Notes for committee and board:

This is the link for GM-facing guidelines

<https://reacting.barnard.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/RTTP%20Guidlines%20for%20Game%20Masters%20-%20Discomfort_0.pdf>

And

https://reactingconsortium.org/resources/Documents/RCGuidelinesforGMsDiscomfort.pdf

Student responses to the questionnaire:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/12ZrcZp5ME8EyaURRyt1yid49_XfpcTElwrUnwBKZvGc/edit?usp=sharing>

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**Guidelines for Students**

**Introduction**

While faculty can attend conferences to learn to teach Reacting, students often find themselves playing Reacting games, only knowing that they are playing a historical role-playing game. A common concern of first-time Reacting students is that they are uncomfortable with public speaking. Yet we find that students who may not have previously spoken up much in classes are more comfortable doing so in character. Students often finish Reacting courses saying that it was the most fun they have ever had in a classroom, and that they got to know their professors and classmates better than they would have in a typical class.

We hope that these guidelines will help you navigate challenging situations while playing Reacting games. Most of all, we hope that you find Reacting to be an engaging form of learning where YOU are actively learning about pivotal moments in history and applying issues to today’s world.

# Suggestions for Participating in Challenging Games

No doubt about it, participating in RTTP games can be a challenge.

**It was challenging because it was my first time playing the games but others in my class had spent more time playing them. I had to spend a lot of time understanding how to play and get into character while my peers were already ahead of me. I also did not know that we could be communicating outside of class times.** (RTTP Student Survey Response)

Practically every student participating in an RTTP game will face a number of challenges. If you are a first-time student, you will be unfamiliar with the RTTP format. An RTTP class is quite different from most classes you have experienced before. Even if you have played other RTTP games, you will need to become familiar with the game rules and procedures of the specific game you are playing now. You will also need to be familiar in general with the historical background of the game and the issues that you will encounter in the game.

RTTP instructors and game designers understand this challenge. Most instructors will devote a number of class sessions to preparing you and your classmates to play an upcoming game. Pay attention during these preparation sessions and ask questions when you feel uncertain about something. Also, many games have an opening session that is almost a practice session. For example, the Reconciliation Agreement session in *The Threshold of Democracy* probably won’t determine the final outcome of that game, but it does provide a relatively low stakes opportunity to get used to how the game will be played. And whenever you feel uncertain or lost, ask your instructor/game facilitator for help.

Learning how to deal successfully with unfamiliar situations is an enormously important skill. One of the reasons your instructor chose a game-based learning approach like RTTP is that playing games inherently requires us to develop that skill as we become familiar with the game’s rules, procedures, and historical background.

**I'm not inclined to public speaking – it's nerve-wracking and scary! – but I feel like Reacting to the Past gave me real tips on how to improve as a public speaker as well as practice doing so, and in a supportive but energized space, that advanced both my skills and confidence in this field. For example, I learned that women in particular have a tendency to raise the ends of their sentences in a way that makes it sound like we're asking questions, diminishing the assertiveness of our points. Now that I'm aware of this, I make a conscious effort not to do it! Overall, then, this was a positive challenge about playing Reacting.** (RTTP Student Survey Response)

Perhaps the most challenging single aspect of Reacting games is speaking in public. Many people are quite anxious about making speeches and giving presentations. Many instructors will also spend some game preparation time helping students hone their speaking skills. In fact, it is not unusual for a student to find that participating in an RTTP game helped them develop more confidence as a speaker. Sometimes it can help to think that it’s not you personally making the speech, but it’s the historical role that you are portraying in the game. However, if you experience severe anxiety about speaking, talk with your instructor/game facilitator.

**I didn’t really experience challenges except 1 student who took it a bit too far personally outside of class. I had 4 students consoling me after.** (RTTP Student Survey Response)

Games, by definition, involve competition. Some RTTP games are essentially cooperative games where all the players are working together, in a sense competing with outside factors. But most Reacting games do involve competition and even conflict among the players. Hopefully, your instructor/game facilitator has provided some ground rules to keep conflict within acceptable limits. It’s always best to keep in mind that within the game other characters are arguing with and perhaps criticizing the historical person you are portraying and not you.

Unfortunately, sometimes students get so wrapped up in a game that they carry on with argument and criticism outside the classroom. If you think that you are facing such harassment, contact your instructor/game facilitator right away.

