



Zachary R. Wood

Summer 2018

INSIDE THE BIG IDEAS

Uncensored

Zachary R. Wood



ZACHARY R. WOOD IS AN ASSISTANT

Editor at *The Atlantic* and a class of 2018 graduate of Williams College, where he served as president of Uncomfortable Learning, a student group that sparked national controversy for inviting provocative speakers to campus.

INSIDE THE BIG IDEAS

UNCENSORED

ZACHARY R. WOOD

OVERVIEW

Dear Friends,

On its face, Zachary Wood's *Uncensored* seems like a departure from our usual genre of "action-oriented," "big-idea" books. *Uncensored* is not a science-based work of nonfiction but a memoir, and it's written not by a business school professor, but by a 22-year-old graduate of Williams College and Assistant Editor at *The Atlantic*.

But Zach is no ordinary storyteller, and his memoir stands for some of the biggest ideas and actions of all: the courage to consider all sides of an argument, the importance of intellectual honesty, and the power of sharing our life histories.

At Williams, Zach served as President of a student group called Uncomfortable Learning, where his job was to bring controversial speakers to campus. He invited thinkers on race, feminism, and so on, whose views he often disagreed with vehemently, but which he believed should be understood and debated. Zach considers himself a liberal democrat, and he was often vilified and even physically threatened by campus progressives he'd considered friends. And when asked where he got the courage to withstand such controversy, Zach's response was timeless and powerful: "Let me tell you a story."

This book is that story. It's the story of Zach's painful yet inspiring childhood, as the son of both an abusive mother and a loving father who lived in abject poverty despite working three jobs, and as an African-American student from a rough D.C. neighborhood who traveled up to five hours a day to attend a mostly white private school. It's the story of his conclusion that we should never write people off simply because of their backgrounds or their views.

It's also a window into one of the most intellectually voracious minds you'll ever meet, and possibly an introduction to a future President of the United States. You'll see!

I hope you love this book, and enjoy meeting Zach, as much as I did. I look forward to hearing your thoughts!

Yours,
Susan



To say we're living in politically and socially divided times is a bit of an understatement. The temptation to confirm what we already believe and sink deeper into our respective side of the divide only seems to keep growing. But many of us have that voice in the back of our minds, or ache in the bottom of our hearts, for our family members, coworkers, or neighbors who just don't get it, who don't see things the way we do.

But getting everyone on the same ideological page would be an insurmountable feat, and even dangerous to our democracy. Real healing happens when we try to understand, by having the uncomfortable conversations with those with whom we think we have nothing in common. Zachary Wood, an Assistant Editor at *The Atlantic* and former president of controversial student group Uncomfortable Learning at Williams College, takes on these big, difficult conversations in his debut book, *Uncensored: My Life and Uncomfortable Conversations at the Intersection of Black and White America*. Rooted in his own powerful personal story, Zach shares his dynamic perspective on free speech, race, and dissenting opinions in a world that needs to learn to listen.

This season, as a special reading guide, we're proud to present "How to Have Difficult Conversations in 9 Steps." Prepared by the author himself, and offered exclusively for members of the Next Big Idea Club, this actionable guidebook applies Zachary's life lessons to the pursuit and practice of difficult conversations.

Read on for Zachary's nine-step approach to having difficult conversations. And be sure to visit NextBigIdeaClub.com to view the expanded, video version of the guide, featuring Zachary, as well as video of the thought-provoking conversation between Zachary and Susan Cain—it may very well change the way you see yourself, the people you never thought you'd understand, and everyone in between.



HOW TO HAVE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS IN 9 STEPS

PREPARE TO ENGAGE

Every issue that matters in our society is difficult for many people to discuss, especially when the conversation involves engaging with opposing viewpoints. Often, these conversations about sensitive subjects such as politics and religion involve managing the emotions and attitudes of those involved. While there is no easy solution, one effort that can help us improve upon our ability to have conversations about controversial topics is taking the time to prepare ourselves beforehand.

