Section 7: Communication

Effective communication plays an important role in maintaining a healthy departmental climate, and in identifying problems and contending with them when they arise. This section offers examples of effective practices within departments, programs, or other units to encourage open lines of communication across all levels. (Here the focus is primarily upon communication to and among faculty and students, with only occasional reference to staff; communication with and among staff is a topic meriting separate discussion.)

Communication across levels

It is useful for departments to think about the goals that they are trying to achieve in communication. Communicative practices within a department can help or hinder transparency, cooperation, and inclusiveness. Many questions departments face concerning personnel require some degree of confidentiality, but seeking insofar as possible to create a climate of transparency and openness can help faculty and students understand the processes, constraints, and reasoning behind decisions, enabling them to resolve certain corrosive forms of doubt and distrust. This openness also permits faculty and students to formulate clearer questions about the appropriateness of procedures or decisions, fostering wider discussion and more information sharing, contributing in the long run to better decision-making. Moreover, transparency helps faculty and students to be aware of what is expected of them, and what they can expect of one another. Such shared expectations allow students and faculty to hold themselves and each other accountable for their actions and behavior, and greatly facilitates the work of staff. Members of a department are also more likely to be willing to work together if they understand the department’s (and the university’s or college’s) rules, and are confident that these rules will be followed fairly. Since many decisions seriously affect the lives of students and faculty, the existence of standard procedures and clear criteria, as well as appropriate processes for grievances or the appeal of decisions, is vital to maintaining cooperativeness in a setting where the success of the department’s activities depends so heavily upon goodwill. When some are perceived as receiving special treatment without adequate explanation, this tends to break down general willingness to contribute to the department’s essential activities.

Inclusiveness, too, can be affected by communicative practices in the department. Inclusiveness matters both for reasons of fairness and as a way of encouraging the most effective development of the capacities of all members. As a result, inclusiveness can have a positive effect on rates of retention and satisfaction with the program, both for faculty and for students, and can enable a program to grapple more effectively with the problems and crises that will inevitably arise. To take just one example, using the correct pronouns or other forms of address for individuals is an important component of mutual respect and trust, and departments can by their regular practices manifest such respect and trust, creating a background against which occasional misunderstandings can be dealt with constructively.

We have organized this discussion of recommended practices in communication by the type of communication: some forms of effective communication are top-down, some are bottom-up, and others are neither or both.

Top-down communication

Top-down forms of communication come not only from the chair and executive committee, but from advisors, supervisors, directors of undergraduate and graduate studies, and chairs of committees. That is,
from all those in positions with supervisory or resource-allocating roles. It is important that such communication conveys information and expectations accurately, and often this is best done in written as well as oral form to help ensure shared understanding and memory. Some policies can be made most accessible if posted on the department website, though posting alone tends to be insufficient and should be accompanied by communications at appropriate times to remind faculty, students, and staff of rules and regulations they are expected to follow. This approach is inextricably tied with holding people accountable for their actions and allowing them to hold others accountable as well. Good practices for effective top-down communication include the following:

- Communicating expectations for promotion to tenure-track assistant and associate faculty.
- Communicating expectations for annual merit reviews in teaching, service, and research to faculty members.
- Communicating expectations for graduate students concerning the meeting of MA or PhD program requirements, including for advancement to candidacy, qualifying exams or submission of qualifying papers, and the creation and approval of a prospectus. Students should be provided with a clear timeline that will enable them to assess whether they are making expected progress, and in cases in which progress is inadequate, communicate expectations for restoring adequate progress both orally and in writing to the student.
- Communicating, typically in consultation with the department administrator, expectations for office staff members.
- Communicating clearly to faculty, staff, and student representatives which deliberations and decisions should be kept confidential, and why this is important.
- Encouraging the keeping of minutes for meetings of the department and its committees, and ensuring that committee chairs and student representatives report on deliberations and decisions as appropriate. For example, student representatives should be aware of their responsibility to keep the entire student body informed, and chairs should provide assistance in making this possible.

