



Philosophy Club Start-Up Kit

Developed by PLATO's Student Advisory Council

How to Start a Philosophy Club

Starting a philosophy club usually requires a pitch. Here is our pitch guide to planning, justifying, and solidifying a philosophy club initiative.

Planning

- Before you pitch your club, you want to have a rough idea of *what* kind of philosophy club you want to establish. See our meeting formats resource below for ideas.
- Research your school's club formation process. Look for timelines, advisor requirements, and meeting structures. Include these in your pitch, which could be a simple Google Slides presentation.

Justifying

Philosophy is often forgotten in American schools. Although many people will be interested in your club, you will need a plan to justify the importance of philosophy to skeptical teachers, administrators, and students. Here are some ideas:

- Philosophy builds critical thinking and argumentation skills that transfer to every other subject.
- Philosophy gives students a structured, supportive environment to discuss big questions they're already asking.
- No prior coursework is required: questions in philosophy are universal, a philosophy club can meet members where they are at, no matter their experience in the subject.
- A philosophy club can connect to concrete outcomes: Ethics Bowl teams, essay competitions, and published student writing.



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Solidifying

- Getting approval for a philosophy club is only the start of your journey — most successful philosophy clubs are differentiated by how they gain traction in the first 1–2 months.
- Advertise your club in as many ways as you can. Posters in the hallways. Posts on social media. Advertisements in your school newspaper. Getting the first attendees involved is the hardest part of starting a club.
- Market your club using what you can offer students: opportunities to discuss difficult issues, compete on an ethics bowl team, submit philosophy papers to competitions.
- Find a teacher or faculty member who is willing to support the philosophy club for the long term, even after you leave the school. Administrative support is what makes a philosophy club last even after you are gone.

Logistics and Funding Opportunities

School Approval

Most schools require a faculty sponsor before you can officially book a room or appear at a club fair. Look for a teacher, in any subject, who already enjoys a good argument. English and history teachers are often the best to ask. Ideally, you send them your ideas for future club meetings and discussion events. Once you have a sponsor, working with administration is mostly paperwork: a slide deck or one-page proposal, a meeting time, and a room.

Funding

PLATO offers a \$200 stipend for public middle and high school philosophy or ethics clubs. An adult sponsor is required, and stipends do not cover Ethics Bowl or other



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competition fees. Applications are due January 15 each year, with decisions by the end of January. See the tab to the left.

Philosophy Club Formats

Choosing your meeting format is the most important choice that you will make when establishing a philosophy club. Here, we provide several tried and tested meeting formats for philosophy clubs. Importantly, you can mix and match! Your club could be a writing-focused club that has occasional speakers, or you could primarily be an ethics bowl team that invites speakers once a semester. The choice is yours.

Discussion-Based Models

- **The Philosophical Reading Group** — choose an introductory text, and read through it together. This format can operate as a book club, where meetings become discussions on each successive section. Good texts include: Plato's dialogues, Descartes's *Discourse on Method*, or accessible entry points like *Sophie's World*.
- **The Big Questions Group** — use classical questions to generate discussion, no assigned text required (see below). If you choose this style of open discussion, expect that conversations may go off topic. This is ok, and your job is to carefully steer members back on track, while focusing on guiding the argumentation style of members (premises, assumptions → arguments → conclusions).
- **Social Issues Discussion** — tackle issues in the news; requires some fact-finding alongside discussion. This option is particularly useful if you have members interested in politics, economics, or current events. An example discussion meeting may be: "How does distributive justice map onto current economic



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policy?" Before the discussion, you could hand out policy briefs and political philosophy excerpts for students to pre-read.

Discussion Starter Questions

- What is beauty?
- What is justice?
- What makes a good friend?
- Can you change and still be you?
- Are dreams real?
- What is a citizen?
- Can animals talk to us?
- What makes me an individual?
- Is science true, and how do we know?
- Can trees or plants feel?
- Are colors real?
- Should some music or art be censored?

