

Ethics Bowl for the Classroom

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Although today ethics bowls typically feature teams from different schools—and in the case of the National High School Ethics Bowl (NHSEB), teams from different states—the very first ethics bowl happened within a single classroom. For schools not near an inter-school ethics bowl, and for schools simply interested in doing more ethics bowling, this guide explains how to plan and execute a bowl inside your classroom. This guide is based on the rules and procedures of the NHSEB and affiliated events, but you are encouraged to customize the format of your bowl to suit your goals, interests and resources.

What is an Ethics Bowl?

Ethics Bowl is a collaborative yet competitive event that encourages students to deepen their understanding and appreciation of compelling and complex ethical and philosophical issues. Ethics bowls demand that students analyze their reasoning rather than simply hone their rhetorical skills. Most significantly, the event encourages students to seriously consider other perspectives as they make ethical judgments, and in some cases change their mind when given good enough reason to do so.



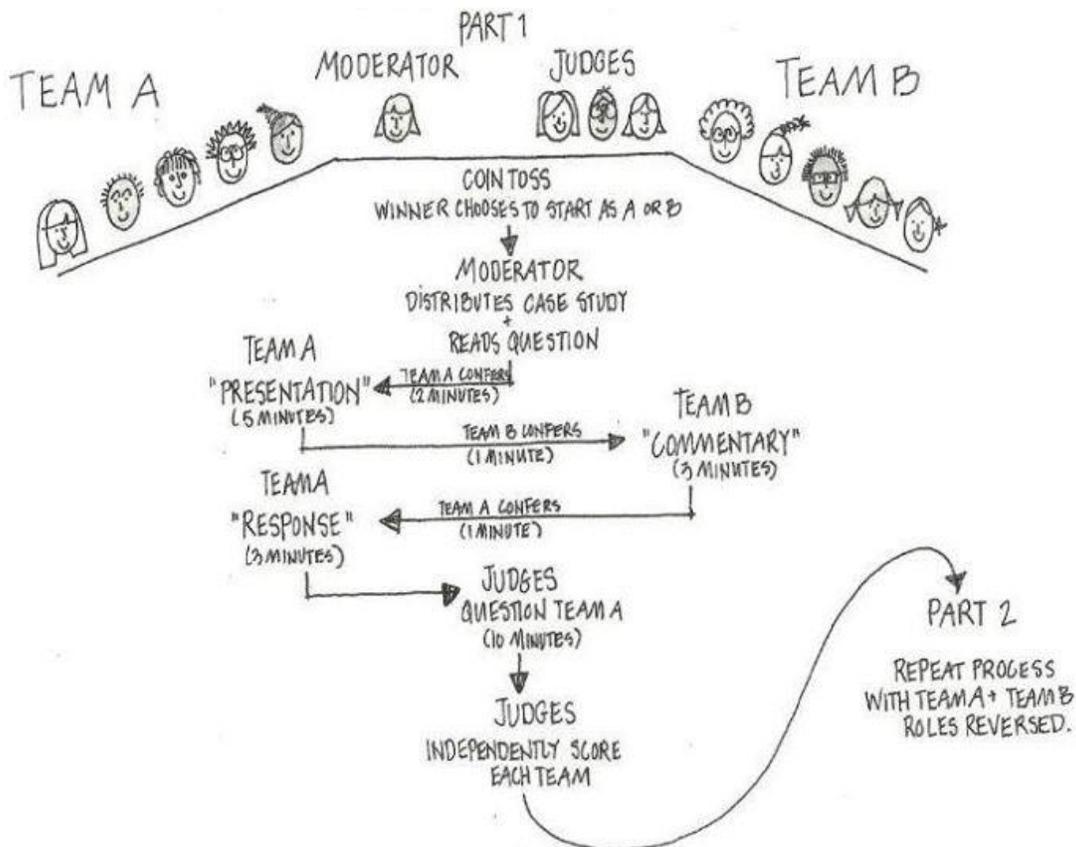
Click the above image to watch a 6-minute video on the 1st Annual Washington State High School Ethics Bowl

In an ethics bowl, teams of 2-7 students (up to 5 students participate during any given round, while 2 alternates may rotate in between rounds) analyze a series of wide-ranging, timeless and timely ethical dilemmas. Teams are not required to advocate for an assigned position (as is the case with debate), but are scored according to the quality of their reasoning.

