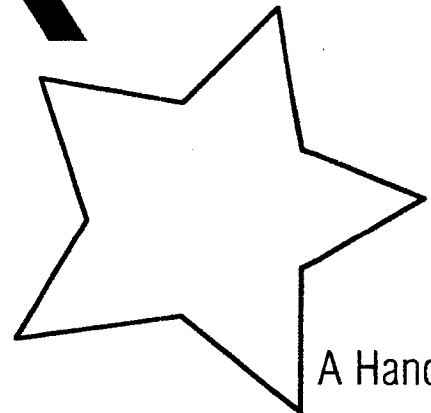


How to Run a Junior State



Thought Talk



A Handbook

HOW TO RUN A JUNIOR STATE THOUGHT TALK

Whether with a group of ten students in a chapter meeting or with a group of 100 students at a convention, a thought talk is one of the most accessible forums in which students can share their ideas. Thought talks are often less daunting than debates tend to be, but there is a great deal of work that must go into their organization. This handbook is designed to guide you in doing that, so that everyone will emerge from your thought talk having had the opportunity to think critically about the issues affecting their world.

THE BASICS

What is a thought talk?

A thought talk is an open discussion about an important issue, and serves as a comfortable atmosphere in which everyone can articulate their ideas. Less structured than a debate, a thought talk offers everyone a chance to speak, and allows the participants to take the discussion in a direction that they would like to explore. This does not, however, mean that a thought talk is a complete free-for-all, or that the moderator does not serve a purpose. If anything, a moderator of the thought talk has a bigger job than a moderator of a debate! To moderate an effective thought talk, one has to be creative, well-researched, focused and flexible.

What do I need?

One of the wonderful things about thought talks is that they are fairly easy to coordinate. Besides a topic and a strong moderator (both of which we will address in detail later), all you really need is a setting in which everyone can sit comfortably and see and hear each other easily. You may want to have copies of background information on your topic to hand out to the participants, and you will definitely want to have your own notes on the subject with you. You may want to have prepared and distributed the thought talk topic with an explanatory paragraph to participants beforehand, so that they have an opportunity to think about the issue, and research it if they wish.

How does it work?

In a traditional thought talk, the moderator introduces the topic and provides a brief explanation. Then, participants share their thoughts and feelings on the topic by raising their hands and being called on by the moderator. The thought talk should flow like a conversation, with the moderator asking questions or posing arguments from time to time to encourage the participants to think critically about all aspects of the topic, and to keep the group focused.

What makes a good moderator?

A good moderator directs the discussion by controlling who speaks without getting involved, and does everything in his or her power to make the thought talk substantive.

CHOOSING A TOPIC

In choosing a topic for your thought talk, you must take into consideration a number of factors that cause certain thought talk topics to be more successful than others. For example, you should not select a topic so broad or so complex that you spend half of the thought talk explaining its intricacies to the group, but it would be similarly disastrous to select a topic that the group will exhaust within ten minutes.

Put some thought into selecting an issue that is pertinent, and do not be afraid to stir up dissent. The entire purpose of a thought talk is to allow students to explore all aspects of their beliefs, and to challenge them to support their views. It should be noted, however, that a moderator should keep conversation about sensitive topics from straying into the offensive. Everyone should feel comfortable discussing their views on the topic.

Try to choose a topic creatively enough that participants will leave the thought talk having been exposed to new ideas and information, but at the same time, avoid choosing a topic so obscure that the participants may have a hard time contributing intelligently to the conversation. Choose something that the group can explore in depth, and be prepared to lead them from one end of an issue to another.

Be sure to phrase your thought talk topic clearly, concisely, and specifically - It is a good idea to present the topic in the form of a question. The following are a few excellent examples. Refer to Appendix A at the end of this handbook for more ideas.

- Are campaign donations protected by freedom of expression?
- What is the "American dream" of today?
- Should public schools be allowed to impose dress codes?
- What can we do about global overpopulation?
- What issues will shape the American presidency of the future?
- Should the United States adopt a system of school vouchers?
- How can we strike a balance between liberty and security?
- Just how perfect are we? Comparing the United States to other countries

Obviously, you cannot expect everyone to have extensive knowledge of your topic. As such, after you have selected your topic, it is a good idea to compose and distribute a page explaining the issue and the arguments surrounding it in three or four paragraphs. You may also choose to have a few participants research the issue a few days in advance and present the opposing viewpoints before you move into the discussion.

