

An Instructor's Guide to Understanding Privilege

<p>Overview</p>	<p>The following content and linked resources have been curated as a primer for instructors to better understand and attend to the ways privilege operates in the classroom. This resource is broken up into four sections:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Introduction to Privilege 2) Why Talking About and Acknowledging Privilege is Difficult 3) Privilege in the Classroom 4) Further Reading on Specific Kinds of Privilege
<p>Goals</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) To explain what privilege is and is not and why it matters. 2) To familiarize instructors with why privilege is challenging to engage with and to help them work through those challenges both personally and with their students. 3) To assist instructors in recognizing and addressing the way privilege impacts their classroom.
<p>Implementation</p>	<p>These resources are best reviewed before the planning phase of course design, so the instructor has ample time to consider how they will address privilege and their own potential biases on every level of their course construction. Some of the resources can be used as content in class.</p>
<p>Challenges</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Because privilege is normalized, it can be challenging to recognize at first. Recognizing and addressing your own privilege will be a constant process that will require a great deal of reflection and adaptation over time. 2) Addressing privilege is usually uncomfortable and you may experience a range of emotions from defensiveness and anger to guilt and defeat. As difficult as it may be, it is important that you commit to recognizing and addressing your own privilege. 3) Because privilege is so uncomfortable, discussing privilege can often bring about “hot moments” in the classroom. Be prepared for how you would like to address student responses.

Section 1: Introduction to Privilege

Privilege, simply put, is societally granted, unearned advantages accorded to some people and not others. Generally, when we talk about privilege, we are referring to systemic or structural advantages that impact people based on identity factors such as race, gender, sex, religion, nationality, disability, sexuality, class, and body type. We might also include level of education and other factors of social capital under the umbrella of privilege.

Privilege is inextricably linked to oppression, because, while systems, social norms, and biases are advantages for some people, others are disadvantaged by those same systems, norms, and biases. For example, think of a flight of stairs. Stairs are in virtually every building with more than one floor and many outdoor spaces. It is generally assumed that people have the physical ability to walk up the stairs to access higher floors. However, a person with a physical disability that makes them unable to walk upstairs must contend with the assumption that everyone who needed to get to the second floor would have bodies that could use the stairs. The design of buildings that privileged some bodies contributed to the oppression of others.

Importantly, privilege, like oppression, is intersectional. [Intersectionality](#) refers to the ways aspects of identity intersect to create specific experiences, needs, privileges, and oppressions. This means that one person can experience both privilege and oppression (for example, they may experience racial privilege for being white, but class oppression for being working class). Privilege and oppression can also intersect with one another to create unique experiences of a specific aspect of their identity. For example, a trans woman who is very affluent has a very different experience of transphobia and cissexism than a transwoman who is very poor. She would, for instance, have better access to resources, medical care, and a safe place to live compared to a transwoman who is working class. While both women experience oppression for being trans, their experiences of that oppression are very different due to the presence or absence of class privilege.

Additional Resources on Understanding Privilege

[“Privilege 101”](#) by Sian Ferguson

[“Sometimes You’re a Caterpillar”](#) a video on privilege by Franchesca Ramsey

[“A Short Comic...”](#) by Laura Willard, comic by Toby Morris

[“Straight White Male: The Lowest Difficulty Setting There Is”](#) by John Scalzi

Section 2: Why Talking About and Acknowledging Privilege is Difficult

While privilege and oppression greatly impact how we all navigate and experience the world, for many of us they remain incredibly difficult topics to broach, personally or in conversation with others. Depending on your proximity to privilege, you may find that thinking about privilege makes your guard come up, and you begin forming counter-arguments to resist the thought that you have benefitted from privilege. Similarly, discussing privilege with your students may bring about tense or hot moments, as your students grapple with their own privilege or oppression and that of their peers.

There are many reasons why privilege can be difficult to acknowledge and discuss. One primary reason is that, as a concept, it is in friction with dominant American ideologies such as individualism, and it challenges our belief in America as a meritocracy where people are uplifted according to their skill and effort. Even the belief that education is the great equalizer is unsettled when privilege and oppression are taken into account. This means that acknowledging privilege and oppression can feel like an assault on your worldview, the values you grew up with, or even your commitment to higher education. But more than that, if you or your students are people who have benefitted from privilege, it might seem as though acknowledging privilege invalidates your personal struggles and means acknowledging that you haven't truly earned your achievements. The stakes in a discussion about privilege will then feel highly personal, and defensiveness and resistance are normal, albeit not particularly useful, responses to what registers as a personal attack.

