

An Online Conversation Guide

Habits for staying decent on social media and in comment threads.

Online conversations are different. They're public, permanent, and designed to reward outrage. The other person feels less real, the audience is larger than you can see, and the stakes for getting it wrong — personally, professionally, relationally — can last for years. These habits are built for the particular challenge of being decent on a platform engineered to make decency hard.

What	How	What It Sounds Like
<p>Decide Whether to Engage at All</p> <p>Online platforms are designed to reward outrage. Before you reply, pause and ask: Is this person open to a real conversation, or am I about to feed a fight? Sometimes the most decent thing you can do is not engage.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Asking yourself: would this conversation go better offline?• Skipping the bait when something is clearly designed to provoke.• Choosing your battles — you don't owe every comment a response.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>(In your head): "Not today."</i>• <i>If I want to talk to this person, I'll send a DM or call them.</i>• <i>I don't owe this comment a reply.</i>
<p>Write for the Room, Not the Mirror</p> <p>Online comments aren't private. They're seen by friends, strangers, employers, and family — often years later. The audience is always larger than you think. Write something you'd be willing to read aloud to your grandmother and your boss.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reading your post or reply aloud before you hit send.• Asking: would I say this to their face?• Avoiding posts you wouldn't want screenshotted.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>(After re-reading): "I can say this better."</i>• <i>Would this read well to someone who already disagrees with me?</i>• <i>Is this the version of me I want online?</i>

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<p>Assume the Other Person Is Real</p> <p>The single biggest difference between online and in-person conversation is that, online, the other person feels like a profile picture rather than a human being. They're not. They have a family, a job, fears, and a story. Write to a person, not to an avatar.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imagining the person across from you at a kitchen table. • Avoiding language you wouldn't use in person. • Refusing to dehumanize, even when the conversation gets heated. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I disagree with what you wrote, but I want to ask a real question...</i> • <i>I don't know you, but I'd guess we have more in common than this thread suggests.</i> • <i>I'm going to take you at your word that you mean this in good faith.</i>
<p>Disagree With the Idea, Not the Identity</p> <p>Online debates collapse fastest when people stop engaging with the argument and start labeling the arguer. Decency online means going at the substance, not the person — even when the post is provocative.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quoting the specific claim you're responding to. • Avoiding name-calling, even mild versions. • Resisting the urge to sort people into camps before you reply. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Here's where I disagree with what you wrote: specifically...</i> • <i>I think this argument has a problem — let me explain.</i> • <i>I want to push back on this idea without making it about you.</i>
<p>Take the Hard Stuff Offline</p> <p>When a conversation becomes genuinely important — a real disagreement with someone you actually know, a misunderstanding with a friend, a heated thread with a family member — get off the platform. Almost no important conversation goes better in public comments than in a phone call.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sending a DM, an email, or a text instead of replying in public. • Suggesting a phone call when stakes are high. • Closing the thread once you've taken it private. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Can I message you about this directly? It deserves more than a comment thread.</i> • <i>I'd rather call you than do this here.</i> • <i>Let me follow up offline — this matters more than 280 characters.</i>

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<p>Know When to Disengage</p> <p>Some online interactions cross a line — harassment, threats, abuse, sustained bad faith. Disengaging is not surrender. Blocking is not cowardice. Walking away from a conversation that has stopped being a conversation is part of decency, not a violation of it.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing the signs of harassment versus genuine disagreement. • Using mute, block, and report features without guilt. • Closing the app or stepping away from the screen. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I've said what I have to say. I'm not going to keep going around on this.</i> • <i>This isn't a conversation anymore, so I'm going to disengage.</i> • <i>(Silently, by closing the tab.)</i>

These habits work best when both people are engaging in good faith. You can only control your own behavior — modeling these habits often invites others to do the same, but not always. If a conversation becomes abusive, dishonest, or unsafe, it is always OK to step away. Online especially, your best move is often the one you don't make.

Learn more at www.decencyingov.org