Group Norms & Ground Rules

What is the difference between group norms and ground rules?
While “group norms” and “ground rules” are often used interchangeably, these terms may be interpreted differently. Group norms are rules that instructors ask students to establish independently for their group work; they are self-created by students. Group norms can help students hold one another accountable for their work and behavior. Ground rules are frequently non-negotiable rules set by instructors for the entire class to follow, such as rules regarding civility and respect, assignment deadlines, or in-class discussion guidelines. Ground rules can help learners understand your expectations as the instructor, as well as what is expected of their behavior in class.

What are group norms?
Every group develops its own customs, habits, and expectations for how things will be done. This includes your students as well, whether they are completing small group work or working as a class. These patterns and expectations, known as group norms, influence the ways in which group members communicate with each other. Norms can help a group achieve its goals.

Why are group norms important?
Group norms set the foundation for effective instruction by:

- Emphasizing students’ effort over ability.
- Encouraging students to learn from mistakes.
- Building positive and collaborative relationships with and between students.
- Shifting the focus from a problem-based deficit model to a strengths-based asset model.
- Building trust through authentic behavior.

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<th>Examples</th>
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<td>Ground Rules (Set by Instructor)</td>
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<td>• Assignments are due on the designated date, unless the instructor is notified in advance.</td>
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<td>• Please arrive on time for class.</td>
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<td>• In class, treat one another with dignity and respect.</td>
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<td>• Practice open-mindedness and consider all students’ input without judgment.</td>
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<td>Group Norms (Set by Learners)</td>
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<td>• Group members will meet weekly using Google Hangouts and communicate via email and text.</td>
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<td>• Group members agree to meet deadlines or notify the team if they are unable to do so.</td>
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<td>• Group members will take responsibility for their part when mistakes are made, avoiding defensiveness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Group members will listen to one another and strive for authentic communication.</td>
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Why should I use group norms in my class?

Establishing norms for group work facilitates cohesive groups. Group norms can:

- Hold students accountable for their behavior—when students write their own rules for behavior, they are more likely to adhere to the rules, or find time to renegotiate those rules.
- Foster a safe learning environment in which all learners can trust that all ideas and viewpoints will be respected.
- Assure learners that if their viewpoints are challenged, it will be done in a civil and productive manner.
- Provide a “contract” that can be referred to in instances where group norms are not being followed. When groups are unproductive, instructors can ask, “What do your group norms say?”

How can I establish group norms and ground rules in my class?

Group norms are an expression of a collective agreement on desired group behavior. Therefore, group norms will work best when your students take an active role in creating them. When students write their own group norms, it gives them ownership and accountability for their behavior.

- First, decide what is non-negotiable for you as the instructor: those are your Ground Rules.
- Plan to facilitate a conversation around group norms as a class or present some examples of group norms and give students the opportunity to modify those norms.
- In small groups, have students reflect on past group work experiences. Questions they might consider include:
  - In previous group work, what did you like and what helped the group work effectively?
  - What did not work well?
- Based on these conversations, have students create a draft list of group norms. You may prefer to prepare a draft prior to class and review it as a group. You can do this on paper or on a shared document online.
- Adjust norms if necessary and redistribute them to the class for agreement.
- Once everyone agrees, put these group norms in your syllabus.
- After the first group project, revisit the group norms you established and revise the document if necessary. This will ensure that it is a living document.

Resources

- Team Norms Sample: Group Norms or Relationship Guidelines Help You Create a Cohesive Team
- Tool for Creating Norms
- Tools for Schools: Norms put the “Golden Rule” into practice for groups
- Ground Rules for Effective Groups (Schwartz, R., 2002)
- Forming Ground Rules (Creating Norms) (Wentworth, M., n.d.)