



SPHERE

Fostering Civil Discourse and Diverse Viewpoints for Every Classroom

Fair-Minded Critical Thinking and Listening

BY EREC SMITH AND KOBI NELSON

Overview

This lesson helps students understand the important role listening plays in conversations. Designed for a full 90-minute period or two 50-minute periods, the lesson begins with students co-creating a list of characteristics that show the differences between fair-minded critical thinking and self-interested critical thinking. Engaging in the Expert Panel Activity, students will practice evaluating their own listening patterns so that they can better understand when they are engaging in fair-minded or self-interested critical thinking. This activity is followed by an exercise in which students listen to a partner's interpretation of a challenging reading passage, practice asking for clarification, and build off that viewpoint with their own thoughts and opinions. Reflecting on their own experiences as listeners in 2 rhetorical situations, this lesson teaches students that listening is a key part of communication and civil discourse, particularly when engaging with a person who holds a different point of view.



Essential Questions

- What is the purpose of rhetoric?
- What's the value of rhetoric for civil discourse?
- How can rhetoric be a bridge that connects people with diverse viewpoints?

Materials

- Journal
- Whiteboard or chart paper
- 2 challenging reading passages (enough copies for each person in the class)

Learning Objectives

- Identify characteristics of fair-minded critical thinking and self-interested critical thinking
- Analyze one's ability to engage in fair-minded critical thinking
- Explain why it is important to restate one's understanding of another's ideas
- Evaluate one's ability to listen and respond in a fair-minded way

Warm-Up

Write on the board: What does it mean to be fair-minded? What does it mean to self-interested?

Have students write a response to these questions in their journals for 2–3 minutes.

DEBRIEF

Ask students to share their thoughts with a partner. Then, ask several students to share with the entire class.

Explore

Transition to a whole-class discussion by drawing a T-chart on the board. One side should have the heading "Fair-minded." The other side should have the heading "Self-interested." Brainstorm with students the characteristics that show a person who is thinking in a fair-minded way and a person who is thinking in a self-interested way.

Some characteristics that students might offer include the following:

Fair-minded	Self-interested
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looks at all sides of an issue • Doesn't let their beliefs or interests cloud their judgment • Uses the same standards for everyone • Puts oneself in another's shoes • Tries to understand different viewpoints even if they don't agree • Judges ideas based on evidence, not on what a particular community thinks • Looks at all evidence before making up their mind 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only accepts evidence that serves one's beliefs or viewpoint • Ignores evidence that challenges one's viewpoint • Pays attention only to evidence that benefits them personally • Forms opinions based on personal benefit instead of what's true • Is very critical of opposing viewpoints and easily accepting of similar viewpoints • Judges ideas based on whether or not they come from their own community

Have students document or take notes on the list of characteristics you co-create. They will need this information for the next exercise.

Activity 1: The Expert Panel Activity

STEP 1

Ask for 4–5 volunteers to serve as experts on a low-stakes topic. You can select the topic for each panelist, or you can have your experts select from a list. Each panelist should have a different topic. Some suggested topics include the following:

- Best movie series (Marvel, Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, etc.)
- Most underrated TV show
- Best video game
- Best music genre
- Best streaming platform
- Best fast-food restaurant
- Best pizza toppings
- Best type of candy/soda
- Most valuable sport
- Most useful hobby
- Best book
- Most interesting fact about a sport
- Most enjoyable extracurricular activity

STEP 2

While your expert panelists are preparing their arguments, hand out a table like the one below. Have students fill in their classmates' names next to Student 1, Student 2, etc.

	Fair-minded thinking	Self-interested thinking
Student 1		
Student 2		
Student 3		
Student 4		
Student 5		

STEP 3

The audience listening to the expert panelists will be observing their own thoughts as each panelist speaks about their topic. Remind students to use the co-created list of critical thinking characteristics to identify moments they find themselves thinking in fair-minded ways and self-interested ways.

STEP 4

Each panelist speaks as an expert on their topic for 2 minutes as their classmates note their internal thinking during each speaker.

Note: To keep expert panelists involved when they are not speaking, hand them the same table the audience completes. They should notice their own fair-minded and self-interested thinking while the other experts are speaking.

DEBRIEF

Following this activity, create small groups of 3–5 students. Each group should debrief about the activity by answering the following questions:

- What expert topic challenged your listening skills the most? Why?
- Were you able to mentally ask more questions about topics you already knew something about or topics that were new to you?
- Did you notice yourself giving more attention to topics and/or experts who shared the same opinions or interests with you?

- When an expert shared something you disagreed with, what was your reaction?
- Did any topics trigger self-interested listening? What characteristics did you notice in yourself?
- Did you use any strategies to be more fair-minded when you found yourself being more self-interested? If so, what were they? If not, is there any strategy you wish you would have used?
- What surprised you most about your own listening habits?
- How might recognizing moments when you are engaging in self-interested thinking help you in other classes? How might it help you in your relationships with friends and/or family members?
- What did you learn about yourself as a listener through this activity?

Allow students to discuss these questions in their small groups. Then, conduct a whole-group discussion about the value of fair-minded thinking when listening to others with different viewpoints.

Note: If teaching a class that is shorter than a block period, this is a great place to stop and pick up again with Activity 2.

Activity 2: Listening to Understand

Draw students' attention back to the moments they had difficulty listening in a fair-minded way.

ASK

How would your listening and thinking have changed if you had been able to ask the experts questions?

Gather ideas from 3–4 students. Guide students to think about the kind of questions that would be best to ask someone who shares a different viewpoint.

Some examples are:

- Could you tell me more about . . . ?
- What evidence or experiences have led you to believe this?
- Could you clarify what you mean by . . . ?
- Can you help me understand what led you to this perspective?

STEP 1

Pair students. One partner should be Partner A, and one partner should be Partner B.

STEP 2

Give each pair a challenging passage from a textbook, article, or piece of literature. Ask each pair to read the passage independently.

STEP 3

During round 1, Partner A states what they believe the passage is about. You can provide sentence stems, such as “This passage seems to be about . . .” or “The most important point in this passage is . . .”

STEP 4

In round 2, Partner B practices stating their understanding of Partner A's response to the text. You might provide sentence stems, such as “What I hear you saying is . . .” or “I understand that you are saying . . .”

STEP 5

For round 3, Partner B builds on Partner A's understanding by saying, “Building off your understanding . . .” or “Your interpretation shows me . . .” or “After hearing your thoughts, I am thinking . . .”

STEP 6

Repeat steps 2–5 with another passage. Have Partner B begin by sharing their thoughts about the passage. Partner A will restate what Partner B says and build off Partner B's understanding.

DEBRIEF

After the activity, have students share their thoughts with one another and/or the whole class.

ASK

After engaging in this activity, what are your thoughts about the value of listening? What role does clarifying your understanding play in fair-minded critical thinking?

Closing the Lesson

Write the following questions on the board as an exit ticket or to prompt a whole-class discussion.

- What did you learn about your own listening and critical thinking habits today?
- What is 1 thing you would like to do to have stronger listening habits?
- How can you better ensure that you are engaging in fair-minded critical thinking when listening to others?
- How can listening help you better think for yourself? How can listening help you persuade others who may have different viewpoints?

Common Core State Standards

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1:** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D:** Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.3:** Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.