

# What's a Professor to Do?

Tips for  
Addressing  
Rude & Disruptive  
Classroom  
Behavior

## Introduction

If you have ever experienced a challenging disciplinary situation, you are not alone. According to mental health, psychotherapy, and disruptive student issues expert, Dr. Gerald Amada, "Instructors throughout the country are discerning a marked behavioral trend among their students manifested in crass incivility toward others, self-indulgent demands and expectations, and an implacable contempt for others, particularly those in positions of institutional authority such as instructors themselves."

The majority of students act in an appropriate and respectful manner. However, there appears to be a growing number of students who test the limits of acceptable behavior. Student conduct that substantially or repeatedly interferes with the ability of an instructor to teach or the ability of other students to learn is a violation of University policy. These expectations extend beyond the classroom to field trips, internship placement, and other off-site activities related to the fulfillment of academic requirements.

## Examples of Rude & Disruptive Student Behavior

John is a forensic science major who considers general education to be a waste of his valuable time. He is bitter that English 101 is not the easy "A" he was expecting. On those infrequent occasions when John attends English class, he spends the period reading the newspaper, eating chips, napping, tickling his girlfriend, and passing notes. John's cell phone is an endless source of amusement. He especially enjoys playing games and sending text-messages to his friends. When he does participate in class discussion, John becomes argumentative and frequently interrupts his classmates with rude, sarcastic comments. He always leaves class 15 minutes early to go to work. The professor tries to ignore John's irritating habits. John has never considered the possibility that his behavior could be annoying and disrespectful to his professor and classmates.

## What to do about John...

To prevent this sort of behavior, include academic and behavioral expectations on the course syllabus and identify likely consequences for noncompliance. (See The Rules and Regulations for the Maintenance of Public Order Pursuant to Article 129A of the Education Law, <http://johnjay.jjay.cuny.edu/files/cunypolicies/publicorderpursuanttoarticle129a.pdf>) Many professors stipulate on the course syllabus that electronic devices, e.g. cell phones, Smartphones, and other gadgets with internet access, must be turned off and put away during class. Cell phone and Smartphone misuse also involves such things as photographing exam questions or unsuspecting individuals in locker and bathrooms. In response to the proliferation of technology, some professors have responded by adjusting their teaching methods to include more group projects with emphasis on the learning process and appropriate application of technology, basing grades on semester projects and open-book tests. Students like John often have limited self-awareness.

Most students behaving in a rude or annoying manner will respond positively if approached in a firm, but friendly, manner. This is also true for students with hygiene issues. Ask the student to stay after class for a minute. Begin the conversation by acknowledging that the student is probably unaware that

certain behaviors have risen to the level of a distraction. Define the behavior and indicate you would like it to stop.

If John's behavior continues, he should be warned that the behavior must cease immediately or further action will be taken. If this does not produce the desired behavioral change, the student can be referred your department chair and/or the Dean of Students, Room L.65.00, 212-237-8100.

## **“This class is a joke!”**

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Jane is unimpressed with her current professors and frequently asks confrontational questions about their credentials and teaching methods. Jane emails professors anytime she has a question about a homework assignment and expects an immediate answer believing her tuition “pays” their salary. Jane has gleefully discovered that some professors will cower to her demands for a better grade if she mentions that her brother-in-law is an attorney. Jane has been known to yell profanities and push chairs around in class if she doesn't like her score on a test. Jane attributes these outbursts to a bipolar disorder and forgetting to take her medication. A junior faculty member has evidence that Jane is the one who has been sending him amorous e-mail messages from an anonymous gmail account, but he is afraid to confront her.

## **What to do about Jane...**

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With advances in medication and treatment, there has been a marked increase in the number of students with psychological disorders attending college. Unlike Jane, most students with psychological disorders do well, especially when connected with campus and community support services. The Counseling Center (212-237-8111, Room L.68.00) and the Office of Accessibility Services (212-237-8031, Room L.66.00) can provide helpful consultation and guidance in providing reasonable accommodations.

Typically, students who act out in class do so for a variety of reasons not related to a psychological disorder. Such students may be attention-seeking, impulsive, immature, arrogant, or self-absorbed. They may act or dress strangely to get a reaction or express their individualism. Bullying can mask fear or insecurity. Students today are more likely to approach education from a consumer perspective, which can lead to a sense of entitlement and demands for inordinate amounts of attention. Basic classroom management techniques often effectively prevent and curtail disruptive behavior regardless of the underlying cause.

All students are required to follow University rules and regulations, including those with psychological disabilities. The best antidote to Jane's litigious brother-in-law is good documentation, fair treatment, and adherence to due process.

