

8 Dealing with difficulties

While you're studying abroad, you'll have a wonderful time. However, there may be occasions when you have a misunderstanding with someone. This can be especially frustrating for international students because there may be an element of cultural difference that you're not aware of. You may have no idea why there's a problem. In this chapter, we look at different types of problems and disputes you may have and how to deal with them.

Disputes with roommates/flatmates

Living together in a small space is never easy, and this is of course true for home students as well. When you also have a different language and culture to deal with, it can be even more challenging. Clear communication is an important key to avoiding most problems in the first place.

The most common arguments between roommates/flatmates are because of:

- noise/music;
- cleaning and tidying;
- hours coming and going;
- friends and girlfriends or boyfriends;
- money;
- TV;
- the bathroom;
- sharing.

Noise

You love listening to quiet classical music while you study, but your roommate/flatmate can't study without listening to heavy metal. If you have totally different taste in music, or don't agree about how loud it should be, you need to talk. Try to find a time when loud music is OK. For example, maybe your roommate likes to go for a run every evening. If he or she hates your music, then you can blast it while he or she's out running. Or you could try headphones.

Especially if you're sharing a room or bedroom, you'll have to be careful about general noise in the morning and evening, or while someone else is studying. Make sure you're not disturbing your roommate by making too much noise. Even things like eating noisily, clicking a pen, or constantly sniffing if you have a cold can get on people's nerves. If your roommate is doing these things, talk to him or her. It's best to talk early on otherwise these small things will become big issues.

Cleaning and tidying

If you're a very clean and tidy person, a "slob" will be a bad roommate/flatmate choice for you. If you're a bit of a slob, you will not like the constant complaining and anger coming from your tidier roommate. It can also be tough to decide who does what to keep your living space in an acceptable state of cleanliness.

Here is some advice on the best ways to avoid arguments about cleaning and tidying:

- If you're sharing a space, like an apartment/flat or kitchen with a number of people, make sure everyone knows what he or she should do and when. Create a chore chart (also called a "rota" or "roster") that shows who will do which chore each day or week. That way, everyone is helping keep things clean and tidy, and not

just one person gets stuck doing all the unpopular jobs, such as cleaning the toilet.

- Tidy as you go. Clear up your desk space at the end of each study session. If you share a living room, pick up dirty socks as you walk through the room. Rinse out the sponge when you finish washing the dishes. The idea is, you should do little things all the time to maintain a pleasant living space, and avoid having to do hours of heavy tidying and cleaning.
- If you have a roommate that just won't stop his or her slob ways, speak to him or her to tell him or her how it affects you. If there are a number of you in the apartment, talk to the roommate as a group.
- Keep a well-stocked supply of cleaning necessities so there's never an excuse not to clean.

slob (noun): If you call someone a slob, you mean that they are lazy and messy.

Hours coming and going

If you live in one small dorm room together with someone else and you come in very late each night, you're probably waking your roommate/flatmate up each time. This can be very frustrating for the person trying to sleep, especially if he or she has a major exam the next morning. Similarly, maybe your roommate gets up at a ridiculously early hour and wakes you up when you've only gone to bed at 2a.m. Make sure you're quiet when coming and going. Try not to have extremely late or early hours for activities if you're sharing a bedroom.

Friends and girlfriends or boyfriends

One of the biggest areas of disagreement between roommates/flatmates is other friends, boyfriends, and girlfriends. Bringing your girlfriend over to your dorm room or flat all the time is a quick way to really upset your roommates. They

signed up to live with you, but not your girlfriend. The very worst thing you can do, especially to a roommate, is regularly kick them out to be alone with your boyfriend or girlfriend. Although you might have an acceptable agreement between you and your roommate on this issue, roommates still have to have a discussion about the rules of this at the beginning. Friends can be equally annoying to roommates, especially if they habitually stay late, or take food from the fridge. Again, make sure you all discuss the rules of friends, girlfriends, and boyfriends at the beginning. If everyone is clear, you should be able to avoid lots of tension.

Money

Money is a big issue for most students. Remember that many local students will have a large number of money worries, especially if they have heavy student loans and are working to pay all, or part of their way through college/university.

