

Instructions for Philosophical Chairs

Philosophical Chairs is a discussion strategy that emphasizes careful listening and mastery of diverse points of view. Philosophical chairs works particularly well with binary (Yes/No) questions.

1. Write the discussion question on the board. Explain that the class will discuss the pros and cons of the discussion question using something called Philosophical Chairs. Explain that students will be assigned to prepare a position on this question. Emphasize that they may not agree with their assigned side but that the conversation depends on everyone presenting their side well.
2. Distribute documents or handouts to every student. Materials should include 4-6 reasons in support and in opposition to the discussion question. Also distribute **Rules for a Good Philosophical Chairs Discussion** to every student.
3. Divide the class into three groups: Yes (in favor), No (opposed), and Unsure. Ask the Yes and No groups to prepare how they want to present their position. Ask the Unsure group to prepare questions they want to have answered so they can make their decision.
4. Allow time for each group to prepare its main arguments. Circulate to answer questions and confirm procedure. Explain that they can use the provided information, their own experience and views, or both. Remind students to prepare so that several people can offer arguments during the discussion.
5. Arrange chairs in a “U” formation. Students sit facing each other across the center of the room. Each side of the “U” represents one side of the question. The students at the bottom of the “U” are the Unsure group so they can see and hear both sides.
6. Ask one side to begin. One speaker from this side (Side A) begins with an opening argument or statement concerning the question.
7. In order to speak, a student from Side B must briefly summarize the Side A speaker's points to that speaker's satisfaction. Only then can the Side B speaker present his/her view. The speaker from Side B either can respond to the speaker from Side A or present another line of argument. The conversation continues to alternate between Side A and Side B, one speaker per side, following the same rules. After a student speaks, that student must wait until two students on his/her side have spoken.
8. Students must address each other at all times by their first names.
9. The teacher can call time-out periodically to clarify or refocus the discussion.
10. Students in the Unsure position must follow both sides of the argument (notes are encouraged). At the end of the conversation, these students must explain: who said something that convinced them to take side A or B; or what is a question they still have before they can make a decision.

Rules for a Good Philosophical Chairs Discussion

- Students must address each other **by their first names** at all times.
- A speaker must **briefly summarize** the previous speaker's points to that speaker's satisfaction before he/she begins his/her own comments. The previous speaker must accept the summary before the new speaker can present his/her point of view.
- After a student speaks, that student must wait until **two students** on his/her side have spoken.
- **Think** before you speak. **Organize** your thoughts. Give verbal clues to your listeners (“I have three points; first...”).
- One speaker at a time; others are listeners.
- Address the **ideas**, NOT the **person**.
- The teacher can call time-out periodically to **clarify, reflect on the process or content, or refocus the discussion**.

[Adapted from: Zachary Seech, “Philosophical Chairs: A Format for Classroom Discussion,” *Teaching Philosophy* 7:1 (1984), as modified for the classroom by Dale B. Fountain, Mount Tahoma High School, Tacoma, Washington.]