**Bottom-up communication**

The bottom-up forms of communication come from all members of the department, in reporting to those who are in positions of responsibility any problems or issues that need attention in the department. Of particular concern to a department’s climate is the question of whether those who have some degree of formal or informal authority over others are following department and institution rules and regulations. Familiar examples of abuses of such authority include sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination, and other forms of discrimination or marginalization. In a department with a poor climate, members of the department report concerns to those in authority but do not receive indications that these concerns are being taken seriously, or members lacking in authority may be too uncertain of the response they will receive to report them at all. Other abuses include violations of basic principles of collegiality and mutual respect. Good practices for effective bottom-up communication include the following:

- Communicating to faculty and those in reporting roles the rules for reporting abuses, and the mechanisms for protecting those who raise such concerns by acting as whistleblowers or bringing forward a complaint.
- Communicating to faculty and students their rights as members of the academic community.
• Creating ombuds roles in the department or identifying campus ombudspersons and other officials exempt from mandatory reporting rules, and making sure that everyone in the department knows who they are.

**SEE ALSO: OMBUDSPERSON SUBSECTION IN SECTION 3: TEACHING, SUPERVISING, SUPPORTING, AND MENTORING STUDENTS**

• Maintaining a climate page on the department website with information about where students can go for help and assistance.

### Communication in discussions

Another important area of communication is, of course, the many discussions that occur among members of the department in formal and informal settings on questions of philosophy, research projects, and teaching. All members of the department should be able to participate in such discussions in an environment where their viewpoints and work are taken seriously, and where discourse is civil, respectful, and professional. Members of the department should show civility, mutual respect, and collegiality by extending common courtesies, being personally accountable, and being willing to contribute their ideas and efforts to the effective functioning of the academic unit. Department members should defend the free inquiry of associates, show due respect for the opinions of others in departmental deliberations and in the exchange of criticism and ideas, and acknowledge academic debt. They should strive to be objective in professional assessment of students, candidates, colleagues, and staff members. And they should respect the privacy of and not discriminate against or harass colleagues and staff members. Good practices include the following:

• Faculty in particular, but students as well, should model a high level of professional respect toward others, where this is more than mere politeness, but includes taking each other seriously as fellow members of the department and of the wider community of philosophy.

• Faculty in particular, but students as well, should encourage open-mindedness about the scope of intellectual inquiry, and not disparage areas of philosophy other than their own or disciplines in which they do not work or with which they are not familiar.

• Criticism is an important source of progress in philosophy, but it is generally more effective when it is focused and constructive rather than overly broad and dismissive. Criticisms that could reasonably be construed as personal attacks are strongly discouraged—especially in public contexts.

• A department with a good climate will also cultivate norms of respectful, constructive, and inclusive discussion in classrooms and seminars. Some may experience the seminar room as a hostile environment, and faculty and students in their zeal to “do philosophy” can often be highly judgmental. In such an environment, those who lack confidence will sometimes stop participating, to their own detriment and to the detriment of the quality of discussion and effectiveness of graduate training.

• Moreover, students and faculty alike should be aware that hostile and aggressive behavior has been explicitly or implicitly seen as stereotypically male and heterosexual. As a result, such an atmosphere may engender stereotype threat or a sense of alienation among women, those not belonging to dominant groups, and those who differ in their sexual orientation. See Antony (2012), pp. 238–40; and Beebee (2013), §2.
Departmental colloquia and public talks pose special challenges to the pursuit of constructive, inclusive exchange. Among good practices for chairing talks are the following:

- Take a short (3–5 minute) break between the talk and the questions. This allows those who aren’t confident about their question to think it through and discuss it with colleagues and permits speakers a moment to rest and reflect.

- Designate a chair to organize the Q&A. The chair can keep track of those seeking to raise questions, and then attempt to allocate time and order the sequence of questioners so as to permit fully inclusive discussion. For example, the chair can prioritize questions from graduate or undergraduate students at the outset of the Q&A period or call upon those who speak up less frequently.

- Adopt (and enforce) the hand/finger distinction. A hand represents a new question, and the discussion chair can keep a list of questioners based upon the showing of a hand at any point in the Q&A. A finger may also be used at any point in the discussion and represents a request to pose a follow-up question or to ask for clarification on a point that is highly relevant to the exchange that has just taken place. This can permit more focused and productive discussion and can give people who tend not to speak the opportunity to ask smaller, “safer” questions. However, the finger convention can be abused by some to monopolize discussion or prevent moving on to other questions, and the chair should be recognized as having the authority to decide whether or when to cut short a long series of follow-ups. The chair should also not hesitate to intrude if bullying occurs, either from the podium or from the floor.