To help avoid these issues:

- Have a clear due date for rent, and how it'll be paid between you.
- Decide what food or drink will be shared, and how to pay for it fairly.
- If you have a party, split all costs.
- Pay all bills on time, and be clear on how they will be split between you.
- Never ask a local student to lend you a large amount of money (anything more than a few dollars or pounds). That's not acceptable in these cultures. If you're having money problems, you'll have to go to your family, or the student services to see if you can get a job.
- If you decide to go out with your roommates, split the bill evenly between you, or ask for separate bills at the beginning of the meal (this is usually very acceptable to North American waiters/waitresses). Some cafés and

restaurants in Australia and the UK will have a sign saying “No split bills,” or “One bill per table only.” If you see this, you’ll need to sort out who pays what among yourselves.

TV

Though this isn’t such a big issue as it was years ago, it can be hard to decide which TV shows to watch if you have a lot of roommates/flatmates and share a TV. If you can’t agree, look at a TV schedule and start negotiating who can watch what and when. This will help avoid arguing while you’re trying to watch your favorite soccer/football team. If people want to watch programs on at the same times, check whether you can watch them later online, or record one program while the other one is showing.

The bathroom

If you’re sharing accommodation, the cleanliness of the toilet, shower, or bath can be a major issue, and you may have arguments over how long people spend in the bathroom to get ready. Either way, this is usually the most fought-over room in the house or dorm. Again, you must communicate. Decide ahead of time on a shower schedule, for example. Some people can shower in the morning, some at night. There is nothing more annoying than knowing you’ve got just 30 minutes to get ready for classes, and then seeing your roommate slip into the shower ahead of you. Also make sure to keep it very clean, and tidy up after you’ve finished so the next person isn’t stepping on wet towels.

Sharing

Some people believe that food and drink that is put in a communal fridge or kitchen belongs to everyone, but most people don’t think this. Make clear agreements about what is shared (e.g. milk) and what is not. Anything that’s shared

will need to be paid for by everyone and bought regularly, so make it clear who will buy what and when.

Conflict resolution

Conflict resolution is very culture specific. When there's a major conflict between people, what might work in your country often doesn't work in the English-speaking world. You may get a crazy idea of conflict resolution from watching famous reality shows such as *Big Brother*, *Jersey Shore*, or *Duck Dynasty*. These love to show big conflicts and shouting matches between highly emotional people. Remember that this is entertainment, and it's not the way the vast majority of people in Western culture behave.

If you come from a culture where people prefer to “save face” and not confront people too directly (such as many countries in East and South-East Asia), you may find the English-speaking way of challenging people blunt and upsetting. If you come from a culture where people argue passionately and then let things blow over (such as many Latin countries), you may find the English-speaking way of handling problems frustrating.

conflict (noun): Conflict is a serious disagreement and argument about something important. If two people or groups are in conflict, they have had a serious disagreement or argument and have not yet reached agreement.

resolution (noun): The resolution of a problem or difficulty is the final solving of it.

Conflict and conflict resolution styles can be quite different across the English-speaking world, but there are some points that are pretty universal.

- If a person is angry, they might come out and tell you directly, but they might not.

- If a person really dislikes you or is very angry with you, they'll avoid you as much as possible.
- Eventually, they'll want, or at least feel the need, to talk to you directly about the conflict.
- When they do, they'll usually try to soften their language by saying things like, "you're a really nice person, but you must stop bringing your girlfriend over all the time."
- They may try to use humor to avoid tension, even if they're still really upset.

What not to do during a difficult discussion:

- Don't be too painfully honest (don't say things like, "Since you're so fat, I didn't think you'd mind if I ate the rest of the cake in the fridge.")
- Don't get very emotional.
- Don't use lots of arm gestures, raise your voice, or shout.
- Don't put all the blame on the other person, conflict is usually a "two-way street," where both sides are usually "guilty" of different parts of the problem.
- Don't be upset if a woman is questioning a man. In Western culture both women and men will stand up to people they don't agree with.
- Don't call the person names or make them "lose face" (their sense of self and who they are). Focus on the action, not the person by saying "what you did made me feel ...".
- Don't try to change the person's behavior by appealing to their sympathy ("Yesterday I had a headache all day because your music was so loud. I took three tablets of aspirin and couldn't do my essay!"): be direct but polite ("Could you play your music less loudly on weeknights if you're holding a party in the dorm?")

lose/save face: If you lose face, you do something which makes you appear weak and makes people respect or admire you less. If you do something in order to save face, you do it in order to avoid appearing weak and losing people's respect or admiration.