1. Identify a Controversial Issue that You Care About

While learning about completely new topics can be interesting and intellectually rewarding, identifying a controversial issue that you care about can serve several purposes when trying to engage with opposing views. First, it raises the stakes (personally) and ensures that the conversation you have is one that actually challenges you. When you care about an issue, you generally have an opinion on the matter, maybe even a strong one, and are more likely to feel motivated by the prospect of seeing your values and perspective prevail. In addition, picking an issue that matters to you personally increases the likelihood that any knowledge or understanding you gain from discussing it may be of greater value to you in various facets of your life.

2. Explore Your Own Reasoning

A good way to do this is by asking yourself a series of questions and then working your way toward an understanding of some of the more fundamental answers. For example, a good first question might be: Why does this issue matter to me? Typically, you want to dig a bit deeper than whatever initial answer you come up with by asking yourself, why? Other questions for exploring your own reasoning might include: Why do I find this issue controversial? Why does this issue give rise to strong emotion for me in ways that discussing trivial things generally wouldn't? What kinds of perspectives and attitudes related to this issue bother me the most? By asking these questions and then following up with "why?," you're increasing your self-knowledge, particularly your understanding of certain biases, impulses, and tendencies that may arise when you engage with someone you disagree with.

3. Wrestle with the Worst Before You Converse

No matter what you do beforehand, conversations that involve moral and political disputes are likely to be emotionally challenging. One way to better prepare yourself is to engage with dissenting opinions in other ways before you talk to an actual person. Once you have explored your reasoning and have some sense of what opinions bother you on the matter, practice engaging with those perspectives through use of various media. Examples might include reading the editorial page of a newspaper you generally disfavor, watching a news station you typically avoid, or listening to a podcast with hosts and guests you deeply disagree with. For more targeted concerns, use the internet to find sources that reflect the attitudes and contain the specific opinions that you find most problematic. Doing this will allow you to familiarize yourself with how you're likely to think and feel when someone says something to you in person that you find unsettling.

GAIN A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF THE OTHER PERSON

4. Ask Personal Questions

Instead of beginning the conversation with an argument or point of contention, one way of disarming the person you disagree with is by asking them a few questions that reflect your desire to learn more about them and their perspective.

Examples include: If there were one thing everyone could understand about (the issue), what would you want that to be? What kinds of things do you think we should be doing to address (this issue)? How do you think I can best build a deeper understanding of where you're coming from? If you're willing to share—and I understand if you'd rather not—what sources or experiences do you think have been most influential in shaping your view on (the issue)?

Taking this tack increases the likelihood that your interlocutor will be a bit more open to hearing what you have to say in return. Depending on the person and the circumstances, this process can take some time, and may even entail a second or third conversation.



5. Listen Closely Before You Speak

Perhaps the most critical step in having difficult conversations about sensitive issues is making the effort to be a good listener. This does not mean that you have to remember everything someone says to you. What this means is that you should make the same effort to listen that many people often make to persuade or discredit the argument of people they disagree with. Everyone wants to be seen, to be heard—to be validated. When you listen, and do so attentively with good eye contact, it tells people fundamentally that you see their humanity—that they matter. Without this, difficult conversations can easily devolve into people talking past each other.

6. Disagree Tactfully, Argue Thoughtfully

There are many ways to express disagreement. When engaging in difficult conversations, it's generally best to avoid disputatious claims that involve someone's identity—their character, upbringing, values, and personal feelings. You want to acknowledge these factors insofar as you demonstrate an understanding of them, or what your interlocutor tells you about them. But you don't want to disagree in ways that might make it feel as if you are challenging the way in which they view themselves and their beliefs.

One way to disagree tactfully is to use more delicate formulations when you can—for example, saying to someone, “I think I understand where you're coming from. I see the issue a bit differently...” Of course, some conversations escalate and lead to energetic debate. In these cases, making more vigorous arguments can be useful. The key is not to follow a precise checklist here, but instead to make a concentrated effort to put thought into how you frame your points in light of what the other person is saying to you.