**Sacrificing my feminism for the sake of a game or character was very difficult for me, and made it hard to be fully in the game.** (RTTP Student Survey Response)

Many students prefer to play the role of someone like themselves. That’s a shame, really. Empathy is a key social skill, and role-playing games like Reacting can be a tremendous opportunity to develop your empathy muscles. As they say on Twitter, retweets are not endorsements. The mere fact that you are portraying a historical character should never imply that you agree with them even if you are doing your best to portray their ideas. That’s one of the reasons this approach is called *Reacting* to the Past. Your instructor ultimately wants you to react to, not just repeat, all of the ideas embodied in the characters that you and your classmates are portraying. When you analyze these ideas, apply them to issues, and carefully critique them, you may well find that you are not sacrificing your own views or values, but making them much stronger than they were before.

This can be most challenging when a game at its core immerses students in fraught discussions about difficult historical subjects like slavery, colonial domination, racism, anti-Semitism, genocide, among others. It can seem wrong to treat these matters as a part of a game. Games are supposed to be fun, right? And topics like these should never be treated as fun. Precisely because these are such serious subjects, many of which are not just historical memories but terrible contemporary problems, we need ways to engage deeply with them. Engaging with these issues in their historical manifestations can help us better recognize and understand them when we encounter them today. Finally, it is sobering to realize that history’s villains--slavers, colonialists, fascists, and the like-- usually thought that they were justified in their actions. Encountering them in a Reacting game may help caution us against our own tendencies toward self-justification, helping us develop a measure of ethical humility.

# Suggestions for Playing Challenging Characters

Reacting games are always about conflicting ideas and often address complex and controversial topics. The ideas can be far from the present experience of most students. For example, few people today would argue that education would render women unfit for motherhood or that women’s suffrage would destroy the harmony of families. When students encounter such beliefs, they may require more research to understand the ideas and why they were once commonplace. It may cause less discomfort if a student were to fervently argue against women’s suffrage when speaking in character. Similarly, arguments for the divine right of kings may be difficult because they draw on a philosophical and political culture that is far from what many players know.

Other controversial ideas are not as distant. These ideas raise challenges because they are too close. You might, for example, may be uncomfortable expressing support for birth control in a game set in early twentieth century America because of your own beliefs. Other games may ask you to articulate the theology of a religious tradition that is very different to your faith. Racism is a pressing and constant problem now and its history is painful because it is still so present. How can anyone play a character whose odious political positions reverberate to the present day? Why would anyone want to do this?

**I think some students had trouble relating to characters that had outdated values. I have debate experience so I am used to arguing things I don't necessarily agree with, but I think at times people melded their views with their character's inadvertently.** (RTTP Student Survey Response)

First, RTTP is not theatre and it is not a re-enactment. Theatre asks actors to physically and mentally disengage from themselves and take on character’s ideas, motivations, and physical appearance. The audience is meant to believe that the actor and the character are one and the same. RTTP is different.

No RTTP student should attempt to mimic a character or to suggest the historical character is being depicted in life. You should not use accents. Costumes should not draw on stereotypes or misconceptions about ethnicity, race, gender or culture but can creatively indicate what faction you are in or what ideas you support. You might, for example, wear a votes for women sash or wear a color associated with your faction but you would not try to mimic a regional accent or wear a head dress you think suggests the ethnicity of your character. Your focus will be on your character’s ideas and goals and you can do that by reading the primary sources in the game book and conducting research. Each role is meant to help all players in the game understand the ideas and principles that shaped historical events.

**One of the more fun challenges was trying to know everything about everything. Meaning: It was a challenge to gain insight into every character’s perspective in order to more effectively argue my own character’s point, but it was a rewarding challenge. Additionally, public speaking is not necessarily my strong suit, but the game allowed me to practice this skill and become more comfortable**. (RTTP Student Survey Response)

Historical conflicts involve ideas in opposition, ideas that could not be easily reconciled. An RTTP game may ask a student to advocate for ideas that they don’t believe and would never endorse. But before a student can advocate for an idea, they must first research and understand the principles behind it and the context in which it was argued. That practice is at the core of what RTTP is meant to teach. It asks you to examine points of view and to anticipate what opponents will argue. It requires you to look at the context and to consider the evidence in order to advocate for your position. Your understanding of a particular historical moment will be enhanced but also your ability to examine and understand points of view very different from your own. Like a defense lawyer, a RTTP player is an advocate who relates a story in a compelling way and anticipates what the prosecution will argue in response. A defense lawyer’s role is not to determine guilt or innocence but to advocate for their client. As defense lawyers quip, you don’t have to buy it, you just have to sell it. Similarly, you do not need to agree with an argument or share the historical role’s understanding of the world. You almost certainly will not. Yet a game allows you to understand historical context and change from multiple perspectives and that skill builds historical thinking, empathy and an ability to advocate more effectively for the ideas you do believe.

