

What's a Professor to do?

Tips for Addressing Rude & Disruptive Classroom Behavior

INTRODUCTION

If you have ever experienced a challenging disciplinary situation, you are not alone. According to behavioral expert, Dr. Gerald Amada, "Instructors throughout the country are discerning a marked behavioral trend among their students manifested in crass incivility toward others, self-indulgent demands and expectations, and an implacable contempt for others, particularly those in positions of institutional authority such as instructors themselves." The majority of students act in an appropriate and respectful manner. However, there appears to be a growing number of students who test the limits of acceptable behavior. Student conduct that substantially or repeatedly interferes with the ability of an instructor to teach or the ability of other students to learn is a violation of University policy. These expectations extend beyond the classroom to field trips, internship placement, and other off-site activities related to the fulfillment of academic requirements.

EXAMPLES OF RUDE & DISRUPTIVE STUDENT BEHAVIOR

"Who, me? Rude?"

John is a science major who considers general education to be a waste of his valuable time. He is bitter that English 101 is not the easy "A" he was expecting. On those infrequent occasions when John attends English class, he spends the period reading the student newspaper, eating chips, napping, tickling his girlfriend, and passing notes. John's cell phone is an endless source of amusement. He especially enjoys playing games and sending text-messages to his friends. When he does participate in class discussion, John becomes argumentative and frequently interrupts his classmates with rude, sarcastic comments. He always leaves class 15 minutes early to catch the 2:45 p.m. bus. The professor tries to ignore John's irritating habits. John has never considered the possibility that his behavior could be annoying and disrespectful to his professor and classmates.



What to do about John...

To prevent this sort of behavior, include academic and behavioral expectations on the course syllabus and identify likely consequences for noncompliance. Many professors stipulate on the course syllabus that electronic devices, e.g. cell phones, pagers, SideKicks, and other gadgets with internet access, must be turned off and put away during class. Cell phone misuse also involves such things as photographing exam questions or unsuspecting individuals in locker rooms. In response to the proliferation of technology, some professors have responded by adjusting their teaching methods to include more group projects with emphasis on the learning process and appropriate application of technology, basing grades on projects and open-book tests. Students like John often have limited self-awareness. Most students behaving in a rude or annoying manner will respond positively if approached in a firm, but friendly, manner. This is also true for students with hygiene issues. Ask the student to stay after class for a minute. Begin the conversation by acknowledging that the student is probably unaware that certain behaviors have risen to the level of a distraction. Define the behavior and indicate you would like it to stop. If John's behavior continues, he should be warned that the behavior must cease or he will be instructed to leave for the remainder of the period. If this does not produce the desired behavioral change, the student can be directed to leave and told to contact you or your department chair before returning the next class period.

- If you are seeing a pattern of odd behavior that concerns you, consult with your department chair, the **Counseling Center**, and the **Disability Service Center**. With the advances in medication and treatment, there has been a marked increase in the number of students with psychological disorders attending college today. The staff in the **Counseling Center** or the **Disability Service Center** may advise you on how best to approach the student given the disruptive behavior. A joint meeting with the student may be arranged. If a student with a psychological disability cannot conform to the rules, they may be disciplined even if the misconduct is symptomatic of the disorder.
- Refer the matter to the **Office of Student Conduct**. The student will be expected to arrange an appointment to discuss the incident, present their point of view, will be informed of the alleged violations, and will be informed of the informal resolution of the matter as appropriate. Such a resolution may result in the student receiving a written behavioral contract that sets parameters of conduct which the student will be required to follow. If the student later violates the contract he/she will be given additional sanctions up to and including suspension or dismissal. Any individuals who are witnesses named in a complaint, may be asked to appear as a witness in a University disciplinary hearing before the **Conduct Review Board**.

- Students who are connected to a positive support system are less apt to act out in class. Rather than telling an emotionally distressed student that he or she may "need" counseling, offer to provide a list of offices that help students cope with the stressors of college life. Refer to the Campus Resources listed on this guide. Include a colleague in the discussion, if appropriate. For a repeatedly disruptive student, consider a behavioral contract that sets parameters of conduct in writing. Inform the **Office of Student Conduct** if the behavior continues.
- Report threatening or offensive e-mails and voice messages to the **UC Irvine Police Department** before removing. Immediately report all suspected violations of law, including verbal and physical threats, to the **UC Irvine Police Department**.
- Document all incidents and your attempts to resolve the situation. Be factual and objective. Use dates, times and quotes when possible. Avoid labels, e.g. "the student is paranoid." Contact the **Office of Student Conduct** about possible referral for disciplinary action when a student's behavior significantly interferes with teaching or learning. Individuals submitting complaints may be asked to appear as a witness in a University disciplinary hearing.

Staff-Faculty Relations:

- Convene a departmental meeting to clarify any misunderstandings around the incident and to advise staff and faculty on what steps should be taken if a future incident occurs with the same student.
- Depending on the specifics and the degree of threat being experienced by faculty and others, advise such individuals to seek the imposition of a restraining order to prevent any future contact with the student. Contact the **UC Irvine Police Department** at (949) 824-5223 to inquire about the process.

