



*A  
Great Teacher  
tells  
step by step  
how  
to teach  
Great Ideas*

---

## REVIVE THE CLASSICS

**Mortimer Adler**

**A**T WHAT AGE can the human mind become engaged in the consideration of ideas in a way that inculcates disciplined thinking about those ideas and also enriches their understanding? In short: How old do students have to be to benefit from courses in philosophy?

In my judgment, and in the light of my experience, the answer is: between the ages of 12 and 18; as early as possible, the earlier the better; but certainly by the last three years of high school.

Let me say a word about my own experience in this matter. Many years ago—back in the 1930s—Robert Maynard Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, and I were invited by the principal of the university's Laboratory School to conduct a great books course for eleventh and twelfth graders. In the course of two years, we read with them and discussed the same books that we had been teaching to juniors and seniors in college. In our judgment, the

younger students were just as good, if not better. As Hutchins quipped, they had the advantage of being exposed to less schooling of the ordinary sort; their minds were less stultified; their response, fresher.

In recent years, I have had even more striking and encouraging experiences. At the invitation of Ruth Love, then superintendent of schools in Oakland, Calif., I conducted five two-hour seminars on the Declaration of Independence; Plato's *Apology*; Aristotle's *Politics*, Book I, together with Rousseau's *Social Contract*, Book I; Machiavelli's *The Prince*; and *Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels.

All of these works are on the reading list of the Executive Seminars I have been conducting at the Aspen Institute for 30 years. The best way I can describe my Oakland experience, and a similar experience I had last summer at Aspen with a mixed group of youngsters between the ages of 12 and 18, is that the young did the reading and carried on the discussion of these books every bit as well and in some respects much better than their seniors, most of whom hold top executive positions in our major corporations.



I have one more experience to relate. Last May, a group of high school students on the Eastern Shore of Maryland volunteered to read a recent book of mine that was intended for the young as well as their elders—*Six Great Ideas*, dealing with truth, goodness, and beauty, and liberty, equality, and justice. They volunteered to meet with me in six two-hour seminar sessions for the discussion of each of these six ideas. They did remarkably well. They found nothing in the book unintelligible. They asked penetrating questions, raised reasonable objections, debated difficult issues.

In all these instances, I must add, the 25 or 30 students in the group were either average or slightly above average. They were not top-flight geniuses by any means. They represented a fair sampling of the middle and upper thirds of the normal distribution curve.

I firmly believe that all of us tend to underestimate the intelligence of the young and the power of the human mind at any level except the subnormal. I, therefore, also believe that I could conduct the same kind of seminars with students in the lower third of the normal distribution curve for intelligence *if* those students had demonstrated proficiency in reading.

What are the essential ingredients for setting up such seminars involving great books and great ideas and aiming at intellectual discipline and philosophical thought? Let me first, enumerate the external conditions that must be present for these seminars:

1. The group should consist of no more than 20 or 25 students, aged anywhere from 12 to 18, all of whom are able to read above the sixth grade level.
2. The seminar must run for at least two hours. It cannot be conducted in the usual 50-minute class session.
3. The participants must be seated around a table arrangement—a hollow square—large enough to accommodate all of them comfortably and in a way that enables them to see one another as well as the moderator and to talk around the table and across it. Such seminars cannot be conducted in ordinary classrooms with a teacher standing in front of the room and the students sitting in rows in front of the instructor.
4. The so-called “teacher” or “instructor” should not regard himself as a teacher or instructor in the usual sense of those words. To do so is to fail miserably. For such seminars to be successful, they must be carried on as discussions among equals with the leader or moderator of the discussion superior only in the following respects: a little older; a little better reader, having done more reading; and possessing a better disciplined mind.

These points of superiority should never become too manifest or the seminar will degenerate from a discussion among equals, which it should be, into a didactic session in which teacher tells students what he knows or understands and acts as if they were there to imbibe his views without questioning them.

The discussion leader or moderator must imitate Socrates especially the calculated irony with which Socrates pretends not to know the right answers to the questions that are the backbone of the ongoing inquiry, in which Socrates himself is simply the principal inquirer, first among equals.

