes.

While being a community moderator is a volunteer (but often *elected*) position, and participation is strictly voluntary at all times, we do require three important things of all elected community moderators.

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1. You must accept [the community moderator agreement](#) within 30 days of election or appointment and remain active on the site.
2. You must stay in communication with your fellow moderators and work with them to resolve any disagreements within the team. [There is a process in place](#) for a team to remove moderators who are unable or unwilling to cooperate.
3. On Stack Overflow, due to its immense size and scale, there is another requirement. If you spend time on the site participating but aren't regularly resolving flags, you may cede your right to remain a community moderator.

A lot of the moderation work is extremely mundane, almost janitorial. It's deleting obvious spam, closing blatantly off-topic questions, and culling some of the worst rated posts in various dimensions.

The ideal moderator does as little as possible. But those little actions may be powerful and highly concentrated. Judiciously limiting your use of moderator powers to selectively prune and guide the community -- now *that's* the true art of moderation.

By [Jeff Atwood](#), Co-Founder (Emeritus)

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