

The 4Cs Guide to Engaging in Civil Discourse About Israel and Palestine

Navigating conversations on complex and emotionally charged topics is difficult. It can be challenging to separate dissenting opinions from personal attacks. According to Ohio State's [Shared Values](#), being part of the university community means recognizing everyone's potential to contribute new ideas based on their background and experiences and actively engaging multiple perspectives in pursuit of learning and open-minded exploration.

Public universities are excellent sites for civil discourse, a valuable form of democratic engagement. The 4Cs (be Curious, be Charitable, be Conscientious, be Constructive) is a set of virtues that serve as a framework for engaging in civil discourse. The 4Cs can help us have respectful, productive discussions about contentious issues. Doing so is important for maintaining trust and our sense of community at Ohio State during times of political polarization. This guide can be used as a resource for engaging in civil discourse about the 2024 election

Setting Up the Conversation

One of the most challenging topics for civil discourse is the situation in Israel and Palestine: a state of affairs with deep religious and cultural significance, historical complexity, and stories that span the full scope of morality and immorality. There is no way for a short guide to offer a comprehensive account of how to engage with this topic, but we believe that the 4Cs—Be Curious, Be Charitable, Be Conscientious, Be Constructive—are an important place to start. For a complete look at the 4Cs, we invite you to take our free [Scarlet Canvas training](#).

When engaging in civil discourse in the style of the 4Cs, your first step must be to clarify your intentions. If your goal is only to air your legitimate grievances, to inform others by sharing your expertise, or to persuade or silence others by whatever rhetorical means, you are not engaging in civil discourse as we conceive of it through the 4Cs. This is not to deny the value of these goals—all are crucial parts of civic and interpersonal engagement—but to name them as activities that fall outside the scope of what we are setting out to help you accomplish here. However, if your goal is to collaborate on terms of equality with others who may disagree with you in the search for truth and a deep sense of mutual understanding, then this guide is for you.

Engaging in Civil Discourse

Create an environment in which people feel safe and welcome to share their own ideas and relevant experiences while discussing political issues openly by being **curious** and **charitable**. Discuss those issues fairly and productively by being **conscientious** and **constructive**.

Be Curious

Imagine that an interlocutor has described the situation in Israel and Palestine using terms that you do not think accurately characterize what is going on. To your ears, it may sound historically inaccurate, like propaganda, or deeply offensive. You may find such a description in the following list:

- The Israeli/Palestinian Conflict
- A Genocide against Palestinians
- The fight against antisemitism
- The Israel/Hamas War

What does it mean to Be Curious when hearing such a description? A first step is to let go of the assumption that you know what your interlocutor means by it and that you know why they are using it. In situations like this, we invite you to hear the following phrase in your head: *I do not yet know what my interlocutor means*. Sit in that space of curiosity until the drive to correct your interlocutor has subsided and the most salient urge within you is to understand them.

Reaching a state of curiosity is a meaningful achievement—a mental shift that takes work. Mutual curiosity is necessary for you and your interlocutor to have a dialogue, and your interlocutor will be more likely to reciprocate your curiosity if you approach them with curiosity first.

Be Charitable

Your next step is to find out what your interlocutor means by inviting them to share their views and then charitably reconstructing them. Imagine that an interlocutor has made one of the following statements:

- I am proud to be a Zionist.
- There is no room for Zionism here.

After achieving the mental state of curiosity, you should ask your interlocutor a question like the following: “could you help me understand what you mean when you say that?” Then say, “I want to make sure I’ve understood what you’ve just said, so I’m going to tell you what I’ve heard and then you can correct anything I’ve misunderstood.” You will know that you have succeeded in your charitable reconstruction when your interlocutor recognizes their own view in what you have said.

After you have charitably reconstructed your interlocutor's view, invite them to do the same: "I want to make sure you understand my position: could you tell me what you think it is?" If the person begins to critique your view while stating it, interrupt them and say, "hold on; I really want to see what I can learn from your critique, but I don't yet recognize my view in what you have said. Could you please tell me what you think my view is first?"

It would be beyond the scope of this guide to try to distill the essence of Zionism, but it is worth highlighting what we have observed when charitably reconstructing people's views. In our experience, many (but certainly not all) people acting in good faith who say they are proud to be Zionists mean that they are in favor of a place in the world where Jewish people will be safe from antisemitic violence; many (but certainly not all) hold this view even though they strongly object to many current and historical policies and actions of the Israeli government. Many (but certainly not all) people acting in good faith who say they are opposed to Zionism mean that they are critical of what they interpret as a colonialist project involving horrific violence and oppression; they can hold this view while abhorring antisemitism.

Be Conscientious

Being Charitable can help us understand each other's initial points of views, but it is important to keep in mind that the goal of civil discourse is to search for truth and deeper understanding. Being conscientious is about ensuring that our reasoning is of the highest quality as we pursue this goal in collaboration with others. Instead of offering a primer on reasoning, we will present a small number of tips that, in our experience, are especially relevant in this context.