Uncomfortable roles are challenging and some strategies may make that position less troubling. Your class could agree that before the game begins and after it concludes, everyone will clarify for their classmates that they do not believe what they advocated.

Take challenging roles as an opportunity rather than a test.

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# Suggestions for Communicating with Your Professor

Reacting to the Past can be a challenging methodology to engage with and requires a shift in how you approach your studies. For many classes, you are often required to memorize course material and, to some extent, reproduce it in quizzes and exams. We are familiar with multiple-choice tests and standard essays. Reacting to the Past asks you to engage with coursework in new ways by studying the historical background and primary sources, and interpreting them through the lens of your characters, taking on, for the duration of the game, views that may be antithetical to your own deeply held beliefs. Try to be positive and proactive in how you approach learning in a course that utilizes RTTP. Your professors want you to succeed and have likely helped other students facing similar challenges in the past. Your professors also have a community of other professors who use RTTP to support them in advising you in the best way through your difficulties. Professors are your best resource for thriving in RTTP, an unconventional, but tremendously rewarding way of learning. But they can’t help you if they don’t know that you are struggling, and if you don’t take the initiative to ask questions and to reach out for help.

**The readings were hard to understand sometimes.** (RTTP Student Survey Response)

Every Reacting game will usually have an introductory class or classes, during which professors discuss historical background and core texts for each game. This is the time to begin asking questions about your readings. If you struggle with reading complex texts from remote times in history, ask your professor for advice on the best way to approach reading such texts for the game. Ask if there are particular texts or sections that you should prioritize in your reading. When reading in preparation for class, take notes, so that you can ask questions in class. Once you receive your role sheet, go over the most important texts for your character again. These will be listed under the section “Relationship with Texts” in your role sheet. If you are having trouble understanding how to interpret these texts and refer to them in your speech, consult with your professor.

**Reading the sources takes time, and if one wants to be successful in the game, they should read the sources.** (RTTP Student Survey Response)

Reading Core Texts in your game book is, indeed, essential for success. Referring to primary sources can help you craft a speech that is specific, substantive, and historically grounded. However, if you have never done this before, it may be a challenging task. While professors at different colleges and universities have different ways in which they engage with students, most welcome questions and requests for feedback. You may ask a professor whether they would be willing to discuss your ideas for a speech or read a draft of your speech to give you feedback. Be courteous, timely, and realistic in your expectations. All professors are very busy with multiple priorities, of which you are not aware. Give them the courtesy of asking for help early and do not wait until the last minute to get in touch. Be respectful of your professor’s busy schedules when making appointments and prepare for this conversation by having done the necessary work, such as doing your readings, creating a draft of your speech, or making a list of questions ahead of the meeting. Ask your professors when it is convenient for them to meet and make it a point to work around their schedules. Asking for help at the last minute and not giving your professor sufficient choices of times to meet is considered discourteous.

**I wish there was more direction with the writing assignments as to the expectations of the professor and clarification on guidelines set forth in the prompts.** (RTTP Student Survey Response)

Reacting to the Past, in some ways, mimics life. In life, we do not usually have clear expectations on how and when to act. In your future work, you will also likely encounter challenges with understanding expectations and how exactly you must to fulfill them. Every game involves many characters, all with different assignments for speeches to be delivered at appropriate times. Your professor cannot possibly keep track of all of them, but will certainly be able to make clarifications, given the opportunity to do so. If in doubt, let your professor help you by asking for help in good time.

**Certain classmate(s) didn't fully understand the game, which made certain aspects of game play difficult (however, on some level, this taught me how to deal with difficult people).** (RTTP Student Survey Response)

One of the best things that you can take with you from an RTTP game is developing your abilities to work well with others, something that all employers value. Your classmates can be of great help in developing strategy, fine-tuning your speeches, or preparing questions to ask other players during the game. However, occasionally, difficulties and even conflicts arise. Here, again, your professors can be a valuable resource. Ask them for advice, if you are having a challenging time communicating with your faction or with players outside of your faction. Your professors have many years of experience working with others and may have suggestions that you would not have thought of.

