Establishing a Course Covenant
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Background:
One way to create a class community centered on shared principles, values and expectations, is to develop a covenant **with** your students. A covenant lays out expectations for how every member of the class will engage and support the learning environment and establishes mutually agreed-upon behavior. By co-developing expectations with students, the process creates shared ownership and buy-in for all members and provides a mechanism for holding each other accountable.

Approach:
For this example, a starting covenant is provided to get the conversation started since students may be unsure where to begin. Another way to do this would be to invite students to come to class with a few items for the covenant describing the kind of behavior they would need from others to be able to have productive conversations about challenging topics. Either way, it is helpful to open a discussion with the class about the value of a covenant, provide some examples of what might go on the covenant, and clear directives for how you will proceed in creating the covenant.

If working with a starting covenant, students can be instructed to add, delete, or modify items on the covenant, but should be ready to support their edits to the class. Students can also be asked to share how they think a few of the existing items might be helpful for the class if they do not have any edits they wish to make.

The creation of the covenant can be done in-person in a few different ways. For instance, by breaking into small groups for initial conversation and then coming together as a whole class to discuss. Or the covenant draft can be shared with students ahead of time, and students asked to come to class with their input to share in a discussion with the class. For an online course, this can be facilitated through a discussion forum or shared document.

Creating the covenant during the first week of class during the add/drop period is helpful in giving students a clear sense of expectations for the course and setting the tone for how classes will proceed.

Once everyone has given input on the covenant, post the final draft to Canvas so everyone has access, and offer a short window for students to suggest revisions. This can be done by asking students to email you directly with requested changes or to share these during a class discussion. It is a good idea to get this process completed by the second week of class and finalize the covenant by then.

Example of Starting Covenant

This course deals with some difficult topics that will hit close to home for many of you. We need to work together to make this classroom a productive space for learning.

We are all to begin by assuming the best intent of everyone. Intent, however, does not predict impact. We can have the best intentions and still upset others, unfortunately.

We want to take some time to think about how we can be good, supportive, and open-minded classroom citizens. To help us do this, we will work together to develop a covenant: a commitment about agreed upon behaviors that we will abide. We will all be bound by the covenant.

A covenant helps set the tone for the semester, be mindful of our behavior, and manage difficult situations should these arise. Anyone at any time can draw attention to an item on the covenant to remind us of expected behavior.

Below is a "starting covenant" as a beginning point, put together over the years based on what students have suggested. The items can be modified, removed, and new ones added.

Once everyone has posted their feedback, I will revise the covenant accordingly and you will have an opportunity to make additional revisions. You will have a window of time in which to make changes--if you do not request changes, we will assume you agree to abide the items on the covenant.

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Starting Covenant

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1. **Different perspectives**: There will be people in class with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, political and religious beliefs, and other differences. We will be open to learning about and considering new perspectives. Avoid taking a position of judgement. Seek to ask questions and fully understand what the other person is saying.
2. **Disagreements**: If you disagree with something someone says, ask for clarification before responding. Be sure you fully understood what they meant. When you respond, explain your views clearly and in detail.
3. **Respect**: Treat your peers and the instructor with respect. Treat others the way you want to be treated and treat them the way they want to be treated.
4. **Use "I" statements, avoid "you" statements**: When we speak, we should only speak for ourselves.
5. **Be attentive to language**: Because language matters, it creates the world we live in, be thoughtful about how we use language. Avoid terms that are racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, ablest, or that discriminate against others in any way. If you use such language by mistake, acknowledge the mistake as soon as you realize it, and apologize briefly and simply. For instance, some may not be aware that using a term such as "blind to a problem" is ablest language: it uses a term for differently abled people (the blind) to characterize a problem.
6. **For group work, be responsible and pull your own weight**: Do not let the burden of the work fall on one or two peers.

For online activities

7. **Avoid sarcasm and be careful about humor in written posts:** Since people cannot see your expression or hear your tone of voice, humor and sarcasm can be misinterpreted in online spaces—you can be misinterpreted. If using humor, do so judiciously and indicate you are doing so by adding "/j" or "/joking."
8. **Avoid posting anything personal on a discussion board:** Do not post personal information or ask personal questions. You can, sparingly, use examples of things from your personal life to illustrate your point, but these cannot be used as proof of your argument, only to illustrate.
9. **Proofread and check spelling on written posts:** Doing this before posting to a discussion means your message is clear and shows thoughtfulness.
10. **Be mindful when using all CAPITAL LETTERS in written posts:** This can be perceived as if you are shouting, and it is more difficult to read.

Example Instructions for Online Class

*These instructions can be easily modified for an in-person class, where students are asked to prepare this work for a class discussion.

Assignment Details:
- This work is worth 1% of your final grade and will be graded on a complete/incomplete basis. A complete is a grade of "A", full points: the work must be done well, following all directives to earn a complete.

Do **one** of the following:

1. **Create one additional item to add to this covenant--use the format on the working covenant to guide you: start with a clear behavior, then explain its relevance**.

   - Make sure it is not already covered in one of the items listed

   - Make sure it has not already been suggested by a peer--if it has, add your new insight to what they have said.

   - Make sure it is not already in the **course policies** listed below

2. **Modify (add or remove a part of) one or more items on the "working covenant" below. Explain what specific modification you would like to see and why. You can "re-write" an item with your modification.**

   - Check that this has not already been suggested by a peer--if it has, add your new insight to what they have said.

3. **Suggest removing an item--explain clearly and in detail why.**

   - Check that this has not already been suggested by a peer--if it has, add your new insight to what they have said.

4. **Post a comment indicating what you like about at least one existing item: be specific in terms of how you think it will help us have productive discussions.**

You are welcome to comment on what your peers post. This can be done **in addition** to one of the above to obtain a grade of "complete." **You will not get credit if you only do this.**

This exercise is about being selective, **not** about putting in place directives that will police our every move. We should end up with a carefully curated list. A good covenant usually has 8-15 items. Remember to read what others have posted and be mindful not to repeat items, suggestions or previous modifications.

Course Policies

In addition to a course covenant, it may be helpful to establish additional specific course policies in the syllabus, including how the covenant will be used (see the first bullet point). Below are examples of policies that might be useful.

The following applies to all activities related to this class:

- **You are bound by the course covenant** which we will develop in the first week of class
- **Recording of class:** see note in syllabus about Intellectual Freedom and Viewpoint Diversity Act (House Bill 233). You may not record a class discussion or comments made by your classmates, or post these to any social media (including one with privacy settings in place) or online site. You do not have permission to sell notes or recordings of class lectures.
- **Hateful and oppressive expressions:** Expressions in class, on an assignment or during class activities that contain oppressive or hateful statements, including racist, misogynist, homophobic, transphobic, Islamophobic, to name a few, are not permitted and *are considered disruptions to the academic process in this course.* USF Regulation 3.025 *clearly outlines ways academic disruptions may be addressed should they occur.*
- **Supported Arguments**: Arguments supported by evidence are required to get a passing grade on assignments: opinions are not arguments and are therefore not sufficient to receive a passing grade on an assignment.
- **Critical Thinking in the Academy:** This course asks you to evaluate ideas based on critical thinking and engage topics academically, that is, as an area of intellectual inquiry apart from personal opinions and beliefs.

Violation of any of these stipulations can result in a grade of "F" for the course, among other possible consequences.