MODERATING A THOUGHT TALK

Moderating a thought talk is more than simply explaining the topic and calling on participants who want to contribute. Thought talk moderating requires knowledge of the issue and skill at leading the group in thinking critically. It is also an exceptionally enjoyable experience, as it allows the moderator to explore an issue from all perspectives and share their knowledge with their peers.

Maintaining the flow of conversation

Aside from the research and critical thinking necessary to lead a strong thought talk, it is the job of the moderator to maintain an open forum in which students can share their ideas. The moderator should keep the conversation flowing and allow everyone to be heard. Sometimes, in a small group, you can simply ask participants to interject whenever they have a point to make and no one else is speaking, but in larger groups or in groups in which one person might otherwise dominate the discussion, it is a good idea to have people raise their hands for you to call on them. Try to keep discussion limited to the topic of the thought talk, and ask questions from time to time to direct the conversation to another aspect of the problem. Be informative - do not be afraid to share your knowledge on the issue when appropriate, and to play "devil's advocate" when necessary.

Providing background

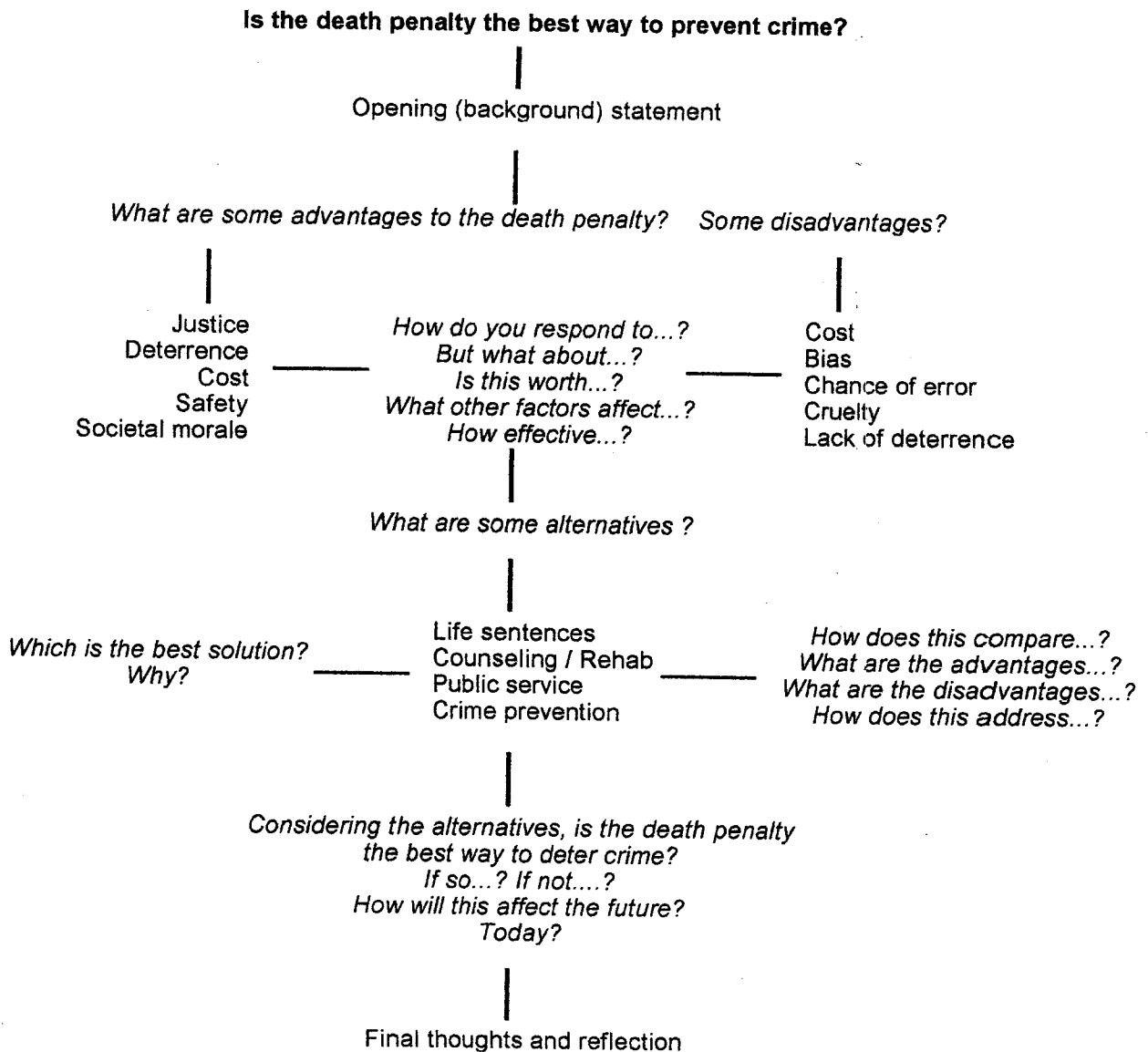
As the moderator, it is your job to bring the factual base to the discussion. Research, research, research! Learn all aspects of the problem, and present it to the group. Of course, it is important to talk with the group rather than at them, but your guidance may very well make all the difference between a valuable thought talk and a wasted hour. Provide a brief background of the problem before you begin, and then as the thought talk goes on, bring up various aspects of the issue that might not otherwise be thought of or addressed. Share something new with the participants, and challenge them to think. Become an expert on the issue to the extent that you can answer factual questions about the topic. The following is a sample topic and the sorts of facts and questions that you need to be familiar with.