5. Finally, what is needed for such seminars are reading materials that satisfy the following conditions: (A) The materials should be, unlike text-books, over the heads of the students so that they have to struggle and stretch to understand them; (B) they should be relatively short in length, seldom more than 50 pages for a given occasion and usually fewer than 30, so that they can be read through a number of times very carefully, marked and annotated; (C) although short in length, they must be very rich in content, so that the topics they discuss and the issues they raise will support two hours of discussion; (D) they must, therefore, be essentially philosophical texts, not merely factual or informational (that is, they must deal with ideas and raise questions that never can be answered by empirical or experimental investigation, by historical research, or by going to an encyclopedia to look up the facts or get the information). In other words, the reading and discussion should aim at improved understanding, not increased knowledge.

If all five of these external requirements cannot be fully satisfied, there is no point in undertaking such seminars.

If the administration of a school is so inflexible that it cannot break through its rigid routine of 50-minute class sessions conducted in ordinary classrooms, that school is no place for such seminars.

If instructors cannot be found who are willing to give up being teachers in the ordinary sense (teachers who teach by telling instead of by asking), or if instructors cannot be found who are willing to try to imitate Socrates, then such seminars should not be attempted.

I greatly fear that there are many schools—too many—that cannot or will not meet all the conditions I have laid down. But there are no schools at all anywhere in our country in which some of the conditions do not already exist or cannot be fulfilled. In any school system, there are always enough students who can participate profitably in such seminars, and the reading materials required are always available.

I now come to the heart of the matter. If all the external conditions I have mentioned are fully satisfied, what remains to be specified is the role of the moderator of such seminars. What should he or she do, and how should he or she do it?

1. First and most important of all, the moderator must prepare for such seminars by reading the work assigned as carefully as possi-

ble, with pencil in hand, underlining all the crucial words whose precise meaning must be kept in mind; marking the pivotal sentences or paragraphs in which the author states his underlying theses succinctly, argues for them, or raises questions about them; and making marginal notes of all sorts about the connections between one part of the text and another.

2. Next, the moderator must make a series of random notes about all the important points, questions, and issues that occur to him as materials for discussion.

3. Then, carefully examining these random notes, the moderator should put down a very small number of questions, phrased with the greatest of care, that are to be the backbone of a two-hour discussion. Sometimes just one question will suffice for the whole two hours; sometimes three or four are needed; seldom, if ever, more than five.

If more than one, the questions must then be ordered so that the first opens up matter to be further explored by the second; the second leads to further explorations by the third question; and so on. In addition, the questions must be such that everyone in the group can be called upon to answer them, and the best opening question is one that every-one around the table is required to answer in succession.

4. The moderator must never be satisfied with the answers given. The moderator must always ask, Why? No answer must be allowed to go by without having reasons offered in its support.

5. The moderator should never allow any student, even one who appears to be thinking and trying to answer the question, to get away with slovenly speech—speech that is no more than a gurgle of words flung at the question with the hope that some of them may hit the target.

The moderator relentlessly should demand that a student's answer to a question should be phrased so that it aims at the bull's-eye; that the student's statement is grammatically correct in every detail; that the student speak in clearly defined sentences and even in well-formulated paragraphs.

Above all, the moderator should never allow a single critical word to be used ambiguously or loosely. No one can legislate about how words should be used; but if two students use a given word in different senses, or if a student uses a word used by the author or by

the moderator in a different sense, that difference in senses should be plainly recognized and labeled before the discussion proceeds another inch.

6. The moderator should insist upon relevance in the answering of the questions asked. By this I mean no more than that the student must attempt to answer the question, not simply respond to it by blurting out whatever happens to be on his or her mind at the time

A question addressed to a student is not like the ringing of a bell that indicates to the student that it is now his or her turn to speak and invites him or her to say anything he or she wishes, whether it is an answer to the question or not.

7. If it appears from the way the question is being answered that the students do not really understand the question, the moderator must repeat the question in as many different ways as possible in an effort to be sure that the question is uniformly understood by all. There is no point in going on unless that is accomplished. The moderator might have to use a wide variety of concrete examples to make the question clear.

Asking the same question in a variety of ways and accompanying it by a diversity of illustrations requires great intellectual energy upon the part of the moderator. Conducting seminars is far from being an easy or passive performance in which the moderator acts merely as chairman of a meeting and at which the participants, are invited to say anything they have on their minds.

8. As the discussion gets going, conflicting answers to a given question will begin to emerge, and then the moderator must make everyone explicitly aware of the issue that is being joined. Unless the conflict is clearly formulated and fully understood, debate of the issue cannot be carried on.