Some of the most common defenses against privilege refer to the validity of personal achievement and personal struggles. People want to have total ownership of their achievements and may resist attributing aspects of their success to unearned advantages. Similarly, people may feel as though privilege somehow invalidates the reality of the challenges they faced. This is not the case. Having privilege does not necessarily mean that someone has not struggled; however, those struggles cannot be attributed to the oppression of aspects of their identity that are privileged. And often privilege makes an individual's struggles easier to overcome than they would have been otherwise. For example, if a student who speaks English as a first language and a student who speaks English as a second language are both taking the same test, the test may be very difficult even without a language barrier. The first student may have studied very hard, lost sleep, and struggled while taking the test. The second student may have studied just as hard, lost just as much sleep, but the language barrier of having to mentally translate during the exam adds a level of difficulty that the first student did not have to navigate. This does not mean that the first student did not earn an "A," nor does it in any sense take away from the hard work they put into preparing for the exam. However, it does mean that their privilege allowed for them to take the test without the additional obstacle of having to translate.

Acknowledging privilege is further troubled by the fact that, more often than not, privilege attaches itself to norms, and thus becomes invisible through its normalization. This has the effect of making many well-intentioned people view privilege as the goalpost instead of as a core aspect of how oppressive systems and structures operate to benefit some and inhibit others. For example, education as a tool for uplifting people from poverty seeks to extend a path to class privilege to those who have merit but lack resources. While education undoubtedly impacts lifetime earnings, the underlying issue of a class system that leaves some without a livable wage is left unchallenged until class privilege itself is recognized as a core problem that perpetuates poverty.

As an instructor, you are likely already aware that learning is often uncomfortable, especially when the material challenges a person's worldview and self-interest. But that discomfort does not make the material less important nor less true. The discomfort you or your students feel needs to be navigated with an awareness of how and why it is there, but it cannot become an excuse to avoid challenging material.

Additional Resources on Resistance to Acknowledging Privilege and Oppression	<p>“You’re not going to believe what I’m about to tell you” a comic by The Oatmeal on social and physiological responses to uncomfortable ideas</p> <p>“4 Uncomfortable Thoughts You May Have When Facing Your Privilege” by Robin J. Landwehr</p> <p>“The Distress of the Privileged” by Doug Muder</p>
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Section 3: Privilege in the Classroom

It is important to recognize how your privilege and your students' privilege may manifest in the classroom and how it can impact the climate for students and instructors who lack privilege. Many resources on the LSA Inclusive Teaching website are devoted to addressing privilege and oppression in the classroom, from the construction of your syllabus to creating an inclusive classroom learning environment. But it is worth taking time to familiarize yourself explicitly with some of the ways that privilege can impact your experience and your students' experience of the classroom.

Some Ways that Your Privilege May Impact You

- If your students read you as white, gender-conforming, male, able-bodied, and affluent, they likely perceive you as a person of intelligence and authority, which may benefit you in student course evaluations and the ways your students engage with you in class.
- If you experience privilege, you can assume that many of your students, if not most, likely share your identity and privilege and that they will not be biased against you.
- If you do not experience disabilities or language barriers, you are likely better able to meet the expectations of workload and grading turn-around than some of your colleagues who lack those kinds of privilege.
- If you experience privilege, the standard canon for your field of study is likely written by people who share your identity or identities. And you can teach that canon without students or peers suggesting that your course is political or overly topical.

Some Ways Instructor Privilege May Impact Students Who Don't Share that Privilege