The Death Penalty

- There are five methods of execution in use in North America: hanging, lethal injection, electric chair, gas chamber, and firing squad.
- 13,000 people have been executed in the US since colonial times
- The Supreme Court banned the practice in 1972
- In 1976, the court repealed its 1972 moratorium and left the decision up to the states
- Few sentences warrant the federal death penalty. About 20 prisoners are housed on federal death row
- By 1997, only 12 states did not have the death penalty: Alaska, Hawaii, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.
- About 90% of all executions in the United States since the reinstatement of the death penalty have occurred in five southern states: Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, and Virginia
- The homicide rate in states with the death penalty is nearly double that of states without the death penalty.
- From 1976 to 1996, the number of executions in the country has increased from 0 to just under 60, while the homicide rate per 100,000 population has remained at just under 10
- Over 99% of federal death penalty recipients are male, and about 90% are minorities

Going somewhere

Sometimes even carefully planned thought talks end up going around in circles. It is your job to prevent this from happening. At the beginning of the thought talk, you should have provided the group with a summary of the topic. Then, you might start off by asking a general question before you move into specific material. It is just fine if the group directs the conversation down a path that they would like to explore, but be sure that conversation is relevant and thoughtful. It is a good idea to have a series of questions prepared in a logical order leading the participants from one end of the issue to another. While you cannot be expected to explore every aspect of the issue in depth, try to touch on the major points in a way that may cast a new light on the issue. Know where your thought talk is headed, and keep that in mind throughout the discussion. At the end, you may want to briefly review the issue and discuss where it could be headed in the future, what the applications are to the participants, or what can be done about the problems surrounding it. Here is an example of how your conversation might flow:



Listening

Even with all of the research you have done on the issues surrounding your thought talk, odds are that you are going to hear some ideas that you have not thought of before. Be open to them, and enjoy it! The opportunity to join your peers in tackling some of the biggest questions of today is not necessarily a common one.

BASIC OUTLINE

Although the structure of the thought talk is largely determined by the direction in which the participants choose to take the discussion, the basic format of a standard thought talk should be similar to the following:

1. Introduction of moderator and topic
2. Introduction of common arguments
3. General group comments
4. Moderator questions
5. Group responses and comments
6. Summary of issue (looking at the big picture)

*Because there is often not enough time to have everyone introduce themselves at the beginning of the activity, remind everyone to introduce themselves by name and school before they make a comment

ALTERNATE FORMS OF THOUGHT TALKS

Aside from the traditional style of thought talk, there are a few other formats that you can use to address specific problems or to offer a new spin on things. Some of these require a little more coordination on the part of the moderator, but they are interesting ways to tackle the problems that might be tougher to address in the standard thought talk format.