LEARN FROM THE CONVERSATION

7. Thank the Person and Ask for a Recommendation

At the end of the conversation, thank the person for their time and for sharing their perspective with you. If it feels appropriate in the moment, perhaps tell them something you learned from them or appreciated about their approach to the issue. Doing this keeps open the potential for future conversation, and makes it easier to build and sustain rapport across ideological differences. Before parting ways, ask them for a recommendation—a book or TV show, anything that you suspect might give you greater insight into their perspective. Tell them you'll check it out (and make a point of doing so when you can). This can be a good way to start your next conversation with them, or someone else you disagree with, because seeking the recommendation conveys that you care about understanding others' views.

8. Reflect Back on the Conversation

What went well? What didn't go over as well? What, if any, remarks from either of you made tensions rise to the surface? How did you handle them? What bothered you most? And what might you try to do differently or better next time? All of this can be done in your head or by writing out some of your thoughts. The purpose of this step is to reflect back more intentionally and with a forward-looking approach, so that you have some takeaways for future encounters that may challenge you in similar or even greater ways.

9. Think About the Bigger Picture

Did the difficult interaction resonate with or challenge any observations you'd previously made about our culture and current political moment? What about the conversation felt intuitive and counterintuitive, and why do you think that's the case? Did this interaction bring to light any benefits or consequences of engaging with people you disagree with? If so, how do you think those effects might impact society if more people made an effort to have interactions similar to the one you had?



TELL YOUR FRIENDS

Here are some hot-button topics with insight into the subject areas and challenges you're likely to encounter when discussing them with people you disagree with. We hope that with this knowledge, you'll feel more equipped to engage in and gain more from potential conversations.

Race/Racism—Among the most explosive issues in American society and around the world, conversations about race between people of different moral and political beliefs can entail a host of challenges. When engaged in conversations on this topic, be prepared to discuss America's history of racial inequality, crime and violence in underprivileged communities, police misconduct, and the pros and cons of policies such as welfare, food stamps, and affirmative action. Challenges around this issue can often involve personal experiences of racial mistreatment, differentials of privilege and power, and the effects of unconscious bias.

Gender/sexuality—Another critical and contested issue of our time, difficult conversations about gender and sexuality will often touch on sexual harassment, societal gender roles/norms, the pay gap between men and women, concerns about views on masculinity and femininity, and inclusion for and discrimination against those who identify as gender-nonconforming. Challenges around this issue may entail personal experiences of discrimination, ostracism, and social pressure, as well as traditional (or conservative) values and certain religious beliefs.

Islamophobia—Discussions about this sensitive and pressing issue often broach subject areas of Muslim faith and religious liberty, 9/11 and terrorism, American foreign policy in the Middle East, and immigration and exclusionary policies. Challenges on this topic might encompass religious discrimination, cultural bias, fear of personal harm, and views on expressions of nationalism and patriotism.

Climate change—While not as controversial as the previous examples, this crucial topic can still stir the pot for many. Likely areas of dispute may involve matters of pollution, endangered species, wildlife, and rising sea levels. Challenges largely involve views on competing economic interests, and opinions on the ideal relationship between the human race and the environment.

Taxes—Always debated and always changing, this evergreen issue is likely to bring up concerns about individual liberty and economic growth, incentivizing hard work and private charity, and tensions between achievement and equality. Challenges are likely to entail personal financial hardship, individual economic interests, entrepreneurial competition, and differing levels of access and opportunity.

