

NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL ETHICS BOWL

COACHING ADVICE! *

Welcome to the NHSEB! We are so excited that you are working with students to encourage them to think seriously and in an open-minded way about very difficult and important ethical dilemmas.

This guide is meant to share advice from experienced coaches. Visit nhseb.unc.edu for all kinds of additional resources. Please especially read our [Rules and Procedures](#) and our [Guidelines for Teams](#). Good luck and have fun!

1) How often do you and your students meet?

***It depends on how close we are to the competition. They do lots of draft work on their own when the cases come out. We meet one or two times a week regularly as a group. They often meet more outside of our "official" meeting--the local coffee shop does well as we get close to the Bowl.

***We begin meeting early in the year and invite new students to learn about ethics bowl. Then we meet once a month. As soon as the first set of cases is released, we start meeting about once a week. As the competition draws nearer, we add in as many practices as we need, and usually meet most days of the week prior to the bowl. Because team members are very busy with other clubs, we usually meet before school, so our meetings are usually 45 minutes.

***We meet once a week (currently every Thursday) at lunch. The week before Regionals, we have one or two long meetings outside of school where we review our notes and come to more definite conclusions about each case.

2) Is there a facilitator at meetings? Do you know in advance what you want to accomplish in a given meeting?

***In the past, we've covered one case per lunch meeting. We all read the case at the beginning, and then proceed to discuss the case for the rest of the meeting. We usually go through every study question to focus our discussion. A note-taker generally records a list of pros, cons, and larger ethical issues as we talk. The meetings are basically fun, open-ended discussions about the ethical dilemmas. As we get closer to Regionals, some meetings become scrimmages where we divide into 2 groups and simulate actual Ethics Bowl rounds. This year, we want to spend the first half of each meeting doing our usual open-ended discussions about the case. Then, we want to actually decide and write down how we would present the case in competition (i.e. what position we would take and how we would structure our argument). (There are also cookies at every single meeting.)

***We have a team captain who sets out a schedule for the meetings. She assigns cases to team members and they do extensive research on the cases they are given. Then at the meetings they usually discuss one case per meeting on the first round, then revisit each of the cases as many times as possible.

***I facilitate in-school meetings that occur once or twice a week. However, as mentioned before, they need to and often get together outside of school. Most early meetings are about becoming familiar with the cases. As we revisit them we try to outline the moral concepts, contours, and tensions in the cases that allow for different perspectives. After identifying these perspectives, they deliberate on what their position might be on a variety of questions that we've concluded are relevant to the case.

***Created in consultation with a variety of long-time coaches from across the nation. These coaches are public or private school teachers, graduate student volunteers, or high school students who lead their teams. Some have studied or even teach classes in philosophy, while others meet only after school and may or may not focus on moral philosophy as they prepare. There's no one right way to do it!**

3) A) What steps do you take with your team when preparing your position on any given case? B) What do you do from start to finish? C) What do you hope to have settled and familiar by the time your team goes to a Bowl?

***Central moral questions raised by the case; morally salient features of the case; moral implications of those features; what each major moral theory would have to say about the case; best points and arguments in favor of each position one could take on the central questions

***The first time they talk about each case, they discover if they initially agree on their positions. I would guess that about 2/3 of the time students agree. They create a Google doc on each case and they add information and/or discuss on the document and try to come to consensus. I listen to their discussions. If I feel like they are missing important aspects of the case, I ask them questions to guide their discussion. By the time the team goes to a Bowl, they have discussed each case several times (many times for the most challenging cases) and have outlined on their Google Doc the format of their discussion for that case. Each team member specializes in some aspect of each of the cases, based on their strengths. (For example, this last year S would introduce the team's position and provide an overview of their discussion. L would outline the stakeholders affected by each of the situations. M would provide and address counterarguments to the team's position. N & E would have special information/research/perspectives on each of the cases, if necessary. Then S would wrap up the discussion.) They used the same format for each of their discussions.

***We mainly discuss and argue our personal thoughts for each case. We always have teammates playing devil's advocate to balance out the discussion. Our main source of preparation is discussing answers to the study questions. In the past, we have relied on team members to improvise points in competition, hopefully prepared by our weekly discussions. For better or for worse, we use our meetings to give team members practice thinking and talking about ethical cases, instead of preparing outlines for our presentations.

4) Do you teach philosophy or ethics in some way to your team as you prepare for NHSEB competitions? If so, how do you do that? What sources or methods do you use?

***Note from the NHSEB's Guidelines for Teams: 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.

***Although I teach lots of philosophy, we don't go heavy on moral theory in ethics bowl. We do use the language and understanding of different approaches (utilitarian, ethics of care, virtue ethics, deontology) to serve as conceptual placeholders for discussion and analysis.

***When there are questions that suggest discussions that have long been addressed in philosophy, since I don't have much of a philosophy background, I research online to find out what others have said about the topic. I may give a mini-lesson on what I discover, but mostly I just ask the team members questions and allow them to figure out what they want to say about the issue. Sometimes students will bring in articles or suggest videos that the team shares and discusses.

5) The NHSEB encourages improvisation and flexibility in difficult conversations about challenging ethical dilemmas. Teams can change their position in dialogue with the other team in a match or with judges during the Q&A period. Do you use any particular methods to practice or cultivate such skills?

***We practice actively listening to opposing arguments and incorporating new information into the team's position. When they practice, I sometimes have them divide into opposing teams and spontaneously discuss ethical questions other than the ones in the packet. They practice collaboration and civility during these discussions. I play the role of judge during practices and ask they follow up questions when they practice.

***First, I make sure that when we're preparing each case, students are forced to identify and reckon with the best arguments for the opposing position. Second, we do mock practice rounds. The best way to learn a skill is by practicing precisely that skill in conditions as close to the real competition as possible! I try to remind them constantly that if you think a case is easy or the answer is obvious, you're probably not thinking hard enough about it.

6) Any advice for new NHSEB coaches who might feel overwhelmed?

***Come up with an overall game plan for the whole season up front. Come up with a general plan for each practice session in a few days before that session. Use backwards planning--figure out your goal for each session, and then design activities around achieving that goal. Remember that NHSEB is supposed to be a learning experience for the students, and they learn when they are having fun. Be flexible, and laugh with the students--don't panic if things don't go according to plan. Also, don't be too hard on yourself. You will become a better coach with each year of experience.

***Give yourself and your team plenty of time to discuss each of the cases. Be sure somebody records the team's thinking (one of my students liked to record the discussions on her phone and then she would type info into their Google Doc). It should be a lot more work for the team members than it is for you--I see the coach's job as getting the students to think more deeply about the topics by asking questions that get the team to think about things from a different perspective or through a different lens. I read through each of the cases and just jot down my thoughts. Then I listen as the team discusses each case and I just ask them questions to make sure they think about the points that came to mind for me.

***Get through it once, revise. Do it a second time. The third time you will know what you are doing. And you will realize that in each instance of working with the students in preparation or in a competition, that it has dramatically benefitted them. Ethics Bowl has been the highlight of most of my students' high school career even though they do many, many other things that are very important and rich experiences. There is just something about preparing the cases together--they get to know each other better than they know some of their closest friends. Invite students to bring friends to meetings--this ensures that many of the conversations will continue in places outside of the classroom. Find curricular connections whether it be in the classes that students take or the clubs that they are involved in. It is important to find the niches of students who may be interested (and benefited) in doing work with moral thought.

Many thanks to the coaches who generously offered their insights!

For more information, please visit nhseb.unc.edu -- for guides, resources, videos, audio, and official documents.

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