Problem Solving Forum

Problem solving forums are thought talks in which the topic is a problem in your community, your country, or your world, and the goal is to come up with new and innovative solutions to that problem. The closer a problem is to home, the more interested your participants are likely to be in solving it, and the more feasible it may be for you to put your plans into action. If you are holding a problem solving forum at your school, try tackling a problem in your school district and presenting your solution to the school board. Whatever the problem that you choose to address, you should begin the forum by explaining the problem and its importance, then open to discussion of the problem and possible solutions. Near the end, you should work on developing the possible solutions into specific plans of action. Record them, and consider publicizing them or, better yet, carrying them out.

Socratic Circle

Socratic circle seminars are based on the practices of the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, who believed that one can learn more by asking than by telling or by being told. As

such, in a Socratic circle seminar, the moderator refrains from commenting extensively on the topic and instead simply explains the seminar as a forum in which everyone is equal and there are no right or wrong answers, with the goals of thinking in new ways, challenging yourself and others to think analytically, and seeking understanding rather than making decisions. Then, the moderator should explain that he or she is not going to lead the discussion, but that it is up to the participants to do so. The participants should ask questions of themselves and the group to seek a greater understanding of the topic. The moderator should refrain from stepping in unless the group becomes unruly or he or she has a question to pose to help his or her own understanding of the issue.

Ethics Workshop

An ethics workshop is a thought talk in which the group does not address a single topic, but rather a series of ethical situations. For an ethics workshop, the moderator should prepare a series of ethical questions with background paragraphs, and distribute them to the group. The following is a good example. You can find more in Appendix B in the back of this handbook.

Francis Coleman is a Republican from South Carolina who has been elected to the United States House of representatives, running on the slogan *responsive and responsible leadership*. A week into his term, Rep. Coleman faces legislation calling for the ban of public advertising of tobacco products. Eighty-two percent of his district is opposed to the bill, the passage of which could lead to large-scale layoffs in the tobacco industry. On the other hand, Rep. Coleman's own mother died of lung cancer as a result of smoking, and he has spoken with many others who have suffered similarly. How should Rep. Coleman cast his vote? Should he be "responsive" and vote against the bill as the majority of his district would expect, or should he be "responsible" and vote in favor of the bill to help stop something that he feels is harmful?

After the group has read over the paragraph together, the moderator should lead a discussion on the situation, asking questions about the problem and encouraging the group to think critically. Encourage participants to share their solutions to the problem, without insisting of consensus. With ethical situations, there are no right or wrong answers, but everyone must carefully assess the situation before they come to a conclusion. Have three or four situations prepared, but do not rush the group to get all of the situations into the allotted time. Encourage the group to discuss one situation until they are comfortable with their decisions, but do not let the discussion get repetitive or off track.

Film Discussion

A film discussion is a fun spin on the traditional thought talk, giving participants an opportunity to share their thoughts on a series of film clips shown to them by the moderator. Although this can be more casual than a normal thought talk, be careful to make sure that the discussion is relevant. Choose a topic and short clips from three or four films that address it. Open the discussion by introducing the topic and explaining the relevance of each of the films. Preface each film clip by telling the group what to watch for and think about, and then follow each clip with discussion of the clip as it relates to the overall topic of

your film discussion. Be careful to choose film clips that are truly relevant to the topic, and to avoid offensive material.

TROUBLESHOOTING

Thought talks can be challenging for even the most skilled moderators, and sometimes the unforeseen can throw you. Don't panic! The following are some quick solutions to problems that you may encounter while moderating your thought talk:

Conversation dies

If the group seems to run out of things to say, ask a new question. Alternately, you can share your own thoughts, or ideas that you disagree with that you think might evoke a response. If the group continues to be quiet, call on a specific person and ask for their thoughts. Odds are, once the group hits upon an aspect of the issue that they are interested in, conversation will pick up again.

