



The Philosophy Club Start up Kit

A production of the Committee on Pre-College Philosophy of the American Philosophical Association



“The Unexamined Life is not worth Living...”

Socrates

Are you and your students interested in starting up or developing a **Philosophy Club**? Students from elementary through secondary level can enjoy the opportunity to discuss important issues with one another under the leadership of a teacher or other interested adult. This brochure offers some suggestions towards organizing a rewarding experience for all participants.

Getting started

If your school requires permission to begin a new club, be sure to submit the request and any necessary paperwork. There should be a teacher or another adult who facilitates the discussion. Your group can be as large as 20 or as small as 3!

1. Find interested students. Advertise through other teachers and through the students themselves. If your school spans a large number of grades you might wish





to consider limiting it to a certain class range, say 6-8 grade. Otherwise one club can accommodate all interested students in your Middle School or High School.

2. Once you have a group of students, choose a suitable meeting time, preferably once a week or bi-weekly. We suggest that you schedule regular meetings after school and if possible, work on avoiding times that might conflict with other big activities. However, the Philosophy Club can be an important social and intellectual activity for students who may not wish to play sports or be in theatrical productions.
3. Have your first meeting and begin right away to share ideas; schedule the length of your meetings depending upon the age of participants.

Some Club Models

How you want to structure your discussions may depend upon your grade levels and student interest. Here are some possible directions to consider:

1. The Philosophical Reading Group- choose a work of philosophy and read it together, discussing the text as you go. This might be particularly attractive to high school students. Some possible texts are:

Rene Descartes' *Discourse on Method*

Plato's Dialogues (*The Apology, Crito, The Republic* offer rich ideas.)

Ten Great Works of Philosophy, edited by Robert Paul Wolff- an inexpensive paperback book which includes some classics of Western philosophy

What Does it All Mean? By Thomas Nagle

Sophie's World by Jostein Gaarder

Of course there is a wealth of philosophical literature and you may already have some texts in mind.

2. The Big Questions discussion group—use the classical philosophical questions to generate discussions. Some sample questions could include:

- ★ What makes something right or wrong? How many meanings of "right" and "wrong" are there?
- ★ How do I know what is "fair"?





- ★ How do I **decide** to do something?
- ★ What makes an idea or statement true or false? Can truth change?
- ★ How do words mean? How does language come about and relate (or does it) to the world?
- ★ What is the difference between a belief, an opinion, and knowledge?
- ★ What makes me 'me'? How much can I change and still be me?
- ★ Is time real? How so or why not?
- ★ What makes something real?
- ★ Is there a meaning of life? What does that question itself mean?
- ★ What makes something beautiful? the eye of the beholder or a quality in the object?
- ★ What is creativity? in art? in science? elsewhere?
- ★ How does an artist create?
- ★ What is the "work of art" (in literature, painting, music, dance, theater? etc.??)

3. Fairy Tales and Philosophy group— for younger children or for older, it can be fun to read a fairy tale or children's book and talk about what issues or questions emerge. Some books to consider:

Frog and Toad series

Any book by Maurice Sendack or Leo Lionni

Alice in Wonderland

The Grimm Fairy Tales

The Giver

The *Harry Potter* series

The *Twilight* series



4. Social Issues Discussion Group—older students may wish to focus on social issues that have been featured in the media. This will require fact finding as well as simply discussion. Issues such as capital punishment, abortion, euthanasia, adoption can be sensitive and the group must be careful to avoid pushing an agenda. Nevertheless, these discussions can be rewarding if the students choose to go in this direction.



Club Rules: Being Socrates

To facilitate the smooth operation of your Philosophy Club, we suggest setting some basic ground rules such as the following:

1. All participants must respect one another and their views although it is acceptable and important to challenge views. No one should be made to feel uncomfortable or attacked in any way.
2. Everyone must be responsible for his or her ideas and welcome supportive questions and challenges from the members.
3. Everyone should contribute by speaking, listening and thinking.
4. Either have the adult facilitate or, depending upon the age of participants, rotate the “chair” position.

What a Philosophy Club is NOT

To help establish the form and substance of your club it might be helpful to reflect on what a philosophy club should **not** be:

1. It is not a debate society where the most aggressive point of view wins;
2. It is not to promote or to *teach* any particular point of view but rather to establish careful thinking as its main goal; all ideas should be welcome but available for scrutiny;
3. It should be responsive to the interests of the participating students, not simply the adult facilitator.
4. It is not a political or religious organization that is dedicated to a specific set of beliefs.



Some sample topics for discussion

Questions for Elementary School Children	Questions for Middle School Children	Questions for High School Students
<i>What is beauty?</i>	<i>What is justice?</i>	<i>What makes a government a good one?</i>
<i>What makes a good friend?</i>	<i>Can you change and still be you?</i>	<i>What is a citizen?</i>
<i>Are dreams real?</i>	<i>What role do friends play in our lives?</i>	<i>What rights and responsibilities should young people have?</i>
<i>Can animals talk to us?</i>	<i>What makes me an individual?</i>	<i>Is science true and how so?</i>
<i>Can trees or plants feel?</i>	<i>What is the difference between a community and a gang?</i>	<i>What values should matter in one's life?</i>
<i>Are colors real?</i>	<i>How do I know I am not dreaming right now?</i>	<i>Should some music or art be censored?</i>

Activities to Try

- Create your own philosophy *game*
- Bring in photos or pictures to stimulate a discussion
- Write philosophical poems
- Watch a movie or TV show for philosophical ideas
- Sponsor a Be-a-philosopher Day
- Create and perform your own Platonic Dialogue



What a Philosophy Club IS

1. a place where thoughtful children and young people can gather to learn new things and explore new ideas;
2. an adventure in being reflective persons within a community where everyone is both a teacher and a student—a *community of inquiry*;
3. a thinking community which welcomes all ideas and encourages participants to develop self-confidence in their own thinking and speaking



For more information:

Many colleges have Philosophy Clubs and your local college might welcome the chance to work with your school in developing a club appropriate for your students. Contact their Philosophy Department to see if they are interested and available. In addition, we can recommend this website:

<http://onlinephilosophyclub.com/>

blog at: <http://www.thephilosophyclub.com/>

The APA Philosophy Tool Box will offer a range of curriculum models and resources:

<http://plato-apa.org>

There is an excellent book on establishing a Philosophy Club which is produced in England. You might wish to visit their website and perhaps order their extensive guide to starting and maintaining an active philosophy club. Visit <http://www.dialogueworks.co.uk/index.php/home>



Can you name these philosophers?

Look for:

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Plato

Hypatia

Søren Kierkegaard

Iris Murdoch

Friedrich Nietzsche

Arthur Schopenhauer

Confucius

Martha Nussbaum

John Locke

Simone de Beauvoir

Immanuel Kant

Karl Marx

Avicenna

Hannah Arendt



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