Activities to Try

- Bring in photos or images to stimulate discussion
- Watch a movie or TV clip for its philosophical ideas
- Write and perform your own Platonic dialogue

Competitions

Ethics Bowl

Ethics Bowl is perhaps the most common philosophy competition format for high school students. Ethics bowl is NOT traditional debate. In ethics bowl you engage in a



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philosophical conversation with another team, arguing the position you actually think is right. Then get judged on how rigorously and generously you reason, rather than simply winning the argument. The National High School Ethics Bowl (NHSEB), run out of UNC-Chapel Hill's Parr Center for Ethics, has regionals in 34+ states. PLATO offers [extensive resources](#) on how to start an ethics bowl team.

Note: Competitive Ethics Bowl is a large commitment for any philosophy club. If you decide to structure your club around ethics bowl, we recommend that you plan out at least 1-2 months of prep meetings and team training before competition.

American Philosophy Olympiad

A high school writing [contest](#) connected to the International Philosophy Olympiad (IPO). Students qualify by writing a philosophy essay in Spanish, French, or German. The two U.S. winners travel abroad to represent the country at the IPO.

Since US entrants to the IPO cannot write in English, this opportunity is limited by the foreign language skills of any interested member. We recommend that you provide club members information about this opportunity, but refrain from structuring your club around the event, due to the high barriers to entry.

Writing-Focused Clubs

Club meetings structured around writing competitions or publication opportunities are often able to draw sustained club attendance. Club meetings can be structured around a writing deadline, starting 8-10 weeks out with brainstorming meetings, then workshopping meetings, and finally group editing meetings. Ultimately, the goal is to support club members in the submission of their own philosophical work.



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Writing Opportunities

- PLATO Questions Journal — High School Research Section
- PLATO Ethics Bowl Case Writing
- NHSEB Case Writing
- John Locke Essay Competition — Philosophy Category
- Aristotle Essay Contest
- THINK Essay Prize
- Sidgwick Prize — Philosophy Category
- Scholastic Art & Writing Awards — Critical Essay Category

Invited Speakers

Invited speakers are one of the best ways to attract attendance. Professors or philosophy professionals can lend outside credibility to the club, and offer exciting insights that complement a usual routine of discussion or ethics bowl meetings.

We recommend reaching out to speakers a month or even two months in advance of when you'd like them to speak at your school. Philosophy professors are busy people! Furthermore, since in-person speaker events are often difficult to arrange, we recommend virtual Zoom speaker sessions as a strong alternative.

Reaching Out to a Speaker

Cold emailing professors at local universities and community colleges works better than you think! Professors are passionate about their work, and they are often looking for opportunities to share philosophy with younger people. Here is an example cold email template:

"Hi Professor [Name], I'm a student and co-founder of the [School] Philosophy Club. We're a group of about [X] students who meet weekly to [discuss philosophy/prep ethics/etc.]. We'd



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love to invite you to speak with us for 20–30 minutes about [topic tied to their work]. Let us know if you'd be open to this, and if you'd be available sometime in the next few weeks!"

Faculty Mentorship Network at PLATO

PLATO's Faculty Mentorship Network connects college faculty with pre-college students and clubs. Please start by reaching out to these faculty via email! [Learn more](#)

Philosophy Content Recommendations

Here are philosophy content resources that members of the Student Advisory Council have found useful when preparing materials and ideas for philosophy club meetings.

Online Resources

- [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) — the field's gold-standard reference.
- [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) — a more accessible companion to the SEP.
- [1000-Word Philosophy](#) — short, plain-language essays on major thinkers and debates.
- [EthicsBowl.org](#) — case sets and prep material.
- [Internet Archive](#) and [Project Gutenberg](#) — free public-domain primary texts.

Courses

- [PLATO](#) — programs and curricular resources from the Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization.
- [UNC Ethics Bowl Academy](#) — Ethics education resources, PLATO SAC providing student input on design.



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- **Coursera** — university intro philosophy courses, many free to audit.

Magazines

- **Philosophy Now** — an accessible general-interest philosophy magazine.
- **Aeon** — long-form essays on philosophy, culture, and ideas.

Podcasts

- **The UnMute Podcast** — philosophy and everyday life.
- **The Partially Examined Life** — long-running deep dives into major texts.
- **Philosophy Bites** — short interviews with working philosophers.