- Follow the “one question per question” rule. Sometimes what is presented as “a question” will in fact be an extended statement, or a series of distinct questions. This too can lead to a monopolization of discussion by a few of the most vocal or influential members of the audience. A discussion chair should be able to decide when it is appropriate to move on to other questioners in order to make the discussion more open to all. Depending upon audience size and available time, discussion chairs may find it helpful to announce in advance a time target for individual questions. This can help ensure that more people will have a chance to participate in discussions, cue questioners about how to formulate their questions, and make it possible for the discussion chair to limit a questioner without creating an appearance of arbitrariness.

- For similar reasons, one should not automatically grant questioners a follow-up question. It should be clear that granting a follow-up is at the chair’s discretion, and chairs should make an effort to be equitable in the use of this discretion, regardless of the questioner’s rank or status.

**See also: Section 7, Appendix A: Some general norms for discussions**

**References**


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10 The text in this section is adapted from the BPA/SWIP UK *Good Practice Scheme* section on “Seminar chairing policy suggestions.”
Electronic communication

Other forms of communication in the department include communication among members of the department as part of effective communal decision-making, communication by the department and groups within it to the outside world, and the ways that individual members of the department communicate with each other and those outside the department, especially via social media. In contemporary academia, these forms of communication often take place electronically, and that can raise special issues. As noted in Section 1: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF GUIDELINES FOR GOOD PRACTICES, it can be a good practice to organize public discussions within the department on questions about recommended practices or norms, and whether it is desirable to adopt these for the departmental community. Practices and norms for electronic communication continue to evolve, and in the absence of shared expectations or standard procedures it is of particular importance for departments to encourage wide and inclusive discussion of these questions. The following is a sample outline of points that a potential set of guidelines concerning electronic communication and social media (herein below, “ECSM guidelines”), developed or adopted by a unit or institution, could include. There are many ways to structure such guidelines; the list of topics given here does not pretend to be exhaustive.

- **Introduction and background**: This section of the ECSM guidelines could explain the reasons for having such a policy and indicate its scope, namely, that it applies to covering the use of institutional computing resources, including computer equipment, networks, and systems. It could also provide definitions of whatever terms seem helpful—e.g., electronic and social media, the distinction between academic freedom and freedom of expression, the difference between privacy and confidentiality.

- **Institutional computer-related policies**: Does the college or university have a general policy on appropriate computer usage? Some institutions have restrictions on what can be said or done using institutional email accounts and webpages: for example, it may be prohibited to use them as vehicles for marketing products from one’s own business to one’s colleagues or for political campaigning. If so, the guidelines should signal key features of this policy and link to the full policy. In addition, department members have responsibilities to abide by all broader legal rules and regulations directly related to electronic and social media usage that apply to their institution. Links to these policies, e.g., the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), could be included in this section as well.

- **Other relevant institutional policies**: Care must be taken to avoid violations of other policies, including the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and institutional non-discrimination and anti-harassment policies, when using institutional computing resources. Links to these policies could be included in a separate section, accompanied by a reminder that departmental members have responsibilities to abide by all applicable policies.

- **Access**: Faculty and students should also be made aware that most private and public institutions have the right to access electronic communications made on computers connected to institutional servers, even if these computers were purchased with private funds. Moreover, at public institutions, or in activities connected with or supported by federal funding, electronic communications may be subject to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests from private individuals. The nature and scope of Freedom of Information rights depend upon state and federal law; for general information, see the FOIA website or consult your state government’s website.
• **APA Code of Conduct:** A separate section of ECSM guidelines could link to the [APA Code of Conduct](#). The code grounds professional conduct in a code of ethics that stresses the value of academic freedom to professional work in philosophy, as well as other professional conduct values such as fairness, equity, and dignity. ECSM guidelines could emphasize that these values should be respected in not only “real world” professional interactions, but also all forms of electronic and social media communications. Additionally, the Code of Conduct contains sections on [Electronic Communications](#) and [Bullying and Harassment](#), which includes cyber-bullying. ECSM guidelines could also include this statement or a link to it.

