

## THE ART OF RHETORIC: CHOOSE YOUR WORDS CAREFULLY

BY KELLY MATTHEWS

As teachers and academics, we value precision in language, so it makes sense for us to choose our words carefully when communicating with students and colleagues.

Two ways we can harness the power of carefully chosen words are in establishing classroom social contracts and opting for nonviolent communication techniques when talking to (or emailing!) others around us.

Classroom social contracts are often used by K-12 teachers, but college instructors can use them as well. Starting the semester by establishing norms and allowing students to help put them into words sets a “Responsibility Model” for classroom climate (rather than an “Obedience Model”) and encourages all students to take ownership of their environment. According to *Discipline with Dignity* by Richard Curwin, Allen Mendler, and Brian Mendler, after teachers decide on classroom principles — such as respect, courtesy, and trying your best — they benefit from seeking student input on formulating specific, effective rules that all can agree to follow.

It’s important to phrase these rules briefly, using precise language that concretely specifies behaviors. Positivity matters. For example, the rule “Be on time” is more effective than “Don’t be late,” which focuses on negative behavior. Avoid vague concepts and



directives, and allow students to state the rules in their own language.

Curwin and his fellow authors advise setting a range of clear, escalating consequences that are logical and relate to the rule in question whenever possible. Discussing potential consequences with students at the start of the school year helps establish norms while preserving student dignity. In K-12 classes, students might, for example, suggest a rule that the teacher give a warning before contacting parents. Teachers may agree to student-suggested rules they can follow and decline those that violate school policy or are unreasonable.

In the college classroom, setting norms at the start of each semester builds community and encourages students to feel safer taking academic risks. In my classes, I ask students to brainstorm guidelines before our first discussion activities, using the simple sentence starter “A good discussion ...,” which I write on the board. Students then extend it into multiple sentences that specify how we take turns, listen actively, and show respect during large- and small-group discussions. I take a photo of the whiteboard and keep it as a record of our agreed social contract throughout the rest of the semester.

Choosing precise language is equally important in our everyday conversations, whether spoken or conducted via email. For example, in his book *Nonviolent Communication*, Marshall Rosenberg suggests avoiding the word “should” at all times. Rosenberg advises that you shouldn’t “should” others because to do so communicates a demand, not a request, thereby diminishing the other person’s power in a relationship.

In my experience, avoiding “should” also seems to make resistance less likely. Using phrasing like “I recommend that you ...” or “It would be good if you ...” allows the other person to act on their own free will and consider your reasoning before deciding whether they will choose your desired course of action.

Students of all ages and colleagues at all levels value language that preserves their dignity and sense of empowerment. Choosing our words carefully will make us more effective — and happier — within and beyond the classroom.



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