What are some benefits of holding an Ethics Bowl?

- Brings students face-to-face with new perspectives on complex issues, which nurtures empathy
- Provides a unique, non-adversarial opportunity to compete in a collaborative context
- Introduces students to philosophy, the only major discipline typically not taught before college
- Encourages reflective, civil discourse and improves participants' critical thinking skill
- Promotes ethical awareness and responsibility, and gives students public speaking practice

How does an Ethics Bowl work?



Graphic courtesy of illustrator Dusty Upton, A2Ethics and the University of Michigan Department of Philosophy Outreach Program, co-sponsors of the Michigan High School Ethics Bowl

Each round is divided into halves and is structured to facilitate a philosophic discussion. During the first half, the moderator announces which case will be discussed first, and Team A is asked a direct question about this case. Team A presents its answer, and then Team B comments on

Team A's analysis. Then Team A has an opportunity to reply to Team B's commentary. Finally, Team A is asked a series of questions by the panel of judges. During the second half of the round, the roles are reversed: the moderator reads a new case, and this time Team B answers a new direct question, with Team A providing commentary, etc. At the end of the round, the moderator tallies the score and announces the winner.

If you're holding your bowl during a traditional class period, you'll likely only have time for one round, and might use any additional time to discuss the case and the teams' analyses, or allow the judges to provide supportive and constructive feedback to the participants. You then might choose to allow differently configured teams to participate in a round during the next class, or have the same teams face one another again – many equally good options exist.

What is discussed at an Ethics Bowl?



The cases that have been used in past collegiate and high school ethics bowls have covered a wide range of personal, political, and social dilemmas. To access several sets of past National High School Ethics Bowl case pools, which you may reuse for your own classroom bowl, click [here](#).

To help students prepare, you can provide study questions (included in all of the case sets at the above link), one of which can be asked on the day of the bowl. You can also choose to ask a new question, one for which the students haven't prepared, which follows the protocol used at NHSEB and IEB.

How can teams prepare?

Teams prepare by reading, reflecting on and discussing the cases in their case pool, and in some cases by analyzing them according to philosophical ethical theories. For an open-source ebook on the four dominant ethical theories, the pitfalls of moral relativism, the role of moral intuitions, and more, download *Ethics in a Nutshell: An Intro for Ethics Bowlers* by clicking [here](#). Additional reference materials can be found [here](#).

Teams can also work with a coach, which for classroom bowl, would in most cases be a teacher or perhaps a student who's competed in a prior bowl. A brief guide for ethics bowl coaches, *How to Be an Ethics Bowl Coach*, can be downloaded [here](#).

How are teams judged?

To promote fairness and objectivity, a panel of three judges uses an official score sheet and rubric to evaluate each team. To download the score sheet and rubric used by the National High School Ethics Bowl, click [here](#).

At inter-school bowls, judges often include philosophy professors, attorneys, journalists, and other thoughtful members of the community, all of whom familiarize themselves with the cases before the event. However, for a classroom bowl, teachers or principals might serve as judges, or students can take turns serving as judges.



According to the NHSEB score sheet and rubric, teams are judged according to the quality of their reasoning, as well as the degree to which they:

- Convey a deep understanding of the central ethical issues and important nuances in the cases
- Appreciate and effectively address positions contrary to their own, including the positions of the other team
- Engage in respectful discourse and generally embody the spirit of the philosophical pursuit of truth (as opposed to a combative disposition bent on “winning” one might see in a debate)

What do students report learning from participating in an Ethics Bowl?

- To appreciate the different sides of controversial topics
- How to argue respectfully
- The difference between ethical and legal arguments
- That not all issues are black and white

What are the main steps in organizing a classroom Ethics Bowl?

So you're sold on the idea, and want to hold an ethics bowl in your class. Great! What are the main steps?