Lectures

- **TEDx Talks** — short introductions to big ideas.
- **"Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?"** — Michael Sandel's Harvard lecture course.
- **Crash Course Philosophy** — Hank Green's free video series.
- **Open Yale Courses** — full recorded university courses, free.



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Student Advice

Collected advice from high school students on the Student Advisory Council.

Getting Started

- If you do plan on starting some sort of club or initiative, one of the most important first steps might be to find a teacher/adult to help oversee the club (as most schools require).
- If you're trying to start something outside of school, it's important to reach out to as many people as possible to gain members.
- Find a co-founder/form a team, and make sure to define roles clearly from the start.
- If you are starting a philosophy club, look into what other schools' philosophy clubs have done in the past and reach out to their presidents for ideas!
- Don't be scared to put yourself out there — more people than you think may be interested!

Choosing Your Format

- Understand that there isn't a single format for how your club/initiative should work. It should allow you to continue your interest in philosophy in a space where you can discuss with and learn from others.
- Having a club that is flexible and focuses on allowing people to have a voice in loosely structured discussions will likely be a better fit for more people.
- It's might be easier to start a club with friends or with people who are like minded, however, it's important to make your club welcoming and for all students afterwards (not just your initial team) in order to have interesting discussions.
- Not everyone who attends wants to do hard core philosophy.



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- Prior knowledge being required to participate in a discussion can deter people.
 - Not many people desire to be lectured about a topic.

Running Engaging Meetings

- Find ways to make philosophy engaging through games like Kahoot, discussions, and other interactive resources.
- Emphasize the real-world applications of philosophy, not just theoretical ideas.
- Gauge which areas of philosophy are most relevant and interesting to your peers.
- Connect philosophy to existing student interests and issues in your school community.
- A compelling ethical dilemma is often a stronger discussion topic than an abstract philosophical concept.
- Give members quick reading or writing tasks between meetings to keep them engaged with philosophy.
- You can have meetings on basically any philosophy. I did one on the Mamba Mentality. You don't need too many participants, you need ones who care about having a productive discussion. Talk to a teacher to get a good mentor for starting a club, maybe an English or a history teacher. Don't be afraid to ask for help from a friend to help you run meetings too. You don't have to know a great deal about philosophy to be qualified, it can be a group that learns about philosophy together, not a bunch of experts.
- Consider joining or learning about a widespread and already structured philosophy initiative such as Ethics Bowl in order to get a rough idea of how people often approach learning and discussing philosophy.



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Growing as a Leader

- Audit online philosophy courses to build a strong foundation for yourself as a leader.
- Online philosophy groups can be very helpful for coming up with ideas and getting support.
- Go to round tables and workshops online especially if you are worried about not saying the right thing (these are a great way to learn about your own philosophical beliefs in a low pressure way).
- There are so many different parts of philosophy so look at what you are interested in, not just what is popular.
- Reach out to local college/grad students/professors to learn and possibly have them as guest speakers.

Logistics & Longevity

- Don't brush logistics and funding under the rug!!! Of course, don't be overly focused on it to the point where it hinders your other goals, but make sure you have it all sorted out before doing events or activities, so you don't run into last minute problems (like transportation, paying for contests, planning meetings, and actually keeping the club going throughout the year).
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Additional Philosophy Engagement and Camps

If your club members wish to pursue additional philosophy beyond the club, here are some activities that members of the PLATO Student Advisory Council have engaged in.

- **PLATO's High School Classes** — PLATO's own offerings for high schoolers.



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- **PLATO SAC** — PLATO's Student Advisory Council; shape PLATO's programming and connect with student leaders nationally.
 - **Community College Dual Enrollment** — intro philosophy or ethics courses may be open to high schoolers at your local community college. They may be free and transferable for college credit, so we recommend cold emailing a professor or administrator at your local community college to inquire about such opportunities.
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Questions?

If you have any questions about how to start or run a philosophy club, student leaders on the PLATO Student Advisory Council would love to help you! Please contact us at info@plato-philosophy.org.