• **Privacy:** Given that respect for privacy is critical for establishing communicative trust in online environments, it is important for ECSM guidelines to stress that information shared electronically with a faculty member, post-doc, or graduate student should generally not be forwarded or shared with others without the sender's consent. Privacy should be taken as the “default” mode for treating the communications of others. This extends, for example, to making student papers available to other students via email or posting them on one’s own faculty website. It would also include taking a photograph of student work and posting that on Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook (regardless of whether one’s social media accounts use private/protected settings).

• **Confidentiality:** FERPA requires confidentiality as the default mode for relating to student records. ECSM guidelines should mention, though, the importance of confidentiality in general with regard to electronic communications and social media. If the sender of an email message requests confidentiality, it should not be forwarded to others, and in general the presumption should be against forwarding content that is not specifically intended for others to see. In addition, students and others should not be “tagged” on the photos one posts on Facebook without first receiving their consent.

• **Other considerations:** While acknowledging the difficulty of drawing a sharp line between professional and personal email, ECSM guidelines could also mention the value of reserving an institutional email account for professional email, and using other email accounts for one’s personal use. They could also mention the value of creating social media accounts for classroom use, ones that would be separate from personal accounts, and deleting them when the course has ended. At the same time, it is important to note that no matter what account a department member uses to send a message or to post something on social media, the recipient could, as mentioned above, “broadcast” the content over email and social media to many others. For this reason, it is a good practice to keep a professional tone in all employment-related online communications. That is, use respectful and collegial language in all professional communications, independently of whether the communications are addressed to one’s actual colleagues.

• **Posting ECSM guidelines:** Departments choosing to develop ECSM guidelines are also encouraged to make the policy available on departmental websites, to explicitly bring it to the attention of new department members, and also to make it a part of new student orientation.

• **Electronic device policies in courses:** Departments are encouraged to ask all instructors to state explicitly on course syllabi how they will use electronic and social media communications in a responsible manner. Such an “electronic device” section of a syllabus could take the form of referring to departmental guidelines and a commitment to abide by them. That section could also set out faculty preferences for student use of social media in class. Just as faculty members might indicate
on a syllabus that, apart from a student who has an accommodation to make a recording of the class, no other recording of the class be made without their consent, they could in an “electronic device” section of a syllabus express a preference that classroom discussion not be “tweeted” while it is unfolding. Such transparency and clarity would contribute to increasing trust within the classroom environment.

**Email**

Communication among members of the department is necessary for effective communal decision-making. Here, habits and practices have been transformed by the use of email in the past 15 years, where members of a department rely more and more on email not only to communicate with each other, but also to make collective decisions. Email is, of course, a useful way of keeping in touch with colleagues and students, and making announcements to the department. However, in using email, one has to balance the importance of ready connectedness with the importance of avoiding the pitfalls that come with email communication. A good department will attempt to cultivate an environment in which all interactions between members of the department—whether personal or professional, whether face-to-face or by electronic media—are conducted with civility and professionalism. Email communication has serious limitations that can breed misunderstanding and conflict. Furthermore, in many instances it cannot substitute for face-to-face interactions among colleagues or students.

Good practices for email use include the following:

- Some departments have taken steps to limit email, recommending, for example, that email not be used as a substitute for talking in person, and setting out clear guidelines for what are or are not appropriate subjects for email. For discussion of sensitive or contentious matters, it is normally preferable to meet in person. Email is, however, a useful way of confirming important results of a conversation, or coordinating with colleagues on a proposed plan of action.

- Many communications require discretion and must respect privacy. Individuals can be significantly harmed if confidential information finds its way to inappropriate recipients. Email is a treacherous medium for any communications that must remain confidential, especially since messages are often automatically threaded in such a way that participants in a discussion are unaware of what information they are sending when they send a message. In-person exchange or, when this is not possible, telephone conversations are often the only suitable means for discussing confidential matters. And emails are typically not protected against Freedom of Information requests.

- Colleges, universities, and other academic units often have very strict rules about what can or cannot be transmitted through email, and FERPA provides privacy guarantees of which students, faculty, and staff should be aware.

