How to Respond to Offensive Behavior

When responding conversationally or in writing to an individual’s behavior and/or verbal communication which you perceive to be offensive:

- Explain what you heard and observed try to state facts without interpretations.
- Explain how you felt or were impacted by what the person said or did, or did not say or do.
- Make a clear, concise request for how you want the person to behave in the future when there if there is a similar situation.
- Explain anything else you would like to happen.

Before deciding whether to communicate in person or in writing consider the pro and cons of each approach.

Some advantages to writing:
- you can state what you want and need to say without interruption
- the recipient of the written message has time to process the message privately and maybe more thoughtful about their response
- may increase the sense of personal emotional and/or physical safety

Some disadvantages to writing:
- the indirect mode of communication may introduce opportunities for misunderstanding and/or defensiveness,
- there is not an opportunity to observe non-verbal cues or the other party that could aid common understanding
- limits the opportunity for immediate clarification

Adapted with permission from a tip sheet prepared by the ombuds office at South Texas College November 2017
Strategies for Communicating Directly to Address a Dispute or Conflict

Speaking to the other party

Resolving conflict in person often reduces time and stress for all parties. If there seems to be an impasse, consider using an alternative method to communicate with the other party. Such alternatives include writing a thoughtful letter to convey your significant concerns, or seeking a neutral party to help facilitate communication.

Describe the situation:
- Stick to the facts without making assumptions about the meaning of the other party’s words and actions, or failure to speak or act
- Be forthright about the feelings the situation prompted for you

Express the impact of the other’s words or actions, or of their lack of action or comment:
- Be aware that expressing your emotions can open a pathway for moving beyond conflict, and it gives the other party an opportunity to be aware of the impact the situation has had on you.
- Use I-statements rather than you-statements; you statement are often received defensively

Allow the other person to respond:
- After offering a description of the conflictual situation and its impact on you it is helpful to give the other party an opportunity to respond for example: When you said or did _______ I felt ________, Is this what you intended?
- Give the person the option of responding immediately or after a period of time for reflection (minutes to days)

Discuss future pathways forward:
- After listening to the other party's response, invite a conversation about potential options for the future
- Take time to consider options that address concerns raised by all parties

Communicating to the other party in writing

It may seem overwhelming to consider communicating in person or over the phone with an individual whom you are in conflict with. An alternative strategy for addressing concerns might be to write a letter. Letter writing has several potential benefits:

- It provides an opportunity to process and edit the messages you do and do not want to communicate without the risk associated with communicating in real time.
- Writing is physical and provides an opportunity for getting the thoughts and feelings outside of one’s self in a tangible way. The activity can offer some distance from the concerns that helps put things in better perspective.
- You will not be interrupted in distracting ways by the other person, but the reader can pause when they are ready and then return to the message without feeling forced to reply immediately (or at all).

Your letter would cover the elements suggested in the section on speaking to the other party in a slightly different order:

- Describe the situation that you perceive has led to conflict between you and the other person. Hold to the observable facts without interpreting their meaning or making assumptions about the other person’s intent.
- Express the impact of the other’s words or actions, or of their lack of action or comment. (When you said or did _______ I felt ________, Is this what you intended?)
- Describe future pathways forward that you can identify. (Providing multiple options is beneficial.)
- If you are open to it, invite the other person to respond. It might help for you to propose two to three different ways that you would feel open to receiving their response, so that the other person has options, but will be unlikely to respond in manner that feels unsafe to you.

After writing a letter you might decide not to send it. Being able to process your thoughts and feelings on paper might be sufficient for the time being. Drafting the letter may help you feel more prepared for a face to face or telephone conversation. Writing the letter might also lead you to think that communicating you would feel more comfortable having the conversation in person or by phone with a neutral third-party present.

Alternative means of communicating directly

If you determine that you would like to have a neutral third-party present, consider making an appointment to consult with the Ombudsperson to explore what options available through the Ombudsperson or the Center for Dialogue might seem helpful in your situation. To schedule an appointment call 440-775-6728.

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Places on Campus at Which You May Not Have Considered Seeking Support

*Academic and Cocurricular*

Academic Advising Resource Center (AARC)

Bonners Center for Service and Learning (BCSL)

Center for Learning Education and Research in the Sciences (CLEAR)

Career Development Center

Center for Student Success (CSS)
Including: resources for those seeking accommodations and modifications to reduce or eliminate barriers to participation in the Oberlin educational experience; tutoring, Learning E A D courses, and peer to peer mentoring.

Center for Teaching, Innovation, and Excellence

*Wellness and Community Building*

Athletics and Recreation

Counseling Center
After-hours Telephone Counseling Support To use this service, call the Counseling Center at (440) 775-8470 and press option 2

Human Resources (HR)
Lifestyle EAP Wellness at Work is an Oberlin College sponsored benefit, providing a full range of life-balance support services. The program is confidential, administered by Cleveland Clinic, and available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by calling 1-800-989-3277. *(for non-student employees only.)*

International Student Resource Center (ISRC)

Multicultural Resource Center (MRC)

Office of Religious and Spiritual Life

Student Academic Success Programs (SASP)

Student Health Services (SHS)
If you have healthcare concerns or questions after hours, please call the 24-hour Nurse Line @ 877-924-7758 for advice.

Student Help and Resource Exchange Advisors (SHARE)
**Safety, Rights, and Responsibilities**

- Academic Integrity and Student Conduct
- Academic Policies and Procedures
- Environmental Health and Safety
- Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, The Office of (EDI)
- Grievance Procedures
- Safety and Security