

# Philosophical Chairs

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## Guidelines for Philosophical Chairs

Presented by Amanda Peterson

As adapted from "Philosophical Chairs: A Format for Classroom Discussion," by Zachary Seech published in *Teaching Philosophy* 7:1, January, 1984.

### How it works:

Set up the classroom so that two rows of chairs are facing one another and a smaller row (no greater than half the size of one of the other rows) perpendicular to the others. One row will be for the *pro* side, one for the *con* side, and the smaller row for the *undecided/middle ground* students.

Present a statement to the students, for example, "Human beings are basically greedy and self centered." The statement must divide the class almost evenly *pro* and *con*. Students sit on the side that best describes their point of view.

Someone on the *pro* side begins by stating a reason for agreeing with the statement. Someone on the *con* side responds to the statement, explaining why it doesn't sway her/him; or simply states a reason for disagreeing with the statement. The opportunity to speak then returns to the *pro* side; however, no one on any side may speak twice in a row. In other words, the first speaker for the *pro* side may not speak again until after someone from her/his side has spoken. Students in the *undecided* side are encouraged to share their thoughts or ask questions at any time. The mediator needs to keep track of which side has the opportunity to speak. Students may/should move during the discussion as comments made by either side sway their opinion on the matter.

The discussion may last for a predetermined amount of time or until the conversation fizzles out. I have found, with high school juniors, that 30-45 minutes is the norm. Be sure to allow time for a written reflection at the end.

### Instructions for the students:

Explain how it works to the students, then give further instructions:

- ✓ The purpose of this format is to promote discussion. It is not a debate; therefore, students are encouraged to keep an open mind by listening to what the speaker is saying without leaping to judgment.
- ✓ No speaker may speak twice in a row for her/his side. This allows students who are less confident the opportunity to speak and/or challenge a more verbally skilled student without fear of immediate reprisal.
- ✓ Students do not raise their hands to speak (especially while someone else is speaking)! In a discussion, the participants need to pay attention to the ebb and flow of the conversation and join in as appropriate.
- ✓ No one acknowledges any move, this is not a team game. This is not a win-lose situation.
- ✓ The goal of the participants is to be fair and open-minded. By the end of the discussion, the participants should be equally able to explain their own view as well as the opposing view.

### For the teacher:

- ✓ The statement should be written on the board.
- ✓ As mediator, you must be neutral.
- ✓ Modify or switch the topic if discussion becomes stagnant.
- ✓ Use talking tickets if a handful of students tend to dominate discussion.
- ✓ If the student who is speaking is looking at you, look at the students to whom they should be directing their comments.
- ✓ Use scaffolding techniques to prepare students for more advanced discussion topics.
- ✓ Be prepared to be comfortable with silent gaps (particularly with less mature, more shy groups).
- ✓ Sit behind a row of students or in the undecided section.
- ✓ As closure, give the students 30 seconds to think and then 30 seconds each to make one statement explaining their position. Or have students each rate themselves on a scale explaining how open-minded they were during the discussion.
- ✓ **Always** follow up with a writing activity!

## **Philosophical Chairs Topics**

### **School/Students**

Too much emphasis placed on grades in our educational system.  
American students should be required to learn a second language.  
Children should be disciplined by physical punishment.  
Banning certain books from public and school libraries is justified.  
Schools should have the right to require their students to take drug tests.  
Every student should be required to study history.  
Our school should/should not require uniforms.  
Financial aid should be denied to those students who have not registered for the selective service.  
Parents should encourage their teenage children to work even if the family does not need the money.  
You tell something about a person from the way she or he dresses.  
Sex education should not be taught in public schools.

### **Quotes**

"The love of money is the root of all evil."  
"Winning is not the most important thing; it's the only thing." Vince Lombardi  
"Every decent man is ashamed of the government he lives under." HL Menken  
"Governments lie." Howard Zinn  
"Only the educated are free." Epictetus  
"History is more or less bunk. It's tradition and we don't want tradition. We want to live in the present, and the only history that's worth a tinker's dam is the history we made today." Henry Ford

### **Voting and Politics**

Giving eighteen-year-olds the right to vote a mistake.  
The voting age should be lowered to fourteen.  
Recent elections have been characterized by small turnouts of eligible voters. Some democracies -- Australia, for example -- require their citizens to vote, such a policy should be adopted in the United States.  
It is better for a political leader to be feared instead of loved.  
The death penalty should be abolished.  
Citizens should be permitted to defend themselves and their property through means of deadly force.  
Court proceedings should be televised.  
Marijuana should be legalized.  
Competitions like the Miss America Pageant exploit women.  
It is appropriate for the government to limit civil liberties during times of national crisis.  
The Black Hills of South Dakota should be returned to the Ogalala Sioux.

### **Economics**

We should return to a cash economy. (or barter)  
It is the responsibility of the United States to share its food supplies with the hungry people of the world.  
The advertisement of alcoholic beverages should be banned from television.  
The automobile has been harmful to our society.

In order to protect American industry, the U.S. government should impose heavy tariffs on foreign goods coming into this country.

### **Military**

The military should draft be reinstated.

Women in the military services should be assigned combat duties.

“You can not simultaneously prevent and prepare for war.” Albert Einstein

War is obsolete.

The United States should lead the world in getting rid of nuclear weapons.

### **Useful websites**

A website with a lesson plan using Philosophical Chairs about the building of the Three Gorges Dam in China.

[http://info.csd.org/staffdev/iecweb/gorge\\_debate.htm](http://info.csd.org/staffdev/iecweb/gorge_debate.htm)

A website with alphabetical list of controversial topics.

<http://www.isu.edu/library/research/topics.htm>