- Some departments designate an individual, such as the chair, to be responsible for monitoring email and empower this person to shut down email threads that appear to be spiraling out of control, e.g., with disrespectful or offensive posts. It is often easier for emails to be misunderstood, especially with respect to tone, than more direct personal communication.

- Some departments restrict access to listserv addresses that send messages to the faculty or department as a whole. Limiting group emails and discouraging the use of reply-all can help disputes from escalating and discourage inappropriate sharing of confidential information.
• All members of a department should be educated about the extent to which the privacy of their institutional email accounts is and is not protected; most institutions reserve the legal right to access and read messages in all email accounts. Faculty and staff should follow the “New York Times rule”: do not put anything in an email message one would not be prepared to see on the front page of the Times—or read in a court of law.

• Faculty members already receive crushing quantities of email each day, and simply processing all these messages makes it difficult to get on to the more important business of teaching philosophy, thinking, and writing. It may be reasonable to limit group emails to announcements that cannot be conveyed through any other means, and which do not require a reply from recipients. Moreover, if no reply is required, indicate this explicitly in the message.

• To avoid proliferation, many departments compile announcements of talks, events, and news into a single weekly electronic newsletter. Such a newsletter should be inclusive in the events it will announce.

Social media
For many who work or study in academia, the use of social media for professional purposes is a routine, everyday practice. By enriching student learning, scholarship, and philosophical community, as well as allowing powerful opportunities for philosophers to communicate with the public, the use of social media can bring remarkable benefits. The use of social media and other forms of online communication can also promote inclusivity; for instance, some students who might feel uncomfortable about speaking up in class might be avid participants in an online discussion forum. Social media can be a useful way of networking and promoting one’s work, soliciting ideas and suggestions about teaching or research, and advertising an event or conference widely. They can also bring down barriers between people at different institutions and at different stages in their careers.

At the same time, the very ease with which information can be conveyed and amplified electronically can have unintended consequences. When, for instance, an email message intended for a single recipient is then posted on social media, a message designed to be seen by one person comes to the attention of the public at large. If this message contains language that is unprofessional (if, for example, it devalues the recipient’s work in harsh and dismissive terms, or makes fun of the recipient’s philosophical interests), the broad attention the message receives may result in not only embarrassment for the original sender, but also institutional or legal sanctions. Messages that were intended only for close friends, or meant to be kept in confidence, or that were written in haste, can end up shared with a much broader audience, including the rest of the department, professional communities, and the public. Such comments can easily be taken out of context, causing unintended pain and damage to reputations. Students and faculty who enjoy the benefits of social media should be aware of these risks and should be especially vigilant in maintaining high standards of professional conduct and in fostering good relations within the department and between the department and the broader community.

While the very seamlessness with which electronic and social media have become integrated into the lives of their users brings many benefits, it also makes it possible to mix the professional and personal in ways that can blur important lines. For example, faculty who “friend” or “follow” students run a number of risks. First, this may send the student the message that the faculty member expects close personal relationships with students, or that the absence of a personal relationship could harm a student’s long-term success in the program and beyond. This is, of course, inappropriate, and can be particularly problematic when the faculty
member is male and the student female. Second, “friending” students can seem to pressure them into sharing personal information that the students would not normally want to share with faculty. Third, “friending” can appear to draw in-group/out-group lines that can be corrosive to student morale and create the appearance of favoritism. All of these problems can be avoided by careful and appropriately restrained use of social media.

- Faculty members may wish to consider making a policy of not adding current graduate and undergraduate students in their program to their online social networks. Some departments have adopted an informal policy along these lines, offering faculty a policy-based explanation for declining social media connection requests from students. However, social media can also be a useful way of developing professional relationships with students, as long as certain guidelines are followed, including the following:
  
  o Learn the privacy settings for social media such as Facebook. Make use of distinctions between Facebook friends who are personal friends, and those who are professional acquaintances and colleagues. Make informed and ample use of privacy settings to block posts that share information best left out of a professional setting. For example, some forms of personal information—including marital status, religious affiliation, and sexual orientation—are protected information that employers and graduate admissions committees are prohibited from considering, and that one may not want them to know.
  
  o Understand and respect students’ FERPA privacy rights.
  
  o When posting, always be aware of one’s audience. Posts visible to colleagues and students should observe norms of professional respect.

