



Key to having a successful community project is setting expectations for your events, meetings, and general behavior. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, and the type of agreement you use will depend on your community. That said, clear expectations are a helpful tool to make your work welcoming to newcomers, and help your group navigate difficult situations.

There is a lot of flexibility in setting these agreements. Codes of conduct (CoC) or anti-harassment policies may span across all of your work, while a safe space policy may enhance this for in-person gatherings, and [event expectations](#) may adapt according to the type of [event you host](#). To be clear, this is not a guide to writing a legal agreement such as a terms of service or privacy policy. For online communities, the [Santa Clara Principles](#) provide some additional guidance on how to implement such policies while respecting freedom of expression.

WHY ADOPT A COMMUNITY AGREEMENT?

Having at least a simple community agreement offers a few perks:

WELCOMING

Community agreements make your group's values and expected behaviors clear — making your work more approachable. Without one, a new person may be hesitant to participate, or face unnecessary tension when they do participate. Setting expectations helps people feel confident enough to get more involved in your work.

CONSISTENCY

Smaller groups often get by without a written agreement, as everyone knows each other well. However as a group grows, it will need to represent a growing number of diverse backgrounds, personalities, and perspectives. Having a written agreement keeps everyone on the same page and avoids favoritism. Making it clear how to act when representing the group, even at events or actions run by another organization, will also help your work be consistent in its values.

DEESCALATION

Conflict is an inevitable part of organizing, and these heated situations can have a knock-on effect of harm. Having a clear outline of unacceptable behaviors and enforcement processes can mitigate interpersonal tensions and allow for more fair and unbiased decisions.

SWIFTNESS

Delaying a response to inappropriate behavior lets it continue to harm and upset people impacted by your work. For example, if everyone knows when a disruptive person be asked to leave an event, events can get back on track without hesitation

LANGUAGE

Having a shared way of discussing problems with behavior is often a necessary first step of making sure everyone can identify, address, and remedy the situation.

WHOM IS YOUR AGREEMENT FOR?

Before writing a community agreement, your organization should establish the outcomes you hope to achieve, and who needs to be reached to ensure that happens. Some example audiences and desired outcomes include:

- **Event Attendees:** Event expectations inform newcomers how to participate without disrupting the event for others
- **New team members:** Clear communication and conduct expectations help someone who likes your work get involved
- **Current organization members:** A clear accountability process makes working together during difficult times smoother
- **Coalition partners:** In [7 building a coalition](#), participants establish a baseline of respect of each other's needs and concerns

Plan how you'll share this agreement with its audience, and make sure they can easily access and understand it. It may be worth taking the time to walk someone through it and answer questions. To use event expectations as an example, it might be included in an online event page, and in-person handout, and be reviewed by presenters before they begin.

WRITING A COMMUNITY AGREEMENT

It's important that groups communicate internally how such agreements are written and approved. Often it is best to start writing in a smaller sub-group before having the agreement edited and approved more broadly. For that initial writing process, it is helpful to think of the intended audience and outcomes, and write out the following:

DESIRED BEHAVIOR

Write out what behaviors you are encouraging and discouraging. Often you can frame similar issues either positively ("make space for others to participate") or negatively ("don't interrupt or talk over others"). Consider what is a norm you want to encourage, versus a rule that will be enforced.

IMPORTANCE AND VALUES

Why are each of these changes in behavior important to your organization? Connecting these changes to broader values improves buy-in and makes them appear less arbitrary.

PENALTIES

Whenever possible make penalties explicit and precise. For example, which behaviors get “three strikes”, a warning, or immediately penalized? Being clear if and when penalties for past behavior can be dropped or contested is often important to include.

ENFORCEMENT

How will your group make sure this agreement and its penalties are upheld? Try to be clear about who has the final say and how you will enforce this agreement equitably. Most importantly, make sure this process is sustainable and consistent for your organization, even if that means embracing a less ideal process.

With these components thought out, you can write out your own agreement or look to other organizations and templates to start from. Many agreements, especially within activist and free and open-source software communities, are under Creative Commons licenses. If you have the resources, there are also for-hire community agreement consultants to guide the writing and approval process.

No need to reinvent the wheel, borrowing from pre-existing language can make your agreement more familiar and easy to interpret.

If after this process you find an agreement you want to adopt entirely, it is best practice to share your own copy with updated information to avoid implying the other organization is responsible for the enforcement of the agreement.

In writing these agreements, balance clarity, accessibility, and brevity. Short agreements are more likely to be read but may be too ambiguous. Less common terms may be precise to people in the know, but exclude people with a different background. These barriers can determine who does and doesn't have access to community justice.

COMPONENTS OF AN AGREEMENT

What goes into your agreement depends on your goals. Common sections include:

- **Preamble / Introduction:** Outlining your goals for the agreement, its purpose, and how it fits into your community
- **Guide of behavioral expectations:** Outline encouraged and discouraged behavior and any penalties you will enforce, optionally with specific examples.

Example: “Our community does not tolerate public or private harassment of other community participants.”

- **Definitions of terms:** A term that seems intuitive to you might not be for newcomers. Try to provide explicit and accessible definitions to key terms in the agreement. This can also be a separate text linked to in the agreement.

Example: "Harassment includes disparaging or hurtful comments based on age, body size, caste, disability, ethnicity, gender identity, nationality, race, religion, sex, sexual identity and orientation, socio-economic status, or tribe."

- **Accountability and Violations:** Outline of the steps organizers will take when they become aware of a violation, how others can make these violations known, and how (if ever) decisions are revisited.. Be clear on who will be involved in these decisions, and who will have access to reports.

RESPONSE MEASURES

Responses to bad behavior can often fall into a few categories:

- **Punitive measures** are meant to deter repeated offenses and add some weight to breaking a rule.
 - E.g. a temporary ban from attending events.
- **Remediative measures** focus on helping the organization or event recover from a violation.
 - E.g. explaining to someone who breached the agreement why their behavior is not acceptable
 - E.g. a private conversation with someone impacted on what support they need
- **Administrative measures** focus less on the specific people involved but seek to systematically reduce harm through new practices.
 - E.g. revisiting and changing the community agreement

ENFORCEMENT TIPS

While on their own an agreement can help set norms and expectations, most agreements will need to be backed by some form of enforcement. To plan out an effective enforcement strategy, consider the following:

INCIDENT REPORTING

Be clear with your community about whom to contact if there is an incident, who will respond to the issue, who else may be informed about it. This may all be the same few people for a small event or a few distinct teams in a bigger group.

Some people reporting incidents may feel more comfortable talking to one person over another. Where possible include a variety of options for who to include in an incident report, especially when you can include people with diverse identities and backgrounds.

INFORMATION SECURITY

If you are receiving information about an incident in a written form, say via email or text, it is important to make sure your team talks explicitly about how this information is handled. Put together a security plan for sensitive content with the Surveillance Self-Defense to have a clear plan and process on how it is received, stored, accessed, and deleted.

DEBRIEF

Learning how to respond to, de-escalate, and resolve conflicts in a community space is a new skill for most people. After an incident, make some time to discuss how the reported incident was handled and how it may be improved upon. You might want to limit this discussion to the people involved in enforcement and share a more general summary of the incident to others to preserve the privacy and well-being of everyone involved.