

What does Philosophy Circles look like?



There are hundreds of ways to do a Philosophy Circles session

This narrative description shows one of many ways this session might have gone, and this session is one of many ways of doing Philosophy Circles. The other pdfs in these taster resources are session plans that use Philosophy Circles principles with a variety of activities on different topics. This session was for primary school children on a history topic, using an element of drama to bring the context to life.

Background: The children have been studying Ancient Rome

This session is an opportunity for them to think more deeply about the genius and flaws of Roman society, and to reflect on themes that still have relevance for us. First, the tables and chairs are pushed to sides to make room for a circle. You don't always have to do this – but you can't do the Circus Maximus without a circle!



First, a **Get Moving** opening. To get pupils engaged, talking and physically active at the start of the session, we imagine an all-against-all gladiatorial combat session. Volunteers model the weapons of the competitors. A metre ruler and a coat serve as the trident and net of the retiarius. Two shorter rulers are the swords of the diplomachus. The lid of a stacker box becomes the shield of a Thracian, and so on.



Which of these gladiators would be the last man standing? This is an example of a **Y-Question** – one where there are reasonable arguments to be made on either side. Just as the different fighting styles of the gladiators were chosen to provide a balanced and entertaining fight, so questions where no side can easily land a knock-out blow on the other make for interesting discussions. More serious issues will emerge later in the session.



The children discuss for a minute, and then go and stand by the gladiator they think would be victorious. The teacher moves around behind the clusters of supporters, asking pupils to 'tell them' why their choice would be the winner. That means the children are talking to one another, not directing their comments to the teacher – the beginnings of **Take A Back Seat**, the third Philosophy Circles principle. Some of the children are persuaded by the arguments they hear, and move to show they have change sides.

At the start of a Philosophy Circles session, these principles generally come into play in the order above. Get Moving gets them engaged, A Y-Questions creates challenge, and you Taking a Back Seat encourages independence. However, as we move to deeper themes, it's a merry dance of all three. Here's how this session proceeded:

A deeper question is introduced: *Why do people enjoy watching violent sport – gladiators for Romans, boxing and martial arts for us?* While they talk animatedly in pairs, the teacher moves outside the circle (**Take A Back Seat**). The teacher then chooses one person to speak, and a "pass-it-on" discussion follows, with each speaker choosing the next.

The teacher sometimes asks for clarity, or volunteers a relevant fact to provide background, but rather than putting his/her own ideas forward or leading the discussion, notes what is being said. There is no agenda about where the discussion has to go – "scribe don't script" (**Take A Back Seat**). Some think that if people want to watch violent sports, it should be their choice; others think such things should not be on television because of the risk of younger children seeing it. They have found their own **Y-Question** within the discussion.

There are then several comments about violent video games, and as the discussion seems to be heading in this direction, the teacher forms a final **Y-Question** for the group. *Should parents allow children to play games with older age certificates?* Notice that instead of creating his/her own question, the teacher uses one that emerges from the children – **Take A Back Seat** again.

The session ends with a final **Get Moving** opportunity, with the children standing on one side or the other to show their views on this final question. Some arguments ping-pong backwards and forwards, and there is still a buzz of interest and disagreement as they head off for break.