In conclusion, remember that your professors are your partners in learning. Treat them with courtesy and respect, reach out for help, and have fun learning via this creative and non-conventional methodology. You might just find yourself enjoying it!

# Suggestions for Communicating with Your Classmates

While your professor’s role as a Gamemaster is important, it is often the students who make for a successful game. Students who bond and form a community together often make for the best iterations of any Reacting game. We recommend that students communicate with each other using the formats established by your professor (Discord, Slack, etc) and/or student-initiated formats such as GroupMe. It is also helpful to have a Google doc with a list of ground rules that the professor and students decide on together, and to go back to it and revise as needed. While factional solidarity is important, remember that you need indeterminates to win any game. Please reach out across faction lines and get to know indeterminates.

As with any collaborative group work, classmates may not, or are unable to, give the same amount of commitment to classwork as others.

**I just find it really frustrating when people don't read and therefore don't participate. I don't know what else to do to get people to participate and read since we have papers/speeches due and get an overall gameplay grade.** (RTTP Student Survey Response)

**I felt that my classmates didn't have the same care for the experience as I and a few others did. It's frustrating to work with people that don't care, and then use it against you later.** (RTTP Student Survey Response)

Since each person’s situation is different, please be sensitive to their particular circumstances, as they may have work, family, or other obstacles to putting in the level of commitment that you expect. Having a gentle discussion about group expectations might be helpful, but be open to their circumstances, and encourage them to speak with the professor if they need special accommodations (being mindful of other students’ privacy needs).

If they have just been remiss in pulling their weight, hopefully your gentle nudge as well as concern for a good grade will encourage them to keep up with their workload. If not, is it your faction member who is not keeping up with the workload? How might you step up in your role? You might be able to work your expanded responsibilities into the gameplay and make it a part of your role to take on additional tasks, if your classmate agrees.

If someone in an opposing faction seems underprepared, you could use that to your advantage. And if an Indeterminate seems to be underprepared, you might be able to persuade them to vote with you by showing how hard you have worked in the game.

Factional animosities can arise in Reacting games, and they can be humorous and light-hearted, but sometimes, people can feel hurt and targeted even if they know that the character is being targeted, and not the student in real life. But if classmates’ comments get out of hand, please do speak up. Even if you are not at the receiving end of the offensive comments, please intervene and call out the offensive remarks right away, ask how the targeted classmate feels, and talk with your professor. Reacting games do not condone verbal abuse or hate speech, although most games encourage some strife among factions. Classes might also institute a “safe” word to signal when things have gone too far, and it is time to check in with each other in real life.

Please have honest and constructive discussions with your classmate and professor to make sure that the classroom is a safe space for all. Our goal is to build an empathetic, supportive learning community, so please speak out when learning stops and you feel the need to have a time-out to discuss what is happening and “reset” the gameplay.

**The [X faction] got frustrated with the [Y faction]. Although they were just playing characters, they were relentless and it was hard to not associate the person with the character they played.** (RTTP Student Survey Response)

**As a character that was not really liked by the majority of the class, I was targeted for debates and beheaded. Sometimes this made it hard to want to discuss issues and towards the end I didn't have any votes. However, it was still a lot of fun and I could tell that those members of the group were also having fun.** (RTTP Student Survey Response)

**There were a lot of jokes that the nobility were "ye olde [Z] supporters" and we definitely played into being racist/classist etc. However, it was highly exaggerated and satirical and we all knew it was a joke. I think that there was potential for people to be genuinely hurt, but in the context of my game specifically we all knew that it was just for fun.** (RTTP Student Survey Response)

Some classmates may enjoy contentious roles, but some students may overextend their power. Again, please balance gameplay with player safety and advocate for yourself and your classmates if you feel that the class environment is not conducive to safe and fun learning.

**In the [X] game, players who were leading parliament would often go on a bit of a power trip.** (RTTP Student Survey Response)

**I had a hard time really getting into character and organizing my thoughts as well as the questions asked in class can be unnerving from classmates. I had to remember it was just a game and not a personal attack.** (RTTP Student Survey Response)

**People showed their true colors—both good and bad.** (RTTP Student Survey Response)

If you are playing a role with contentious views, you may want to communicate to your classmates that you are in gameplay mode and distinguish yourself from your character.

**Final Thoughts**

We hope that your Reacting experience is positive and that your class is a safe learning community. Please maintain open communications with your professor and classmates, and foster an environment where each person feels empowered to speak up and each person is validated for their views.