

# Grades K-5 Learning Activity

# Contracting

Develop a classroom or team contract to create a community of mutual respect and inclusion.

This learning activity was adapted with permission from Facing History and Ourselves' [Contracting](#) strategy.

Contracting is the process of openly discussing with your students or players expectations about how community members will treat each other. It is an effective strategy for making your classroom or team a reflective community. Reflective communities are places where explicit rules and implicit norms protect everyone's right to speak; where differing perspectives can be heard and valued; where members take responsibility for themselves, each other, and the group as a whole; and where each member has a stake and a voice in collective decisions. These types of communities are usually created through deliberate nurturing from students, teachers, and coaches who have shared expectations about how community members will treat each other. The instructions below describe how to discuss community norms with students and then draft and agree to a formal contract of behavior.

## Step 1: Define contracting

Explain that a contract is a kind of agreement. A classroom or team contract describes what everyone in the community agrees to do.

## Step 2: Students reflect

To prepare students to develop a community contract, ask them to think about their past experiences as students in a classroom or players on a team. If students have no previous experience, you might prompt them to think of their experiences as members of their family. (You'll want to modify the prompts below accordingly.)

You might use prompts like these to structure students' reflection:

- Think about a time you felt really comfortable sharing your ideas with your teacher and your classmates/your coach and the other players. What ideas have you shared?
- What happened that helped you to feel comfortable to share?

## Step 3: Select an approach to developing a contract

We have found that useful community contracts typically include several clearly defined rules or expectations, as well as consequences for those who do not fulfill their obligations as members of the community.

There are many ways to proceed with developing a community contract. Here are three examples.

### Start with students' ideas

Starting the contracting process with students' ideas boosts student engagement and increases the likelihood students will be invested in the final contract.

You might begin by having lower elementary students engage in a turn-and-talk in which each student shares one idea for a rule or expectation with their partner. Upper elementary students might work in small groups to write short lists of rules or expectations.

Next, partners or small groups share with the rest of the class or team. As partners or small groups share, the adult might help them to organize their ideas by theme. If there are any tensions or contradictions in the expectations that have been suggested, the community can discuss them together. Ultimately, the adult should support students in

consolidating ideas to arrive at 3-5 clearly defined rules or expectations and appropriate, aligned consequences for not meeting those expectations. Note that in lower elementary grades, it is likely that the adult will need to carry more of the cognitive load of categorizing and consolidating.

While this process is inclusive of students' ideas, ultimately it is the adult's responsibility to ensure that the ideas that make it into the final contract are those that will best nurture a safe learning environment.

### Start with an existing list

Starting with an existing list is a more concrete way to begin the contracting process.

With this approach, the educator or coach shares with students a list of norms, rules, or expectations that have been used in Facing History classrooms in the past. They then ask students to discuss what they think about these norms. Prompts might include:

- Which of these norms might help this group to create a safe, respectful, productive environment?
- Are there any rules students want to remove from the list?
- Are there any rules students want to change?

Here is a list of norms that have been used in previous Facing History classrooms:

- Listen with respect. Try to understand what someone is saying before judging.
- Make comments using "I" statements like "I think..." or "I feel..."
- If you do not feel safe making a comment or asking a question, write or draw about the idea in your journal. You can share the idea with your teacher first and together come up with a safe way to share the idea.
- If someone says an idea or question that helps your own learning, say thank you.
- If someone says something that hurts you, say "I feel hurt by that," and explain why.
- Put-downs are never okay.
- If you don't understand something, ask a question.
- Think with your head and your heart.
- Share the talking time—provide room for others to speak.
- Do not interrupt others while they are speaking.
- Write thoughts/Draw pictures in your journal if you don't have time to say them during class.

### Reflect on scenarios

Another way to help students develop a classroom contract is to have them envision what they would like to have happen in certain scenarios. Scenarios could be drawn from students' own experiences. They might include situations such as:

- When we have an idea or question we would like to share, we can...
- When we have an idea but do not feel comfortable sharing it out loud, we can...
- When someone says something that we appreciate, we can...
- When someone says something that might be confusing or hurts our feelings, we can...
- To make sure all students have the chance to share their ideas, we can...
- If we read or watch something that makes us feel sad or angry, we can...
- To show respect for the ideas of others, we can...

## Step 4: Initiate the contract

After the class has completed its contract, reaching consensus about rules, norms, and expectations, it is important for each student to signal his or her agreement. Students can do so by copying the contract into their journals and signing the page, signing a copy of the contract that remains displayed in the classroom or, for lower elementary students who may not be writing yet, adding their hand print to a copy of the contract that remains displayed in the classroom.

