

Recommendations for Students in Virtual Learning Environments

This document contains a set of recommendations and guidelines designed to help you contribute to your classroom community, to treat your classmates and instructors with respect, and to support your success in virtual learning environments. It is important to remember that the [Cal Poly Standards for Student Conduct](#) and our Campus Community Values apply to virtual learning environments, just as they apply to our in-person classes. Students who do not adhere to the Cal Poly Standards for Student Conduct will be referred to the [Office for Student Rights and Responsibilities](#).

Campus Community Values

The University is committed to maintaining a safe and healthy living and learning environment for students, faculty, and staff. We encourage each member of the campus community to choose behaviors that further this goal. When students are good citizens and engage in responsible behaviors, they contribute positively to university life.

General Recommendations For Virtual Learning Environments

- **Remember that we are Mustangs United.** Virtual learning environments may leave you feeling less connected to your peers and instructors. This feeling of disconnection can make it easy to forget that, together, we are all members of the same Cal Poly community, even when we aren't interacting face to face. In all virtual learning activities in which you interact with peers and instructors, try to enact Cal Poly's principles of love, empathy, and respect. Doing so helps to establish an inclusive learning environment for all.
- **Focus on meeting course learning objectives.** Concentrate solely on course activities and avoid multitasking; consider turning off notifications on your devices in order to avoid distractions.
- **Identify yourself by name.** In other virtual spaces (such as social networks) where you interact with others, you may have the opportunity to be anonymous or create a unique profile. In virtual learning environments, you should identify yourself by name when engaging in course activities, whether during discussion forums or when sharing documents, unless otherwise advised by your instructor. If, for privacy reasons, you prefer not to identify yourself by your full name, a first name and last initial may be appropriate (if it does not create confusion) or you might consider contacting your instructor to establish an alternative practice.
- **Be mindful of privacy and personal information.** Be sensitive to the information you share within virtual learning environments. Consider whether it is appropriate to reveal private information about yourself or others. We recommend that you avoid including personal information, such as phone numbers or addresses, in discussion forums or online chats. Remember that others might (properly or improperly) capture and share your words and behaviors beyond the context of your virtual learning environment. Note that Zoom is not an anonymous platform, so if you're using Zoom for live class sessions, your IP address and Cal Poly credentials may be logged by the company. In all, be sure to consider how interactions within virtual learning environments may impact your digital footprint for years to come.



Considerations For Communicating Effectively in Virtual Learning Environments

- **Consider the feelings and experiences of others before asserting an idea or argument.** Just like the in-person classroom environment, a virtual environment should be a place where we have the opportunity to engage with perspectives other than our own, to agree and disagree toward the goals of co-constructing new knowledge. It is important to show compassion for others and consider their feelings and their circumstances when communicating with classmates during this difficult time. Know that the COVID-19 situation has had very different impacts on students, their families, and their communities. Extend empathy to all members of the Cal Poly community.
- **Be mindful of the impact your words may have on others.** When communicating in any virtual learning environment, it is important to remember that we may have good intentions, but nevertheless our words may have a harmful impact. Be clear in your communications and avoid using language that may be interpreted differently than you intend. Try to adhere to the same rules you would follow in face-to-face communications. If the instructor or another student gives you feedback that you have negatively affected them, try to learn about their perspectives before responding.
- **Use humor, playfulness, or sarcasm with caution.** We often rely on non-verbal cues such as facial expressions to communicate humor or sarcasm, but non-verbal cues are not present in all virtual learning environments, and even in live sessions those cues may not be clearly interpreted. Be aware that what may seem like humor, playfulness, or sarcasm to you may unintentionally offend or hurt your classmates.
- **Be understanding and cooperative during online discussions.** Keep in mind that you and your peers enrolled in the course to learn, which means that anyone can make a simple mistake in research, knowledge or communication. When engaging in dialogue, try not to make it personal: focus your response on an idea or concept, not the person who presented it. When adverse communications or conflicts arise, try to understand the other person's point of view.
- **Formulate written communications carefully.** When appropriate, take time to prepare the information contained in your online communications: thoughtfully consider all points in order to reduce confusion, research your facts, and provide citations for information from outside sources integrated within your communications. Effective communication promotes a robust academic environment and adds credibility to the course experience.
- **Be clear and concise in your writing.** Clear and effective writing translates to clear and effective communication. Do your best to adhere to discipline-specific expectations for written communication, including rhetorically appropriate expression and stylistic formatting.
- **Re-read communications before sending them.** You may be accustomed to informal writing in some online platforms, but for your virtual courses you should respond in written format in much the same way that you would for an in-person class, which likely includes taking on a more formal/professional tone to establish ethos and effectively reach your audience. Keep communications respectful and succinct, and avoid emotional and/or "all capital letter" statements, which may be construed as yelling.



- **Contact your instructor if/when difficulties arise.** Your instructors will do their best to address difficulties in communication when they arise. In the case that an instructor is unaware of a dynamic or difficult situation in a virtual learning environment, consider sharing issues directly with them.

Suggestions for Synchronous (Live) Class Sessions

- **Consider your surroundings.** While you may not have access to a completely quiet or private environment, choose a location that is most amenable to video and/or audio engagements.
- **Test your connection and technology before class.** It is always good practice to get ready to connect to a live class session by testing your audio, microphone, and video a few minutes before class begins.
- **Mute your microphone.** Always mute your microphone when you are not speaking during a live class session. This not only limits background noise and ensures that the audio will be clear for all participants; muting your microphone also protects your privacy. Consider the possibility that someone with whom you share your surroundings may enter the space where you are engaging in a live class session—their words/noises will be heard by the entire class unless your microphone is muted.
- **Use an appropriate background.** If you decide to share your video during a live class session, consider what is visible in the video and make sure that you are not inadvertently sharing a background that you do not want to share with your instructor and classmates. If your instructor requires you to use video, but you do not want to reveal your surroundings, consider adding an appropriate virtual background if your technological device has the capability to do so. If your device does have this option, be sure to incorporate a simple background to avoid distractions from the learning process. You can choose from Zoom-provided backgrounds if your live class session is being held through Zoom. As an alternative, Cal Poly has virtual backgrounds available for download [here](#). Be aware that a virtual background is not fail-safe; it may spontaneously disappear and people, animals, or objects may appear in your video frame. If you are particularly concerned about using video because of your circumstances or the space you have available to you, please contact your instructor.
- **Use an appropriate display name.** The screen name you display during a live class session should be the name that you would use in an in-person class. Do not use a name that is humorous or inappropriate.
- **Use the chat feature appropriately.** Depending on what platform your instructor uses to lead a live class session, you may have access to a chat feature. Your instructor may provide guidelines for how to use this feature during the class session, in which case you should only use chat in the ways that your instructor has outlined. In general, be aware that any chat in which you engage may be a public record that is archived and may be downloaded by the instructor for review.
- **Report to your instructor.** If any difficulties arise for you personally and/or with other students during a live class session, report the difficulties to the instructor. You can do this by using the private chat function to contact the instructor directly in real time, or, you can follow up with an email to the instructor after the class session.

Reference: Van Duzer, J. (2008). Guidelines for student participation in online discussion forums. Retrieved from <https://www2.humboldt.edu/aof/team.htm>.

