

Contracting

Rationale

Contracting is the process of openly discussing with your students expectations about how classroom members will treat each other. It is an effective strategy for making your classroom a reflective community. Reflective classroom communities are places where explicit rules and implicit norms protect everyone's right to speak; where differing perspectives can be heard and valued; where members take responsibility for themselves, each other, and the group as a whole; and where each member has a stake and a voice in collective decisions. These type of classroom communities are usually created through deliberate nurturing from students and teachers who have shared expectations about how classroom members will treat each other. The instructions below describe how to discuss classroom norms with students and then draft and agree to a formal contract of behavior.

Procedure

1. **Define Contracting**

A contract implies that all parties have a responsibility to uphold the agreement. Students can think about what it means for a classroom to have a contract.

2. **Students Reflect**

To prepare students to develop a class contract, ask them to reflect on their experiences as students in a classroom community. You might use prompts like these to structure students' reflection:

- Identify when you have felt comfortable sharing your ideas and questions in a class. What happened in those moments to help you feel comfortable?
- Identify when you have had ideas or questions but have not shared them. Why not? What was happening at those moments?

3. **Select an Approach to Developing a Contract**

Facing History teachers have found that useful class contracts typically include several clearly defined rules or expectations, as well as consequences for those who do not fulfill their obligations as members of the classroom community. There are many ways to proceed with developing a classroom contract. For example, you can

ask small groups of students to work together to write rules or “expectations” for the classroom community. We suggest keeping the list brief (e.g., three to five items) so that the norms can be easily remembered. As groups present, you can organize their ideas by theme. If there are any tensions or contradictions in the expectations that have been suggested, you can discuss them as a class. While the process is inclusive of students’ ideas, ultimately it is the teacher’s responsibility to ensure that the ideas that make it into the final contract are those that will best nurture a safe learning environment.

4. Discuss Classroom Norms

To get the contracting conversation started in a more concrete way, you could share with students a list of norms, rules, or expectations that have been used in other Facing History classrooms. Ask students to discuss what they think about these norms. Which ones do they think would help this group create a safe, respectful, productive learning environment? Invite students to edit this list by deleting, revising, or adding to it. Here is a list of norms that have been used in previous Facing History classrooms:

- Listen with respect. Try to understand what someone is saying before rushing to judgment.
- Make comments using “I” statements.
- If you do not feel safe making a comment or asking a question, write the thought in your journal. You can share the idea with your teacher first and together come up with a safe way to share the idea.
- If someone says an idea or question that helps your own learning, say thank you.
- If someone says something that hurts or offends you, do not attack the person. Acknowledge that the comment—not the person—hurt your feelings and explain why.
- Put-downs are never okay.
- If you don’t understand something, ask a question.
- Think with your head and your heart.
- Share the talking time—provide room for others to speak.
- Do not interrupt others while they are speaking.
- Write thoughts in your journal if you don’t have time to say them during class.
- Journal responses do not have to be shared publicly.

5. Reflect on Scenarios

Another way to help students develop a classroom contract is to have them envision what they would like to have happen during certain scenarios. Scenarios could be drawn from students’ own experiences. They might include situations such as:

- When we have an idea or question we would like to share, we can...

- When we have an idea but do not feel comfortable sharing it out loud, we can...
- When someone says something that we appreciate, we can...
- When someone says something that might be confusing or offensive, we can...
- To make sure all students have the opportunity to participate in a class discussion, we can...
- If we read or watch something that makes us feel sad or angry, we can...
- To show respect for the ideas of others, we can...

6. Initiate the Contract

After the class has completed its contract, reaching consensus about rules, norms, and expectations, it is important for each student to signal his or her agreement. Students can do so by copying the contract into their journals and signing the page, or you can ask all students to sign a copy of the contract that will remain displayed in the classroom.

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<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/contracting>

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