Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization

2017-2018 High School Essay Contest Announcement

Theme: Epistemology (Theory of Knowledge)

Essay Question: What is truth? What makes a claim - that is, something we think, believe, hear, say, or read - true or false?

Submission Deadline: January 31, 2018

Winners Announced: April 1, 2018

For more information & to submit: https://www.plato-philosophy.org/high-school-essay-contest/

All winning essays are published in PLATO’s journal Questions: Philosophy for Young People.

Eligibility: All high school students in the U.S. are eligible to enter.

Judging: The papers are read and judged by a panel of high school philosophy teachers and philosophy professors.

Requirements:
The first page of the entry should be a cover page that includes a one-paragraph bio, your name, contact information (phone and email), grade and school. The essay should begin on page 2 (please make sure your name is not listed on the pages containing the essay). Your essay should be saved as a word document (.doc or .docx file format)

• Essay length: 2,000 words maximum
Directions: Write an essay that provides a reasoned, sincere and well-supported argument in response to the essay question, drawing on the case. You may choose to write about truth in general or truth in a specific subject—like mathematics, science, politics or journalism.

For example, if thinking about a particular subject, you might ask:
- What makes a scientific theory or discovery true?
- What makes an interpretation of a text true?
- If one newspaper article says THAT a candidate for office said x, and another NEWSPAPER ARTICLE says that THE SAME candidate never said x, how can we know which is true?

If you do decide to write about truth in a specific subject, be sure to identify the subject in the opening paragraph of your essay.

Your essay should advance reasons to help support your own conclusions about the question. The best essays will not simply summarize arguments put forth by others or make assertions, but will ask questions and make claims based on evidence and considered reflection. Strive to be consistent in your reasoning by testing your position against challenges presented by arguments that oppose your own point of view.

We do not require you to cite other sources, though you may. The texts listed below can be a source of information, but they can also be used to spur inquiry. If you decide to quote from the text, be sure to interpret the passage in your own words. Explain what you understand the philosopher to be saying and why what he or she is saying is important for your argument. For example, the philosopher’s position might support, complicate or challenge your own response to the question.

Here are some online philosophy resources about truth that may prove helpful:

- [http://www.iep.utm.edu/truth/](http://www.iep.utm.edu/truth/)
- [https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth)

If you use outside references, list them at the end of the essay using MLA style. For notes within the essay, use author’s name and page, e.g. (Kant, p. 222). Please do not use Wikipedia or dictionary definitions in your essay.

Give your essay a title, number your pages, and proofread it carefully.
Ethical Case:

The Riverboat Trip

The following day, everyone was aboard a riverboat as it chugged slowly up the river. A crowd of youngsters stood leaning over the side, watching the giant paddlewheel churn the brown muddy water green and white.

Mark was able to cup his hand over the rail and catch a few drops of spray. "Hey, Stottlemeier," he called out, "you want me to prove to you that the sentence 'water is wet' is true? Well, how 'bout this for proof?" And before Harry could answer, he had received a splatter of water in his face. Harry laughed good-naturedly and returned the favor a moment later. But Mark was careful to remind Harry just the same—"Y'see, sentences are true when they correspond to facts. What I said was true 'cause water's really wet."

Later they joined Tony on some deck chairs near the bow of the boat. After a while, Tony mentioned having had a dream the night before that he was in China. "Boy, was it ever real!" he exclaimed. "I really believed I was there. I could see the Great Wall, and imperial palaces, the pagodas, and everything!"

"So," Harry replied, "if it seemed that real to you, how come you now think you're awake, and that China was just a dream, Maybe this riverboat's a dream and China was for real!"

Tony knew Harry was teasing him, but he was ready for it. "It's easy," he answered.

"What happened during my dream seemed as real as anything else, as it was happening. But when I woke up, I realized I couldn't have spent the night in China, and not remember travelling there, or travelling back, or anything. So what happened in the dream wasn't consistent with everything else in my life. It wasn't consistent, so it wasn't true—it's as simple as that!"

Harry shrugged, and Mark was silent.

After the boat had docked at the landing, everyone rushed to explore the mansion, and still later, they began to explore the grounds. The three boys met Millie, Lisa and Laura as they crossed the great, slowing lawn, and together they began to explore the paths that led into the wooded area. Most had signs, but soon they began to follow one that was unmarked. They pushed further and further on into the woods. The path grew fainter and eventually they lost it. Then they realized that they themselves were lost.

For a time they wandered about, until at last they came to a small stream. Mark and Laura were for crossing the stream and going into the forest on the other side, in the hope that they would soon come to a road. But Harry pointed out that the forest might well stretch before them for a great many miles.
"Well," said Laura, "anyone have any ideas?"
"All we need is a compass," Millie answered. "Anyone got a compass?"
"You've got to be kidding," growled Tony.
Mark said, "I wish we had a map. We could find this stream on it, and then we'd know where we are, and how to get out of here."
"But we don't have a map," Harry replied.
"My grandfather used to live up in this area," said Tony. "He knew it like the back of his hand. He didn't need a map. He had a clear idea of the whole layout. If we knew this forest as clearly as he knew it, we could walk out of here with no sweat."
"That's just great, Tony!" Lisa responded quickly. "If we had a clear idea of the forest, we wouldn't be lost!" Then she added, "But wait a minute—why don't we take a chance that this stream flows down to the river that we came up here on? Once we get to the river, we'll know where we are."
"Good idea," said Harry, and the others agreed that they'd nothing to lose by trying it.
For quite some time the six of them walked along the bank of the stream. Just as they were about to give up on Lisa's plan, the river came into view, and they could see the mansion not far off upstream.
Lisa couldn't help bragging just a bit. "See, when you get right down to it, what's true is what's okay when you act on it. I had a hunch; we acted on it; it turned out to be true. That's all there is to it."
"Hold on," said Harry, "hold on! Look, what was the sentence we were trying to decide was either true or false?"
It was, 'If we follow the stream, we'll come back to the mansion,' said Tony.
"Okay," said Mark excitedly, "so what makes it true was that it was consistent with the whole layout around here—with all that anyone knows about this place. If it hadn't been, we'd still be out there stumbling around in the forest.
Lisa laughed. "The trouble with you guys is that don't want to admit when you're wrong! Look, given the sentence, 'If we follow the stream, we'll come back to the mansion,' there's only one way to tell for sure if that sentence is true or not."
"Follow the stream," said Laura.
"Not quite," Lisa answered. "We had to make a guess where the stream led to. Look, we knew for a fact that the mansion was on the river. And we knew for a fact that we were on the stream. Now the best guess we could make was that the stream led to the river. So we just went with our best guess. We tried it out, and sure enough, we found our way back to the mansion! Don't you see? Our idea was true because it worked!"
But Tony and Mark exclaimed together, "No, it worked because it was true!"
Excerpted from Matthew Lipman, Lisa (Montclair, New Jersey: Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC), 1983): 110-114. This novel and its accompanying manual, Ethical Inquiry (1985), is part of the pre-college philosophy curriculum developed by Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp at the IAPC.