To aid such formulation and debate, the moderator should use the chalkboard, putting on it some form of schematic diagram that frames the issue and indicates the opposing positions on it, so that the students can identify the position they are taking or the view they are defending.

After conducting several seminars on the same bit of reading, the moderator often will be able to anticipate key issues, construct appropriate diagrams, and put them on the chalkboard before the discussion begins. When thus presented in a schematic form, the diagrams will employ symbols that will at first appear to be mere hi-

eroglyphics to the student but will become intelligible after the discussion has reached a certain point.

9. The seminar should not attempt to reach conclusions about which everyone agrees. On the contrary, it should leave the students with an understanding of questions to be answered and problems to be solved. The understanding of the questions and of the range of answers they elicit are the important thing, not this or that answer, however true or profound.

10. In a succession of seminars with a group of students, whatever understanding has been achieved in an earlier session should be used in dealing with questions or issues raised in later sessions. Therefore, a useful ordering of the reading materials is just as important as the proper selection of them in the first place.

11. The moderator must never talk down to the students or treat them as most teachers do when the teachers are sitting in front of a class in 50-minute sessions. The moderator must make the greatest effort to understand what is going on in the mind of another human being who, even though much younger, is struggling to understand something that is difficult for anyone, including the moderator, to understand.

12. The moderator must be patient and polite in dealing with everyone around the table, as patient and polite as one should be with guests at one's dinner table. The moderator should try to set an example of intellectual etiquette that the participants are induced to imitate. Above all, the moderator should conduct the whole discussion with a smile and try to produce laughter at as many points as possible. Nothing is more productive of learning than wit and laughter.


I have been conducting such seminars with students of all ages and with adults for more than 50 years. It takes a long time to learn how to do it well. But how does one *begin* to learn it?

By watching someone else do it well. I began to learn by watching my first great books teacher, John Erskine, do it supremely well when I was a junior and senior at Columbia University in 1921-23. I admired his performance and tried to imitate him. That—plus repeated efforts in trying to conduct seminars well, often failing and learning how to correct one's errors—is the only way anyone can become an effective moderator of such seminars.

Though in the foregoing section I appear to have laid down 12

rules of pedagogy for the conduct of such seminars, no one will be able to follow the rules just by remembering them and resolving to conform to them. Good intentions to that effect will get no one anywhere.

Knowing the rules of pedagogy and understanding why they should be followed is helpful, of course, but without observing a model in operation and without a sincere willingness to try to imitate it, the would-be moderator never will learn how to do the job.

How can a model of this sort become widely observable? Television is the answer: That is why I am planning to record on film a series of five seminars that I am going to conduct for high school students in Chicago at the invitation of Superintendent Ruth Love. If those sessions are as good an exemplification of the process as the seminars I conducted for her in Oakland, and if they are effectively recorded on videotape, a pretty good model to be observed and imitated will be available for circulation to all the school systems of this country. 

### **Musts for the well-read kid**

Here is a list of reading materials, arranged in roughly chronological order, from which different selections can be made and set in different sequences, depending on the number of seminars that are to be conducted:

**Plato, *The Apology* and *The Republic*, Books I and II**

**Aristotle, *Ethics*, Book I, and *Politics*, Book I, together with Rousseau, *Social Contract*, Book I**

**Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, together with Epictetus, *Enchiridion***

**Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, Books I-IV**

**Plutarch's *Lives*, Alexander and Caesar**

**Augustine, *Confessions*, Books I-VIII**

**Montaigne, *Essays* (selected essays, all short)**

**Machiavelli, *The Prince* (selected chapters, short)**

**Locke, *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, Chapters I-V**

**The Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution**



of the United States, and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

Hamilton, Madison, Jay, *The Federalist*, Chapters I-X

J. S. Mill, *Essay on Representative Government* (selected chapters)

Melville, *Billy Budd*, together with Sophocles, *Antigone*

---

*This article appeared in the January 1983 issue of The American School Board, pgs 30-32.*

---

---

## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

**Kathleen Boland**

**Joseph Breckenridge**

**Marie DeNino**

**Johnny Pope**

---

---

## THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the  
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS  
Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann  
Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor  
E-mail: [TGIdeas@speedsite.com](mailto:TGIdeas@speedsite.com)  
Homepage: <http://www.thegreatideas.org/>

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.  
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.