QUIZ

- 1) Which of the following is *not* a good way to go about having difficult conversations?
 - A) Listening to people you disagree with.
 - B) Expressing your disagreements thoughtfully.
 - C) Challenging people's claims about their feelings.
 - D) Discussing issues you already have an opinion on.
- 2) It is important to understand why issues matter to you because...
 - A) It helps you advance a more forceful argument.
 - B) It shuts down your opponent.
 - C) It gives you a clearer sense of how you think about an issue.
 - D) It makes it easier to humblebrag.
- 3) One of the most important steps in building understanding is...
 - A) Arguing relentlessly for your values and beliefs.
 - B) Telling people why their view disturbs you.
 - C) USING ALL CAPS.
 - D) Listening closely before you speak.
- 4) One way to build and sustain rapport across political differences is to...
 - A) Attack the values of your political opponents.
 - B) Look for ways to undermine the beliefs of others.
 - C) Tell people something you learned from them.
 - D) Helpfully explain why no sane person could think like them.
- 5) Watching a news station you disagree with can help you...
 - A) Lose weight by raising your heart rate and boosting your metabolism.
 - B) Prepare for what you might hear in a difficult conversation.
 - C) Challenge those you agree with to see the other side.
 - D) Solidify your biases.



- 6) Why is it good to reflect back on difficult conversations you've had?
- A) It reminds you of why you should stay away from people you disagree with.
 - B) It helps you improve upon your skills for future conversations.
 - C) You can see why you're right about your sacred beliefs.
 - D) You can tell jokes about them later.
- 7) When discussing race, you are likely to encounter issues of...
- A) Police misconduct
 - B) Affirmative action
 - C) Foreign policy
 - D) Both A and B
- 8) Difficult conversations about gender and sexuality often involve concerns about...
- A) Treasury yields.
 - B) Societal gender roles and norms.
 - C) Integrative medicine.
 - D) Shampoo and conditioner preferences.
9. Economic interests and environmental consequences often come up when discussing what controversial topic?
- A) Foreign policy.
 - B) Climate change.
 - C) Taxes.
 - D) The *Sex and the City* sequel.
10. Which factor is a key aspect of good listening?
- A) Taking detailed notes while someone is talking.
 - B) Stopping them after each statement you disagree with.
 - C) Maintaining good eye contact.
 - D) Whistling a peppy accompanying soundtrack.

INTERACTIVE

There are many ways to practice open-minded, thoughtful engagement with controversial topics. Here are some exercises that you can try with others.

Swapping Media Preferences

Find someone you disagree with on an issue you care about—it can be a friend, peer, family member, colleague, or mentor. Ask them if they'd be willing to swap media preferences for a week. If they agree, ask them where they get most of their daily news.

If they say Twitter or Facebook, ask them what outlets most often appear in their newsfeed, and then tell them yours. Once you've identified three to five outlets apiece—they can be newspapers, news stations, blogs, or podcasts—swap preferences for the next week.

The swap means you can only indulge the media they prefer, and vice versa. It's important that during that week, you actually give their preferences a chance, and not just ask for them. A week later, meet and discuss what you observed, learned, liked, and disliked.

Note: This example can also be used with music or literature as opposed to news media, as long as the content selected reflects views you oppose.

Playing Devil's Advocate—Both Ways

Find someone you disagree with on an issue important to both of you. It's important that this person be willing to have more of an issue-specific debate. Explain your positions to each other as best you can, then take a day or two to learn more about their position through some light additional research.

Convene later, but this time, you argue in support of their point of view, while they argue in support of yours. The key here is to try to put the same focus and effort into the debate that you would if you felt your own values were at stake.

Discuss the experience afterwards. Did you have any trouble with the exercise? If so, why? Did you learn anything or discover new ways of defending your true position?



INSIDE THE BIG IDEAS
UNCENSORED
ZACHARY R. WOOD

Finding the Positive

Find someone who admires a public or political figure that you dislike for substantive reasons, and who dislikes someone you admire. Each of you commit to finding two actions, decisions, values, pursuits, or redeemable qualities of the figures you each dislike, and agree to share them with each other.

Granted, nothing may come to mind immediately. The goal here is to learn more about the figure and to discover a couple of things about them—their character, their habits, their approach to a challenge, or their values—that you can acknowledge and appreciate.

In sharing what you've found, be sure to clarify why you admire or appreciate it.

