

## Large Classes: Limiting the Chaos

Here are some tips on how to set a positive classroom atmosphere and limit disruptions from the first day of class:

- **Signal the beginning of the class clearly and consistently.** To limit disruptions, you need to set the proper quiet atmosphere before you begin your class. In a clear, loud voice, say “Good morning!” or “We’re going to start now.” and use the same cue throughout the term to gain students’ attention. Do not start lecturing while students are talking.
- **Define ground rules for the course on the first day.** Discuss your expectations for the students in the first lecture. Tell them your policies on classroom disruptions such as talking in class or arriving late. Provide a brief rationale for your rules, focusing more on students showing respect for other students (see Conduct Statement on back).
- **Put your ground rules in your course outline.** Since the outline is a contract you make with the class, it is an appropriate place to put your expectations for the course. It also gives you an impartial document to return to should you need a way to reinforce your rules.
- **Give students a non-disruptive outlet for expressing their concerns.** Consider placing an “exit” box at the back of the room for students’ questions, ideas, suggestions, and concerns, and respond to them on a regular basis.
- **Consider giving a professionalism grade.** In smaller classes, it may be possible to grade students on their level of professionalism – are they on time, prepared for class, respectful of other students, etc.?

If students are disrupting your class, here are some possible ways to handle them:

- **Ask the students if they have a question.** Sometimes talking during class is legitimate; students have missed a key definition or number and need clarification from someone sitting nearby.
- **Move closer to the disruptive students.** Your proximity may signal to them that they are interrupting the class.
- **Make a general statement to the class about the disruption.** If you do not feel comfortable singling people out, you can indicate to the class in general that the disruption level is too high and remind them of the ground rules you set on day one.
- **Stop talking, look at the disruptive students, and wait for them to stop.**
- **Use an active learning activity.** Try a think-pair-share where you have students turn to the person next to them to discuss a problem or question. This will break up the flow of the class and help to re-capture students’ attention. It will also give you an opportunity to approach the disruptive students and discuss your concern with them.
- **Ask those who consistently disrupt the class to see you after class.** This will give you an opportunity to air your concerns outside of class and indicate your displeasure with the students’ behaviour without embarrassing them in front of the class.
- **Ask the disruptive students to leave.** If you feel there is no other recourse, you are within your rights to ask students to leave the room. You may also choose to leave.

Other general tips to help large classes run smoothly include:

- **Start and end classes on time.** This helps to create an atmosphere of respect for students' time and yours.
- **Avoid giving cues that class is ending.** If you say "One more point and then we can go," it is likely that students will start packing their bags before you are finished.
- **Move around the classroom.** Try to keep students involved and attentive by moving throughout the classroom.
- **Look and sound confident.** Arrive at class prepared and handle yourself professionally at all times to indicate that you are in charge.
- **Repeat all student questions and responses so that everyone can hear.**
- **Admit when you can't answer a question, offer to find the answer, and then report back next class.** Avoid getting bogged down in material about which you are unsure.

See the TRACE Tips Sheets on "[Classroom Management](#)" and "[Conflict Management](#)" for ideas on how to personalize a large class and reduce disruptive behaviour.

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Sample Conduct Statement for Course Outlines:

### A Word about Conduct in Large Classes

This is a large class but you are not a small part of it! To make our time together as valuable as possible, we both have to work hard at it. The following basic principles may give us some guidelines:

1. Every student has the *right* to learn as well as the *responsibility* not to deprive others of their right to learn.
2. Every student is accountable for his or her own actions.

In order for you to get the most out of this class, please consider the following:

- a. Attend all scheduled classes and arrive on time. Late arrivals and early departures are very disruptive and violate the first basic principle.
- b. Please do not schedule other activities during this class time. I will try to make class as interesting and informative as possible, but I can't learn the material for you.
- c. Please let me know immediately if you have a problem that is preventing you from performing satisfactorily in this class.

I am looking forward to working with you this term.

*Source:* Lasorsa, 1990 as seen in Lewis, K.G. (1994). "Teaching large classes (How to do it well and remain sane)." In K.W. Prichard & R. McLaran Sawyer (Eds.). *Handbook of College Teaching: Theory and Applications*. London: Greenwood Press.

*(Adapted from TRACE's TA Workshop on "Effective Teaching in Large Classes")*