CAMPUS RESOURCES

Counseling Center	(949) 824-6457	Health Education Center	(949) 824-9355
Office of the Dean of Students	(949) 824-5181	Student Health Center	(949) 824-5301
Disability Services Center	(949) 824-7494	UCI Police Department	(949) 824-5223

For more information about the student conduct process at University of California, Irvine contact the **Office of Student Conduct** at (949) 824-5590 or conduct@uci.edu



"This class is a joke!"

Jane is unimpressed with her current professor and frequently asks confrontational questions about the instructor's credentials and teaching methods. Jane calls professors at home anytime she has a question about a homework assignment believing her tuition "pays" their salary. Jane has gleefully discovered that some professors will cower to her demands for a better grade if she mentions that her brother-in-law is an attorney. Jane has been known to yell profanities and throw books in class if she doesn't like her score on a test. Jane attributes these outbursts to a bipolar disorder and forgetting to take her medication. The new dean has evidence that Jane is the one who has been sending him amorous e-mail messages from an anonymous account, but he is afraid to confront her.



What do do about Jane...

With advances in medication and treatment, there has been a marked increase in the number of students with psychological disorders attending college. Unlike Jane, most students with psychological disorders do well, especially when connected with campus and community support services. The **Disability Services Center** can provide helpful consultation and guidance in providing reasonable accommodations.

Typically, students who act out in class do so for a variety of reasons not related to a psychological disorder. Such students may be attention-seeking, impulsive, immature, arrogant, or self-absorbed. They may act or dress strangely to get a reaction or express their individualism. Bullying can mask fear or insecurity. Students today are more likely to approach education from a consumer perspective, which can lead to a sense of entitlement and demands for inordinate amounts of attention. Basic classroom management techniques often effectively prevent and curtail disruptive behavior regardless of the underlying cause.

All students are required to follow University rules and regulations. If a student with a psychological disability cannot conform to the rules, the student is not otherwise qualified under the Americans with Disabilities Act and may be disciplined even if the misconduct is symptomatic of the disorder. The best antidote to Jane's litigious brother-in-law is good documentation, fair treatment, and adherence to due process.

A warning is not necessary before directing a student to leave if the student is engaging in violent or unsafe behavior - throwing books, coming to class intoxicated, or threatening physical harm. You can adjourn the class, if necessary. **UC Irvine Police** will assist if a student refuses to leave a classroom, or an office, after being directed to do so. The **Office of Student Conduct** will follow up upon receipt of the Police report.

Threatening or disturbing communication, such as unsolicited, sexually suggestive e-mails, should be promptly reported to the **UC Irvine Police Department**.

An interim suspension, pending a formal hearing, can be enacted by the **Office of Student Conduct** if a student poses an immediate risk to the health and safety of self or others.

OTHER PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

Proactive Strategies

- At the first class session, take a few minutes to discuss the rules regarding attendance, tardiness, active class participation, cheating, plagiarism, and appropriate conduct. Specify consequences. Reference the computer use and e-mail policies.
- Invite students to help set ground rules that will encourage positive attitudes, robust discussion, and spirited debate, while adhering to principles of respect and civility.
- Intervene early before a problem escalates. A general word to the class about such things as taking turns when speaking is better than singling out a particular student who keeps interrupting. Use of profanity can be handled by reminding everyone that such expressions are unwelcome and unnecessary in the classroom.
- Instruct a student to see you after class or during office hours if the student becomes agitated or unduly confrontational. If a student prevents you from moving on to another topic, take control of the discussion, express the need to cover all the material, and invite the student to continue the conversation after class.
- Create an interactive learning environment that interests and engages students. Promote active learning and lively group discussion.



- Be a good role model. Respond to inappropriate remarks in a professional manner. Put downs or witty comebacks tend to escalate the situation. Find something to appreciate in every student and communicate it.
- Disruptive students may not realize they are bothering others. Move closer to the inattentive students, pause until everyone quiets down, and make direct eye contact.
- Do not feel bad about addressing the behavior - faculty must realize that discipline is not inherently cruel or immoral - it is a learning experience for students. Ignoring the behavior causes the student to think it is okay and that the behavior is not disruptive.

- When the problem is isolated to one student, meet privately with the student. Use "I" messages such as, "When I see you ____; I feel ____; and I need the activity to stop." A non-defensive, low key approach to an agitated student can often refocus the discussion on mutual understanding and problem solving. First, allow students to ventilate their anger and tell you what is bothering them, but don't tolerate abusive language or a violation of your personal space.

Reactive Strategies

- Seek consultation from experienced colleagues and your department chair. If the problem continues, issue a written warning to the student addressing concerns and consequences for noncompliance, e.g. lower participation grade, referral to the **Office of Student Conduct**. Consider offering the student the option of transferring to another section if the instructor of that section is agreeable.
- Consult with the **Office of the Ombuds** for advice and assistance (949) 824-7256.
- If verbal admonishment is not effective, give the student the option of modifying the undesirable behavior or leaving the class for the remainder of the period. Faculty may tell a student to leave class temporarily, but adjudication by the **Office of Student Conduct** is necessary for permanent removal. In the event of serious disruption, the class can be adjourned and **UC Irvine Police** summoned.