

Establish Safer Space Ground Rules Through A Collective Process



Your role as a facilitator is to ensure the safety and comfort of your participants. This is as much the case when holding online meetings as it is for physical meetings. By facilitating a collective process where participants can name and agree to a set of ground rules, everyone is held accountable to uphold a safer space. This might include discussing things like, “avoid assumptions about the gender or attraction identity of anyone in the group”, and “being mindful not to interrupt anyone”.

While many of the same ground rules you have already established for your physical GSA meetings will still apply, it is a good idea to revisit them to see if they work for an online environment. Additional measures to protect the privacy and safety of your participants may be needed, as not everyone will be joining from an environment in which it is safe for them to be out.

[Click here for an example of collective ground rules.](#)

Make Participation Optional and Low Pressure

The attendance of your online GSA meetings may differ compared to the attendance of your in-person meetings. As this is an exceptionally challenging time for many, trust that your peers are doing their best to take care of their own needs in this new context. Extra compassion will go a long way and lowering pressure to attend will help both facilitators and participants. Some members may appreciate a check-in or a gentle, no-obligation reminder about the opportunity to join in online. Consider planning activities for each meeting, rather than longer projects requiring multiple meetings to complete.



Share the load

As facilitators, there may be days when you do not have the capacity to hold space for other people. It is okay to ask for help! If possible, have rotating facilitators or co-facilitators with varying different subtasks and roles assigned ahead of time. This is a great opportunity for GSAs to foster leadership skills.



Be Flexible and Adaptive

Come to meetings prepared with a game plan in mind but be open to flexibility. Be mindful of where levels of engagement are at and adapt your plan if necessary. More group check-ins may be needed in an online environment! Make use of Emojis, GIFs or virtual hand raising and polling to provide participants with a range of ways to express how they are doing and feeling in any given moment. You must develop new ways to “read the room”.



Be Sensitive to Participants' Home Situations



Unfortunately, not everyone will have the same access to a queer-affirming environment, good internet connection and technology, or privacy to participate. Keep this in mind when designing your meetings and try your best to remove barriers of access.

Encourage participants to share any accessibility needs they may have and work with them to find an appropriate accommodation. Provide a range of different participation options such as having participants call-in to the meeting by phone. Some participants may not wish to leave a digital trace of their participation and others may simply not have access to a computer. Text or chat are also alternative options for participating. Keep in mind that participants may not be able to use the same name and pronoun they do at school meet-ups. Remind participants to change their screen name to display the name and pronoun they wish to be referred to within online communication and do a check-in about pronouns ahead of time. You can also suggest a safe word or hand gesture for everyone to use in order to signal to the group that the topic of conversation has to change or stop.

[Click here for an example of a Needs & Wants Form.](#)

Moderate Conversation with Digital Tools

There are some added challenges to working within an online environment. You want to keep the conversation flowing as organically as possible while minimizing interruptions. At the same time, you also want to give everyone the opportunity to contribute. Instead of a “talking stick”, ask participants who are not currently speaking to mute their microphone. Ask participants to use the digital “hand-raise” feature to ask for the floor to speak. Encourage participation by giving everyone a chance to speak in “round-table” style. As the facilitator/moderator, suggest a ground rule that gives you the authority to help orchestrate the conversation. If you are working with a co-facilitator, assign one of you to moderate the chat feature so that the participants there are not left out.



Trouble Shooting Spotty Tech

Spotty internet connections, delays, or freezing can be frustrating parts of meetings. One way to help connections is to limit the number of people with video display on at one time. Prepare a back-up option to keep communication flowing in case of tech issues. Keep a group chat going elsewhere on a predetermined platform that everyone has access to. Keep in mind the limitations of free apps and keep everyone informed on when your session could time out!



Monitor, Address and Report Harmful Behaviour

To ensure the safety of your participants, review every registration for your virtual GSA session and adjust the privacy settings for restricted, password protected access. Make it clear that trolling or bullying behaviours are not tolerated and will be reported. For more information on how manage harmful oppressive behavior and language online, check out [Egale's Anti-LGBTQI2S Cyberbullying resource.](#)