If the student is engaging in violent or unsafe behavior – throwing books, pushing chairs around, coming to class intoxicated, or threatening physical harm, Public Safety will assist in removing a student from the classroom, or an office. Each classroom is equipped with a Public Safety Hot-Line telephone. The Office of the Dean of Students will follow up upon receipt of the Public Safety incident report.

Threatening or disturbing communication, such as unsolicited, sexually suggestive e-mails, should be promptly reported to Public Safety (212-237-8888).

An interim suspension, pending a formal hearing, can be enacted by the Dean of Students (212-237-8100, Room L.65.00) if a student poses an immediate risk to the health and safety of self or others.

## Proactive Strategies

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- At the first class session, take a few minutes to discuss the rules regarding attendance, tardiness, active class participation, cheating, plagiarism, and appropriate conduct. **(Many faculty members have found it useful to include this information on the course syllabus.)** Specify consequences. Reference the computer use and e-mail policies.  
<http://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/CIS/policies/ComputerUsePolicy.pdf>
- Invite students to help set ground rules that will encourage positive attitudes, robust discussion, and spirited debate, while adhering to principles of respect and civility.
- Intervene early before a problem escalates. A general word to the class about such things as taking turns when speaking is better than singling out a particular student who keeps interrupting. Use of profanity can be handled by reminding everyone that such expressions are unwelcome and unnecessary in the classroom.
- Instruct a student to see you after class or during office hours if the student becomes agitated or unduly confrontational. If a student prevents you from moving on to another topic, take control of the discussion by expressing the need to cover all the material, and invite the student to continue the conversation after class.
- Create an interactive learning environment that interests and engages students. The Center for the Advancement of Teaching offers the latest information on innovative teaching strategies to promote active learning and lively group discussion, <http://www.jjay.cuny.edu/center-advancement-teaching-cat>
- Be a good role model. Respond to inappropriate remarks in a professional manner. Putdowns or witty comebacks tend to escalate the situation. Find something to appreciate in every student and communicate it.
- Disruptive students may not realize they are bothering others. Move closer to the inattentive students, pause until everyone quiets down, and make direct eye contact.
- When the problem is isolated to one student, meet privately with the student. Use “I” messages such as, “When I see you \_\_\_\_\_; I feel \_\_\_\_\_; and I need the activity to stop.” A non-defensive, low key approach to an agitated student can often refocus the discussion on mutual understanding and problem-solving. First, allow students to ventilate their anger and tell you what is bothering them, but don’t tolerate abusive language or a violation of your personal space.

## Reactive Strategies

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- Seek consultation from experienced colleagues and your Department Chair. If the problem continues, issue a written warning to the student addressing concerns and consequences for noncompliance, e.g. lower participation grade, referral to the Office of the Dean of Students (212-237-8100, Room L.65.00). Consider offering the student the option of transferring to another section if the instructor of that section is agreeable. Please check with your Department Chair about this process.
- If verbal admonishment is not effective, and the student seems incapable of or unwilling to modify the undesirable behavior, the student can be referred your department chair and/or the

Dean of Students, Room L.65.00, 212-237-8100. In the event of serious disruption, call Public Safety.

- If you are seeing a pattern of odd behavior that concerns you, consult with your Department Chair, the Counseling Center (212-237-8111, Room L.68.00) or the Behavioral Intervention Team (BIT), <http://www.jjay.cuny.edu/behavioral-intervention-team>
- For a repeatedly disruptive student, contact Public Safety (212-237-8888) and/or the Office of the Dean of Students for assistance (212-237-8100, Room L.65.00).
- Students who are connected to a positive support system are less apt to act out in class. Rather than telling an emotionally distressed student that he or she may “need” counseling, refer the student to the Director of Student Relations for assistance (212-237-8871, Room L.65.00).
- Report threatening or offensive e-mails, voice messages or telephone calls to Public Safety (212-237-8888) before removing.
- Document all incidents and your attempts to resolve the situation. Be factual and objective. Use quotes when possible. Avoid labels, e.g. “the student is paranoid.” Contact the Office of the Dean of Students (212-237-8100, Room L.65.00) about possible referral for disciplinary action when a student’s behavior significantly interferes with teaching or learning.
- N.B. Individuals submitting complaints may be asked to appear as a witness in a University disciplinary hearing.

***For more information about the student conduct process at John Jay College, contact:  
Office of the Dean of Students  
Room L.65.00  
212-237-8100  
<http://www.jjay.cuny.edu/3537.php>***

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