1. Decide whether you'd like to have an "ethics bowl week" or month during which you introduce, prepare for and execute a bowl within a set time period, whether you'd like to devote one day per week to ethics bowl, whether you'd like to run your classroom bowl as part of an extracurricular club, or follow some other model
2. Familiarize yourself with the general bowl process by reviewing the graphic on page 2
3. Select a number of cases from the case pools [here](#)
 - a. You might consider involving the students in this step – they're more likely to enjoy your bowl if considering issues they find interesting
4. Help the students think through the cases, one by one, identifying the central moral issues and tensions at play
 - a. Refer to the *How to be an Ethics Bowl Coach* guide [here](#)
 - b. Consider preceding discussion of the cases by first exploring philosophical ethics, potentially by working through the 58-page ethics ebook *Ethics in a Nutshell: An Intro for Ethics Bowlers* [here](#)
5. Identify judges (ideally 3), explain ethics bowl to them, provide them with the cases you'll be using, as well as the score sheet and scoring rubric [here](#)
6. Identify a person to serve as the moderator
 - a. This person will read the questions, keep time, tally the judges scores, announce the winner, and generally oversee the event
7. Author questions for the competition
 - a. If you'd like to evaluate your students' ability to think on their feet, rather than simply deliver rehearsed answers, keep these secret until the actual event
8. Hold your bowl, celebrate, repeat 😊

What will your bowl look like?

Though this guide and associated materials are based on the model followed by the NHSEB (you may download and review the NHSEB rules and procedures [here](#)), you are encouraged to modify your bowl as you see fit. Thus, what your bowl will look like will depend largely on your goals, your students' preferences, and the time and space you have available.



For example, say you're teaching a class of 20 students that meets for an hour 3 times per week. During the preparation phase you might begin by working with the class as a whole, but after a few sessions divide them into 4 teams of 5 students each. These teams could use class time to think through the case pool as independent teams, considering various viewpoints and attempting to arrive at a consensus within their group.

Once your teams are ready, you've selected competition questions, and recruited judges, it's time to hold the bowl. During one class period you might have Team 1 compete against Team 2. Then at the next class meeting, have Team 3 compete against Team 4, and at the next class have the winners of the first two meetings compete for the championship. If there's still time left in the semester, you could select a new case pool and repeat the process. Alternatively, you could devote class time to preparing for the event, but hold the actual bowl one evening or weekend, inviting parents to observe.

Many aspects of an ethics bowl can be modified to suit your needs and those of your students: team size, the rules governing the use of notes, the amount of time allotted to each portion of a match, time for preparation, etc.. Just be sure to communicate and clarify the rules and procedures, whatever they are, before a round begins, and to make any associated changes in the moderator's script.

Have questions?

If you have questions about bringing ethics bowl to your classroom, contact Squire Family Foundation Senior Research Fellow and National High School Ethics Bowl Director of Outreach Dr. Matt Deaton at matt@mattdeaton.com or 865-323-9773. Dr. Deaton has worked with new ethics bowl organizers nationwide, and he would be more than happy to help you bring a customized bowl to your classroom.

Ready for the next level?

Think your school might like to compete in an inter-school ethics bowl? For a list of regional high school ethics bowls, click [here](#) to see if there's a bowl in your area, and contact the organizer(s) to find out how your team can register for their next event.

If there's not an inter-school bowl in your area, think about sponsoring one at your high school. Although regional bowls are most commonly held at universities, several high school teachers have successfully hosted inter-school bowls at their school. To discuss sponsoring, hosting or organizing a new bowl in your area, contact Squire Family Foundation Senior Research Fellow and National High School Ethics Bowl Director of Outreach Dr. Matt Deaton at matt@mattdeaton.com or 865-323-9773.

And for more information on high school ethics bowl in general, visit the National High School Ethics Bowl website, nhseb.unc.edu, where you'll find videos, case pools, information on the upcoming bowl season and other useful resources.



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The Squire Family Foundation is dedicated to expanding pre-college philosophy and high school ethics bowls across the U.S. Please visit our website, www.SquireFoundation.org.

The [National High School Ethics Bowl](#) (NHSEB) is part of the larger Ethics Bowl initiative which includes the [Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl](#) (IEB) and the [Two Year College Ethics Bowl](#), which are affiliated with the [Association for Practical and Professional Ethics](#).