
NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL ETHICS BOWL

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Guidelines for Teams

High school ethics bowl is not Speech & Debate, and this is an important distinction. In ethics bowl, teams are not required to pick opposing sides, nor is the goal to “win” the argument by belittling the other team or its position. Ethics Bowl is, at heart, a collaborative discussion during which the first team presents its analysis of a question about the ethical dilemma at the core of the case being discussed, offering support for its position but also considering the validity of other positions.

The goal is to demonstrate breadth and depth of thinking about difficult and important ethical situations. In fact, teams are rewarded for the degree to which they eschew adversarial positioning and instead adopt a more collegial, collaborative stance.

- In other words, teams are strongly encouraged to think of themselves as being on the same side rather than as opponents. That is, both teams are working together trying to solve a difficult problem—while impressing the judges with thoughtful, considered analysis and support. Listening to the other team with an aim to affirm, gently correct, supplement, or build on their argument is a prudent approach and one that expresses the ideals of the NHSEB.
- Because an ethics bowl encourages collaboration, team members are encouraged to remain seated rather than standing during a match.

Teams are not penalized or rewarded depending on whether one person speaks or everyone contributes. We understand that each team has its own process:

- Some divide up the cases so that individuals are responsible for a certain number of cases; as a result, one person would present. Other teams ask that each member of the team become responsible for a different aspect of all the cases; as a result, all team members would speak.
- **Either of these strategies or variations is feasible and scoring is neutral on this issue.** However, judges do not know which approach a team will take unless they are informed. Therefore, to dispel any preconceptions that a judge may harbor, we urge



that a team outline its presentation when it begins—that is, the team should explain who will be discussing which aspect(s) of the case and why. This way, a judge will know what kind of presentation to expect.

- At the Nationals, judges know that they should neither penalize nor reward a team for using either approach: both are welcome.

Successful analyses will include a clear and detailed understanding of the facts of a case. Since cases are often highly complex, researching the topic or incident involved may be helpful. Although teams may use outside research to prepare for a match, they should not assume that merely presenting factual information will impress the judges. Teams need to propose valid, sound, persuasive arguments that are buttressed by fact to score well. If a team introduces a specific fact not contained in the case, the team should cite the source (e.g. “according to a 2011 article in National Geographic...”).

When researching cases, teams should think of this as an opportunity to gather and assess arguments supporting a wide range of points of view rather than to seek only those sources that support opinions the team already holds. As team members analyze the range of arguments, they should strive to get inside the heads of those who have different beliefs and concerns than the ones with which they are familiar. What motivates people to have certain beliefs? What are their values? A team should also ask, “Why is this case hard?” If it doesn’t seem hard, it is a good sign a team is not probing deeply enough. The cases are supposed to challenge world views. Asking questions like these will help a team solidify its own position.

During the Presentation period, a team should make sure it briefly introduces the case and identifies the central moral question. A team must clearly and systematically address the case question asked by the moderator. After presenting a position, a team should explain how others might have different points of view. Empathize with these other positions even if your team disagrees.

During the Commentary, a team’s role is to help the other team perfect its presentation, NOT to present its own position on the case. When team members comment, they should think of themselves as thoughtful, critical listeners. Their goal is to point out the flaws in the presentation, to comment on its strengths, note what has been omitted or needs further development; all this is in the interest of making the presentation of the case stronger.

Although teams are allowed to and should pose questions during Commentary, the first team is under no obligation to answer any or all questions raised by the second team (or vice versa). The presenting team, however, should be able to answer the most crucial or morally pressing question or two (in the event that there are more than two questions).



- Teams are expected to ask insightful questions that target the primary position, key implications, or unaddressed central issues.
- When scoring Commentary, judges will consider the questions raised by the opposing team and whether the questions addressed truly substantive issues—both in relation to the presentation and the moderator’s case question.
- **A “question shower” or “spit-fire questioning,” during which a team rapidly asks many questions in an attempt to overwhelm or dominate the other team, is inconsistent with the aims of NHSEB, and will not merit a high score.**

On occasion, team members may discover that they want to modify or perhaps change an aspect of their initial position as a result of the second team’s commentary. Some judges may think this indicates that the team did not fully think through its initial position. However, because the ethics bowl is about ethical inquiry, and because these are high school students, and changing one’s mind can be considered a sign of fluid rather than crystallized intelligence—a hallmark of higher-order thinking—**changing or modifying a position is not necessarily negative.**

Judging the quality of a team’s analysis is subjective and difficult. It is easy for teams to fault or blame judges if they lose a match. To fully understand how each judge reaches their decisions, please read the guidelines for judges (Section V-B). Judges come from diverse backgrounds: some are philosophers or professional ethicists; others come from a range of professional fields such as business, education, medicine, or journalism; and some are fans of ethics bowls. Part of the task of a successful team is to communicate reasoning effectively to judges who have different viewpoints and life experiences.

Because of judges’ diverse backgrounds, it is not essential for teams to reference specific ethicists or ethical theories: doing so is not a requirement of a good answer, nor is it indicative of a poor answer. The argument matters; it is not necessary to name the philosopher associated with the argument. Keep in mind that a team is speaking to a broad audience: many judges have no formal background in philosophy or ethics, and may not understand your reference to “Kantianism.” A good strategy is to explain ethical reasoning in terms everyone can understand.

If a team member does refer to “deontology,” for example, make sure the reference is accurate. A judge may question a team about that specific theory during the judges’ question & answer portion of the match.

****In short, remember that philosophical name-dropping is not a substitute for presenting a sound argument.****

****Please also be sure to consult the NHSEB’s complete Rules, Procedures, and Guidelines for very important information.****

