So, you want to set up a philosophy club in your school, but don’t know where to start? Peter Worley has all the advice you need...

The First Rule...

The first rule of ‘Phi Club’ is: they must not know that it is a philosophy club. I don’t mean by this that you shouldn’t mention ‘philosophy’, or include the word in the name of your group, but it must not feel like ‘just an extra lesson where we think really hard’. Sneak the hard thinking up on your members and sandwich it between thinking games/warm-up activities, especially on arrival (so students look forward to coming) and as a finale (so they leave feeling positive about next week).

For some game ideas see Robert Fisher’s Games For Thinking and/or become a member of The Philosophy Foundation (TPF) website (philosophy-foundation.org), which has games aimed at developing different aspects of thinking. Collections of logical and lateral puzzles and problems make good warm up exercises, especially if people are arriving to your club in dribs and drabs; Lagoon Books publish a variety of different puzzle books of this kind.

The room

You will need to find an appropriate space in the school for your philosophy club. It should be spacious but not too echoey; it should also be reasonably free of outside noise and any distractions should be minimal. There should be just enough chairs for everyone to sit on, arranged into a horseshoe shape so that everyone can see each other, the facilitator, and the board if necessary. Move tables to one side to provide a good ‘space for thinking’ and to allow room for any activities or games you may want to include.

The facilitator/chair

There should be someone whose job it is to facilitate or chair the discussion. This person could be a teacher but it may also be a member of the group, particularly if the students are of GSCE or A level age. The key thing to bear in mind is that the role of the chair is not to be involved in the discussion, but to allow the group to enter into a philosophical enquiry so that there is order and relevance to the contributions. For a much more detailed description of facilitation techniques see The If Machine (additional resources).

The rules

Do not begin without establishing some basic rules of conduct. You may decide to agree on a set of rules that the group draws up. Alternatively, here is a suggested list (I use these rules with Year 1 children and PhD philosophy students – some of the latter have adopted ‘the rules’ for their postgraduate research seminars!)

The Ball Rule:

this is where a ball is used to visually indicate whose turn it is to speak. If you have it then it is your opportunity to speak if you have something to say but otherwise you should remain silent except during ‘talk time’ (see below). The chair passes the ball balancing two over-arching aims: fairness and inclusion with dialectical demands (see ‘a method of enquiry’, below).

The Listening Rule:

this states that when not talking you should be listening in order to understand what it is the speaker is trying to say. (Can the group say identify the difference between ‘listening’ and ‘hearing’?)

The Hands Up / Hands Down Rule:

this rule asks for ‘hands up’ when someone wants to say something, but that hands must be put down again when someone starts to speak.

The Respect Rule:

this requires that the members of the group display appropriate behaviour and the right attitude towards each other (no rudeness). Make sure that you remind students that though they should be respectful they...
A philosophical dialogue should be to some extent logical. Philosophical dialogues should have a creative component. Philosophical dialogues should begin with a sense of puzzlement following the recognition of some kind of problem or tension. A dialogue unfolds as the group then attempts to solve or resolve the problem they have identified.

Anyone involved in a philosophical dialogue should have something deeper/more fundamental (what is existence anyway?) or a question that needs to be asked in order to address the main question more successfully (e.g. ‘what is the fair way to distribute wealth?’). ‘...’ requires that you answer the question. ‘What is fair?’ Sometimes the group will simply identify an area of enquiry that interests them more. However, the chair should try not to let the discussion move off track too much. There may be more than one new question during a discussion but it’s a good idea not to have too many and one should always return to the main question at the end.

Concluding comments from the group – the chair must refrain from providing his or her own conclusions. This is a chance for the group members to say whether they have come to any conclusions or, if not, then to say what ideas – and whose they were – interested them the most, or whether anything in the discussion got them to change their mind, and why.

End with a light-hearted game or fun activity.

### A method of enquiry

The procedure above does not describe any method for conducting an enquiry. This is an important point because the enquiry is at the heart of any attempt to philosophise. Methods for conducting or participating in a philosophical enquiry can be very involved, but here are some key features that, in my view, should be included (adapted from the ideas of Professor M.M. McCabe):

- A philosophical dialogue should be to some extent logical – ideas should be presented as clearly as possible making use of arguments (in the formal sense) to present and support a position; group members should be ready to change their mind in light of good reasons from others. And the problem being looked at should demand the possibility of resolution.

- Philosophical dialogues should have a creative component in that they require those involved to think up scenarios to illustrate a claim or to refute another, but they also make the demand that the thinker think outside their usual way of thinking and possibly even as if they were someone else.

- Philosophical dialogues should be sequential – ideas should follow each other in some kind of order that acknowledges previous contributions in some way.

- Philosophical dialogues should begin with a sense of puzzlement following the recognition of some kind of problem or tension. A dialogue unfolds as the group then attempts to solve or resolve the problem they have identified.

- Anyone involved in a philosophical dialogue should have some kind of overview: they should have one eye on what they are saying, their own ideas and arguments, and another eye on the discussion as a whole.

### The procedure

1. Once your introductory rules and/or games allowed, then begin presenting a stimulus of some kind. This can be anything from a photograph or poem to a short story or even an essay/work (or extract from one) by a philosopher. See ‘additional resources’ for potential sources.

2. Ask a question – either there will be a question in the book that is being used or the group/facilitator will need to formulate one.

3. Talk Time – this is a chance for the group to talk in pairs or small groups about the question without having to wait their turn. This is usually no more than a 2 minutes.

4. Enquiry – this is the discussion that is held by the entire group. A chair or facilitator is needed for this. Allow people to respond to each other and try to develop a sequential, step-by-step discussion based on questions, objections and replies.

5. Repeat steps 2–4 with a new question – this could be something deeper/more fundamental (‘what is existence anyway?’) or a question that needs to be asked in order to address the main question more successfully (e.g. ‘what is fair way to distribute wealth?’).