National and regional differences in conflict style

You'll notice a lot of difference in conflict style across English-speaking countries. New Yorkers can be famously "in your face," telling you exactly what they think when they're upset. Midwesterners are renowned for their politeness, and may be upset, but feel it's too rude to say so. People in the UK tend to use overly polite language (e.g. "Would you mind terribly if I asked you to ...?") but that doesn't mean they're not upset. Of course there are individual differences in style and some people will be more direct when complaining about something. You should pay attention to the interactions and conflict styles around you and ask trusted people about the style of the region you're in.

The criticism sandwich

Some people believe that the criticism sandwich is the best way to discuss something with people. In this situation, regardless of the conflict, you must start with positive praise of some kind (the bread on top of the sandwich). You then focus on the criticism and the problem between you (the contents of the sandwich). You end the discussion with some more praise or kind words (the bread on the bottom of the sandwich). The idea behind this is to start and end on a positive note, and reassure them that they're not all bad.

Start negative, end positive

Because this is a chapter on conflict, we should point out that some people have started to argue against the criticism sandwich. According to Dr. Clifford Nass, a famous professor of communication at Stanford University, negative statements about someone are harder for the brain to process

than positive ones. For this reason, you should start with a few negatives, the criticism, or complaints. Then, you should give a long list of positives about the person's behavior. Nass believes that negative criticism puts the brain on high alert. So then, if the person is hearing lots of positive after some negative, they'll understand and process what you're saying more clearly.

When to get a mediator involved

You might have a situation where you've tried to discuss your conflict and nothing has improved, or it just made things worse. In this situation, you might need a trusted friend who knows you both to mediate. You can also turn to college/university officials to help you. For example, in your dorm/halls of residence, there may be a student representative who can help you. This person can act as a mediator to a conflict. You can also go to student services to see if there are counselors that could work with the two of you, or your group.

There are many great conflict management professionals and mediators out there who have lots of helpful ideas as to how to talk with people about problems. Spend some time researching this on the Internet.

A "representative" is not a mediator

If something isn't going your way, don't get a "representative" to talk to the person again on your behalf. In Western culture, people like to deal with each other directly as much as possible when having a conflict, unless it gets to the point where mediation is necessary. In some other cultures, such as those in the Middle East, friends or representatives will sometimes be asked to talk to someone on a person's behalf. This can be upsetting to people in the West. If a professor/lecturer, for example, tells you that you have failed a class, you must accept this. Don't come back later with a friend

to argue your case. The professor/lecturer will see this as a major lack of respect for him or his authority.

Talk sooner rather than later

Many cultures, and individuals, strongly dislike confrontation. Many people avoid it completely. The problem with this is that the dispute doesn't usually go away on its own. It's always better to discuss a problem sooner rather than later. Professors/Lecturers regularly complain that their international students wait too long to make a complaint or discuss something uncomfortable with them. If you wait too long, misunderstandings and hurt feelings can get worse. It's also harder to fix whatever needs fixing.

Saving face during conflict

Remember that the idea of "face" is not just part of East Asian culture. All people have a sense of face.

Whenever you're in conflict with someone, there's a danger of either side losing face. This is why it's so important to always be respectful, and find ways to praise and help the other person out of this difficult dispute without losing face. If you're struggling with a professor's/lecturer's teaching style, for example, don't criticize her in front of the other students. This makes her lose face. Instead, go to her after class and have a quiet word, explaining that her style is very different from what you're used to. Her style might be cultural, or just very different. The important thing is, you haven't made her lose face in front of the other students, and she will be more willing to listen to your thoughts.

The ombudsman

Many colleges/universities have an ombudsman office for the resolution of conflicts. Whether you're having a problem that you can't resolve with your boss (if, for example

you have a job working in the student cafeteria), another classmate in your morning class, or your professor/lecturer, the ombudsman is there to help the dispute come to a final resolution. When your case is taken to the ombudsman's office, they'll do everything they can to help you with ideas for ways to resolve your conflict. In some cases, they'll see both parties and try to mediate between them.

In the UK, there is an "Education Ombudsman" but this refers to complaints against universities. For help with personal issues, you can usually go to "student (support) services," "counselling," "guidance," or "advice centres." The "international student office" may also be able to help, or there may be "peer mentor" schemes. These are schemes where students help each other.

Note: A college/university may have a "Center for Conflict Resolution": this is usually a department where you can study International Conflict Prevention, Peace Studies, etc. and not a place where you go for help with your personal conflicts.

As we mentioned at the start of the chapter, it's highly likely that you'll have a fantastic time studying abroad and you won't have any disputes or misunderstandings. But it's good to be aware that this might happen and to know that there is support for you.