- Students who do not experience privilege may worry that their instructor and peers are biased against them and their worldview.
- If a student's identity is not well represented in the syllabus or shared among their peers, they may fear that their experiences, interests, and perspectives will be treated as marginal, off-topic, or overly political. And they may worry that they will be asked to speak for their entire social group (for example, that they may be called on to provide "the Muslim perspective" or have their experience objectified as a "teachable moment" or "inspirational story").
- Students may worry that they cannot depend on the instructor to identify harmful comments or behavior in the classroom and that you may not support them if they call-out those harmful comments and behavior themselves.
- If a student has language barriers (such as from speaking English as a secondary language, having a disability that impacts their processing of written or spoken language, or having grown up speaking a dialect of English that is not commonly valued in the college classroom), they may be concerned that the instructor and their peers will think that they are underprepared for the course or that the instructor might not take those obstacles into account when they evaluate their work.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If a student requires an accommodation in order to manage the course requirements, they may fear that the instructor will doubt the validity of their needs, demand documentation that they don't have, judge them adversely for needing an accommodation, or express other resistances to providing an accommodation that the student will have to defend against.
<p>Addressing Your Privilege in the Classroom</p>	<p>The above lists are a small sampling of the ways instructor privilege can impact the classroom, but they are far from exhaustive. It is important that you recognize that student concerns about how your privilege may impact them are often based on previous negative experiences. The good news is there are concrete things you can do to mitigate the impact your privilege has on your classroom and students.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do your research and hold yourself accountable. Research is a crucial step in becoming aware of and attending to your privilege and biases. Because privileged identities tend to be the most normalized, it is sometimes difficult to recognize how they impact our worldview and our teaching. Just by reading this document, you are already taking a step toward doing better. Take further steps by reading the resources hyperlinked and browsing the Inclusive Teaching website. All our catalogue of resources, activities, and readings have been specifically curated to help you address the impact of privilege and oppression in your classroom. • Choose activities that will be inclusive of all identities and avoid objectifying oppression. Again, the resources on this site are a great starting place for choosing activities that will help you build an inclusive learning community with your students. • Construct a reading list that includes many insights from authors who do not share your privileged identities and include readings that address privilege and oppression specifically. Ideally, you should have more than one representative from a particular social group, and you should select those readings with as much care as you selected every other reading on your list. A reading list that shows many voices from various backgrounds and identities will not only avoid erasure and tokenism, it will also help students build confidence that their contribution in your class, the university, and in their field of study matters and will be heard and valued. • Include inclusive language in your syllabus. Your syllabus should show evidence that you will be receptive to student needs and that you will treat your students with respect. For example, if participation is required for success in your class, consider writing something along these lines in your syllabus: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>“Effective participation means being prepared, engaged, respectful, and following the discussion community ground-rules. In the discussion section, participation in discussion is a crucial element of developing a learning community. That said, if you anticipate that participating in discussion will be a major obstacle for you (such as due to anxiety, disability, or a language barrier), please come see me early in the semester and we can brainstorm alternative ways for you to participate meaningfully in class discussion.”</i>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ This wording shows that you recognize that there are valid reasons why daily participation will be challenging for some students and that you are willing to work with students to meet their needs while maintaining high expectations for meaningful engagement. Alternatively, you could include a variety of ways that students can meet your participation requirements. Such as specifying a requirement that they can either contribute to the discussion verbally in class or write a 100-word response to a question raised in class to be submitted to you within 24 hours of your class meeting. ● Listen to your students, take their perspectives seriously, and encourage your other students to do the same. While you should not depend on your students to educate you about privilege and oppression, they will undoubtedly offer insight that you have not considered. Avoid being dismissive or defensive if students offer perspectives that challenge your own. Setting discussion guidelines with your students can help you achieve this goal. ● Be willing to acknowledge your errors and commit to doing better. For example, if you mispronounce your student’s name, use the wrong pronouns for them, or were dismissive of a marginalized student’s perspective in favor of a dominant narrative, apologize, correct yourself, and be more attentive to not repeating that error in the future.
<p>Additional Resources on Privilege in the Classroom</p>	<p>“Speaker Sex and Perceived Apportionment of Talk” by Anne Cutler and Donia R. Scott</p> <p>“How do we teach about privilege”</p> <p>“Bias Against Female Instructors” by Colleen Flaherty</p> <p>“How Student Evaluations Are Skewed Against Women and Minorities” by Eva Lilienfeld</p> <p>“I Am Not Your Teachable Moment” a comic by Robot Hugs</p> <p>“‘We Have Always Fought’: Challenging the ‘Women, Cattle and Slaves’ Narrative” by Kameron Hurley</p>

Section 4: Further Reading

The resources below address various specific experiences of privilege that will help you begin to recognize the way privilege impacts you and your students. These readings, comics, and videos could also be included in your course if you decide to explicitly address privilege with your students. There are of course other forms of privilege that are not addressed here, but reviewing these resources is a good starting place to begin to sensitize you to your own experience of privilege.

Additional Resources on Specific Kinds of Privilege

[“White Privilege Explained in the Simplest Way Possible”](#) a comic by Jamie Capp

[“On Racism and White Privilege”](#)

[“What is White Privilege?”](#) a clip from the documentary *White Like Me* by Tim Wise

[“White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”](#) by Peggy McIntosh

[“What is Able-bodied Privilege?”](#)

[“Able-bodied Privilege Checklist”](#)

[“160+ Examples of Male Privilege in Everyday Life”](#) by Maisha Z. Johnson

[“30+ Examples of Christian Privilege”](#)

[“130+ Examples of Cis Privilege”](#) by Sam Dylan Finch

[“30+ Examples of Class Privilege”](#)

[“22 Examples of Thin Privilege”](#) by Shannon Ridgway

[“30+ Examples of Heterosexual Privilege”](#)