The group gets unruly

Remind everyone that they need to raise their hands to be able to speak. Do not acknowledge participants who speak out of turn. Reiterate that participants need to be sure that their comments are appropriate and that they must respect everyone and their opinions. If a single agitator continues to persist, you can politely ask him or her to leave the thought talk.

Discussion gets repetitive or off topic

Ask a question to bring the focus of the discussion back to the topic, or ask about something that has yet to be addressed. If the group continues to stray off onto an irrelevant tangent, nicely remind them that they are here to discuss the topic, and that the group only has a limited amount of time in which to do so.

One person dominates the discussion

Remind everyone that this is an open forum, and that you encourage everyone to share their views. Ask the person who is dominating nicely to allow others a chance to speak, and then call on someone who has yet to share their ideas.

APPENDIX A

More Thought Talk Topics

Hot Topics

- Is Feminism dead?
- Did God create man, or did man create God?
- Is human cloning ethical?
- Is war the only way to energize America?
- What rights should students have at school?

Social Issues

- What is the appropriate relationship between religion and schools?
- What, if anything, distinguishes hate crimes from other crimes?
- What should be done to save the ailing American foster care system?
- Should homosexual couples be granted the right of legal marriage?
- Should school districts have the right to ban certain books?

Foreign Policy

- How effective are US sanctions on Iraq?
- Should the United States have open borders with Canada and Mexico?
- Should the United States withdraw from the United Nations?
- Should nations known to condone human rights violations (such as China) be eligible for US foreign aid?
- Should a Palestinian state be established?

Economics

- How can we strike a balance between economic growth and environmental protection?
- Do the advantages of a global economy outweigh the disadvantages?
- What, if any, role should the government have in regulating business?
- How should we go about resolving wage inequities for women and minorities?
- Could Socialism be successful in America?

Political Theory

- Does Machiavellian theory still apply today?
- Why does the two party system prevail in America?
- Can an Anarchist society feasibly exist?
- Are there advantages to political gridlock?
- Can democracy go too far?

APPENDIX B

More Ethical Situations

Diplomacy and Ethics

You work for a humanitarian organization which is involved in providing medical supplies for youth in war-torn countries. Unfortunately, safe passage into these countries is difficult due to the volatile political climate. In recent months, it has become apparent that the pilot of the helicopter that delivers medical supplies will need to pay a guerilla fighter guard to ensure safe passage of himself and the supplies to the village in need. The United States is explicitly against these guerillas. Should you tip the guard to help the children, or cease your deliveries in order to avoid aiding the enemy?

Familial Ethics

You are particularly close to your older brother, and growing up, the two of you were faithful allies. In recent years, however, the two of you have remained in communication but have grown apart as he has gotten increasingly involved in cocaine use and dealing, and through this, an underground prostitution ring. Your brother was arrested last month under charges of possession with intent to sell and involvement in prostitution. You have been called to court to testify. Without your testimony, the prosecution's case is weak. Should you honor familial obligations and lie under oath, or honor legal obligations and tell the truth?

Workplace Ethics

You run a small but promising internet company. Although pay and benefits are good and the work is interesting, your most talented programmer, Anne, is looking for employment elsewhere. Anne is aware of how highly you regard her and asks for your recommendation. You think that Anne would love to work on the new project that you plan to launch next month, and you hate to see her go. Should you write a poor recommendation in order to keep Anne at your company, or should you recommend her highly for the other job, which you think would be ill suited for her?

Media Ethics

You are the editor of the student newspaper at your school. Through some excellent investigative journalism on your part, you become aware that your principal is seriously considering accepting funding for a new gymnasium from a corporate sponsor. The sponsor has a sketchy past, including a sexual harassment suit from a young female employee who was a recent graduate of your school. You believe that the student body should be aware of this pending decision and should have a say in the process. The principal has threatened to pull all funding to the newspaper if you print the story before he has announced the decision himself. The staff advisor for the paper, who is unaware of the situation, has always left the decision of what is appropriate to print up to you. You have made difficult decisions of media ethics in the past and she has always stood behind you wholeheartedly. Should you trust your instinct that this is an important story and release it to the students, or should you respect the principal's wishes to keep the deal secret until it is finalized?