One tip is to avoid what is called a Gish Gallop: a rhetorical technique in which someone overwhelms an interlocutor with too many points for them to address. For example, consider the following two quotes—each of which contains statements that are objectionable:

- *"Israel has had the sole goal of ethnic cleansing since before the fall of the Ottoman Empire. And Netanyahu's party—the Likud Party—is basically the same as The Irgun. And don't even get me started on the fact that the United States has a perfect track record of undermining democracies, funding every terrorist group, and setting up puppet governments that have undermined every Middle Eastern state where violence is taking place today."*
- *"Before October 7 we had peace, so the only people responsible for the current civilian deaths in Gaza are Hamas. Israel has a right to take any measures it deems necessary in self-defense. And Israel is the only Democracy in the whole Middle East where everyone*

has equal rights, and what's the alternative—a state where women and gay people have no rights at all?"

On the one hand, there isn't a single sentence in any of these statements that is literally true, as written, and many of them are surely offensive. On the other hand, each one contains the seeds of some idea that, through deliberate cultivation, could be developed into an argument worthy of careful attention (NB: this is not to say that the resulting argument would be sound). When we present more arguments than can be carefully examined, however, we end up without the resources to examine any of them. Our recommendation is to stick to one point at a time.

If you notice that you or your interlocutor is heading into a Gish Gallop, you may find it helpful to say, "we both have a lot to say, and I'm worried that your points and my points won't get the attention they need if we take on too many of them; what if we start with ____ and then talk about ____ once we agree that we're ready to move on?"

Once you agree on a point to discuss—and commit to bringing the conversation back to that point if it deviates—it is important to ensure that you are using exactly the same standards for evaluating each argument. Here is a list of common pitfalls:

- Dismissing a piece of information on the grounds that it comes from an interested party, and then presenting a piece of information that comes from an equally interested party.
- Insisting that someone else understands the meaning of your statements in light of the definitions that you give to your words and then refusing to understand the meaning of someone else's statements in light of the definitions that they give to their words.
- Asking someone else for sources for their claims and then making claims for which you cannot provide equally robust sources.

Be Constructive

The essence of Be Constructive is to remember that civil discourse, in the style of the 4Cs, is an opportunity for meaningful progress. One form of progress comes from having a better understanding of your interlocutor's views and from your interlocutor's having a better understanding of your views. Such increases in understanding allow for the creation of a community in which we are actually familiar with the nuanced perspectives of fellow community members who disagree with us, as opposed to a community where we view one another through the lenses of easy, uncharitable caricatures.

Another form of progress concerns the development of better answers to important questions: we may make tangible progress in evaluating, for example, the ethics of Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions campaigns or the meaning of U.N. Resolution 242 once we can identify and move beyond barriers caused by differences in our language, Gish Gallops, and seductive double standards in the evaluation of arguments. In order to Be Constructive, we invite you to take time at the end of your discussion to debrief with your interlocutor. See if you can agree on a few points where genuine progress was made along the dimensions we listed or others otherwise grounded in a commitment to Civil Discourse.

Tips for Special Contexts

The foregoing consisted of general advice for applying the 4Cs to Civil Discourse around Israel and Palestine. In what follows, we will briefly address a number of special circumstances in which this topic may come up.

Non-Civil Discourse Circumstances: You may find yourself invited to participate in a debate, to participate in strategic nonviolent direct action, to share your expertise with an audience, or to provide empathy to someone who is struggling. What it means to succeed in these contexts can differ from what it means to succeed in the context of civil discourse, and we invite you to consult with people with expertise in those activities. Having said that, you may find that tools from the 4Cs are useful for these other activities as well—just be honest about your aims and never pretend to be engaging in civil discourse when you are really doing something else.

Discourse Across Hierarchies: It is inevitable that you will occupy positions in various hierarchies, regardless of whether these are informal social hierarchies or formal occupational ones. When you are seeking to engage in civil discourse with someone who occupies a lower position in a relevant hierarchy—suppose you are a teacher talking to a student in office hours or a workshop presenter talking to an attendee about a topic of mutual concern rather than simply imparting information to them—you must be especially mindful of the difference between persuasion and civil discourse. Be explicit in asking them to challenge your views (and even help them brainstorm objections) and be suspicious when they concede points too easily.

Emotionally Volatile Discourse: We should never discount the value of someone's contribution to civil discourse merely because they are having a strong emotional reaction to the topic, but we should also not pretend that a chorus of adversarial emotional outbursts is likely to be constructive. A good middle ground is to realize that people are at different places with respect to the degree to which they are intimately emotionally connected to an issue as well as with respect to their capacities for emotional regulation. Once you realize this, you can then seek

Be *Curious* Be *Charitable* Be *Conscientious* Be *Constructive*

conditions that will allow the unique group of people in front of you to actually achieve civil discourse. One tip is to select a narrow sub-topic that the group is ready to discuss. Another is to always be ready to jump to a meta-question *about* how the discourse is going whenever things are starting to get heated. It may be the case that the most useful outcome of the present discussion is to set the stage for future discussions through such meta-reflections.