Twitter and similar forms of microblogging social media make it possible to share news and information, broadcast opinions and requests, and build a professional community of individuals interested in similar academic or professional issues on a very broad scale, but they come with minimal control over who sees one’s broadcasts or tweets. Twitter can be used in the classroom to live-blog events, build a sense of community, serve for backchannel communication, or even to provide a study guide via tweets with hashtags. Again, as with Facebook, Twitter and similar microblogging social media have important drawbacks, which include the ease with which personal and professional activities and opinions can intermix, and the fact that one’s opinion may end up broadcast to a much larger audience, and with less context, than one intended. Posts made in one’s role as faculty should be professional and should never contain or refer to confidential information. Student information is, as noted above, protected by FERPA and by norms of privacy that should always be observed by professional educators. The use of Twitter or other social media in order to broadcast denigrating or humiliating remarks about others is never appropriate.

**Communication on department websites**

Many departmental websites are oriented toward recruiting undergraduate majors or minors, or graduate students. Sarah-Jane Leslie and colleagues (2015) have published a study showing a strong inverse correlation between the belief that success in fields such as philosophy required raw “brilliance,” and the percentage of women as well as African-American PhDs in these discipline. The study recommended that “Academics who wish to diversify their fields might wish to downplay talk of innate intellectual giftedness and instead highlight the importance of sustained effort for top-level success in their field.” With this advice in mind, departments should review their websites and make changes as appropriate.
In addition, departments should carefully phrase references on websites to departmental areas of emphasis and strength. If a program is strong in history of philosophy and in epistemology, for example, but does not have course content from non-Western traditions, these strengths should be identified as being in “Western history of philosophy” and “Western epistemology.” If a program is not truly comprehensive, broad, or inclusive with regard to traditions and readings, the department website should not describe the program in such terms. (This recommendation is in line with the APA Statement on the Global Character of Philosophy.)

It is a good practice for departmental websites to refrain from referring to rankings based on incomplete data or non-representative survey samples in order to promote their reputation in the field.

References
Section 7, Appendix A: Some general norms for discussions

Because of the distinctive importance of discussion in the development of philosophical ideas and in the training of our students, it might be helpful to have a list of some general norms that can facilitate these goals. Such a list, or a modified form of it, might be shared with students and faculty, and form the basis for meetings on the climate for discussion in the department, its talks, and its classes and seminars. Placing the possible adoption of a set of norms on the agenda might encourage taking the climate for discussion seriously. The norms below are excerpted and adapted from a [list compiled by David Chalmers](https://www.davidchalmers.org/).

**Norms of respect**
- Don’t interrupt.
- Don’t present objections as flat dismissals. (Leave open the possibility that there’s a response.)
- Don’t be incredulous or sarcastic, or mime astonishment or amusement to others in the audience.
- Don’t start side conversations parallel to the main discussion.
- Acknowledge your interlocutor’s insights.
- Object to theses, not to people.

**Norms of constructiveness**
- Objections are fine, but it’s also always okay to be constructive, building on a speaker’s project or strengthening their position. Even objections can often be cast in a constructive way.
- Even when an objection is destructive with respect to a position, it often helps to find a positive insight suggested by the objection.
- If you find yourself thinking that the project is worthless and there is nothing to be learned from it, think twice before asking your question.
- It’s okay to question the presuppositions of a project or an area, but discussions in which these questions dominate can be unhelpful.
- Don’t keep pressing the same objection (individually or collectively) until the speaker “cries uncle.”
- Remember that philosophy isn’t a zero-sum game. (Related version: philosophy isn’t Fight Club.)

**Norms of inclusiveness**
- Don’t attempt to dominate the discussion. (Partial exception for the speaker here!)
- Raise one question per question. (Further questions go to the back of the queue.)
- Try not to let your question (or your answer) run on forever.
- Acknowledge points made by previous questioners.
- It’s okay to ask a question that you think may be obtuse or uninformed.
• Don’t use unnecessarily offensive examples.
• Be aware of others in the audience who might be attempting unsuccessfully to enter the discussion, or are being interrupted, and attempt to find a way to incorporate or invite them into the discussion.
• Many departments have had good success with the practice of asking first for questions from undergraduates or graduate students before proceeding to questions from faculty or others.