



Philosophy  
Circles

# The Numbers Strike

*A stimulus that explores the consequences of the numbers downing tools. It dovetails nicely with the stimulus 'More', about a civilization adapting to the addition of higher numerals.*



Lay pieces of paper, each with a number from 0 to 9, spaced out in a line across the floor. What is the most useful number? Ask pupils to spend some time discussing, before standing on their choice. Hear some reasons, and let pupils move if they change their mind.



You could read the stimulus and go from there, but even better if you could have a member of staff dash in asking if you've seen the news. Numbers have gone on strike, due to under-appreciation. Giving pupils an experience as their stimulus always heightens engagement. The stimulus could be handed to you as a news print out. A shift to present tense will be needed.

Tip: You could get round the difficulty of mentioning numbers in your enquiry by the fact you were all showing your appreciation for them only minutes earlier. The numbers have agreed to remain working for your class only.

Throw some of the following questions at the group. It's a good idea to blurt them out all at once, like a character in a film following a particularly momentous event.

- *What should we do? Can we cope without numbers?*
- *If they refuse to go back to work, what would we replace them with?*
- *Could a world without numbers actually be better?*

Let them discuss in pairs. Be on hand for questions from the more literal thinkers.



Each of the questions above have got 'legs' – in other words, they could sustain a long discussion. Hearing their responses will give you and them a sense of what has captured their curiosity the most, so let them run with that. You might find the group figuring out a means of showing their appreciation for the numbers, or devising a new system of counting, or even debating whether we should accept them back!

## NEXT STEPS

Send pupils home with the question "Do numbers exist?" and see what you get the next day. There's several excellent articles on this: <http://www.philosophytalk.org/shows/what-are-numbers> and <https://welovephilosophy.com/2012/12/17/do-numbers-exist/> are particularly accessible, if you wish to connect your pupils ideas to history's.

Today was the day after the day after the day after the day that the numbers had gone on strike.

Everywhere was in chaos.

Computers had stopped working.

The trains didn't run on time, as there was no particular time for the trains to run on.

In the schools, maths lessons ground to a halt as the numbers refused to be added together, subtracted, multiplied or divided. Most of the letters had come out in sympathy and were refusing to participate in algebra.

The numbers refused to negotiate with anybody except the Prime Minister, who they felt would be sympathetic.

The meeting took place at his house in Downing Street. After an hour, and another hour, and some minutes, and some more minutes, the Prime Minister emerged to announce the demands of the numbers to the waiting press.

"It appears that this is not a dispute about pay or working conditions, although some of the smaller numbers do feel they work long hours and have to endure rough treatment from young children.

No, it seems that above all, the numbers wish to be properly appreciated and recognised. They feel that the position they used to enjoy as respected contributors to society has been lost. Much of their work is now carried out unseen, in computers and other machines. They feel that their hard work, consistency and attention to detail goes unnoticed.

In short, they feel that despite the important contribution they make to our well-being, they are taken for granted."

The waiting journalists, who would normally be phoning the Prime Minister's announcement through to their news desks, began the long trudge back to their offices.