Counterspeech DOs and DON'Ts

A tool for countering online hate and harassment – without making things worse

Note to counterspeakers:

Every situation is different, and counterspeech doesn’t always work. Sometimes people are determined to hurt, are convinced they’re right, or both.

At those times it might be best to disengage or use other tactics,* so use your best judgment.

If you choose to engage, here are some tips for getting positive results.

~ Counterspeech DOs : Things you can try when you feel safe

Stay calm. If you’re upset, wait a bit before responding.

Try humor. If your intent is kind and you’re not mocking the person, humor can soften the exchange and attract others to show their support. Counter with images that are silly, clever, or funny – not hurtful – to de-escalate.

Label the comment, not the person, like “That word comes from a racist stereotype.”

Show empathy and connection with the target (“I’m Asian American too, and...”) or with the speaker (“I’m angry about this too, but...”).

Start a supportive hashtag like #LoveForLeslieJones.

~ Counterspeech DON'Ts

Don’t label people – for example, calling them a bigot.
Don’t assume the person has bad intentions.
Don’t be hostile, insulting, or aggressive – it can escalate the conflict.
Don’t talk down to the person – it can shut down communication.
Don’t nitpick or correct spelling or grammar. Use a civil tone and link to a source if you want to correct false information.
Don’t silence the person with threats, social exclusion, or other punishment.

Before You Start

Protect yourself – take steps to protect yourself from retaliation (see the resources at thearthmob.org/tech).

Think about how your online identity or profiles could be used against you.

Think about what you want to accomplish. Do you want to change the person’s mind, or how they post or tweet? Stop them from attacking someone else? Change other people’s minds or behavior?

Remind yourself that behind each comment – no matter how hateful – is a human being. Treat them as you would want to be treated.

Adapted from “Considerations for Successful Counterspeech” by Susan Bennerath, Debra Ruffin, Kelly E. Dillon, Hal Mohammed, Samuel, and Lucas Wright. (The Dangerous Speech Project, October 2015) and Megan Philp (PhD project’s TDL task of February, 2017). Edited by Anne Cluster of GuardianAngel.org, in cooperation with the Dangerous Speech Project, HeadOn, ICRANet and Project HERE. Design by Kendell Simpson. Special thanks to student advisors Chet Elba in Canada and ICRANet’s student focus group in California.

Find our full resource at CounterspeechTips.org.
For more tips on countering online harassment, visit theHillaback.org/resources/bystander_resources.