

Frequently Asked Questions

How does Ethics Bowl differ from debate?

In ethics bowl, teams are not required to pick opposing sides, nor is the goal to “win” the argument by belittling the other team or its position. Ethics Bowl is, at heart, a collaborative discussion during which the first team presents its analysis of a question about the ethical dilemma at the core of the case being discussed, offering support for its position but also considering the validity of other positions.

How many people on a team, and how many teams can participate?

Teams can have up to 7 members. A minimum of 3 and a maximum of 5 students participate in any single round. Teams composition can change between rounds but not once a round begins.

Who wins an Ethics Bowl Round?

The winning team is the one that is deemed having won the match by 2 of 3 judges. Total points does not determine the winning team.

What’s a good argument?

The goal is to demonstrate breadth and depth of thinking about difficult and important ethical situations. In fact, teams are rewarded for the degree to which they eschew adversarial positioning and instead adopt a more collegial, collaborative stance.

- *Teams are strongly encouraged to think of themselves as being on the same side rather than as opponents. That is, both teams are working together trying to solve a difficult problem—while impressing the judges with thoughtful, considered analysis and support. Listening to the other team with an aim to affirm, gently correct, supplement, or build on their argument is a prudent approach.*
- *These cases are hard. If they don’t appear hard, you’re not thinking about them hard enough. You can agonize over your decision, that’s the essence of ethical dilemmas. Ethics isn’t about right versus wrong; it’s about competing theories of right. Take time to explore all the possible arguments, and experience them. Let us know that this isn’t an easy exercise.*

Do we need to cite philosophers and ethical theories?

No. In fact, if you do, some judges won’t know what you’re talking about because they’re not all philosophers. In addition, being able to use philosophical jargon is not a requirement of a good answer, nor is it indicative of a poor answer. *The argument matters; it is not necessary to name the philosopher associated with the argument.* Keep in mind that a team is speaking to a broad audience: many judges have no formal background in philosophy or ethics, and may not understand your reference to “Kantianism.” A good strategy is to explain ethical reasoning in terms everyone can understand.

However, if a team member does refer to “deontology,” for example, make sure the reference is accurate. A judge may question you about it during the judges’ questioning

portion of the match. In short, remember that philosophical name-dropping is not a substitute for presenting a sound argument.

Theories didn't come first. No one woke up and said, "I'll invent deontology today." If a friend comes to you for advice, you don't start by saying, "Here's the utilitarian argument." You begin by thinking about people.

How much research does a team have to undertake?

Successful analyses will include a clear and detailed understanding of the facts of a case. Since cases are often highly complex, researching the topic or incident involved may be helpful. Although teams may use outside research to prepare for a match, they should not assume that merely presenting factual information will impress the judges. Teams need to propose valid, sound, persuasive arguments that are buttressed by fact to score well. If a team introduces a specific fact not contained in the case, the team should cite the source (e.g. "according to a 2011 article in National Geographic...").

When researching cases, teams should think of this as an opportunity to gather and assess arguments supporting a wide range of points of view rather than to seek only those sources that support opinions the team already holds. As team members analyze the range of arguments, they should strive to get inside the heads of those who have different beliefs than the ones with which they are familiar. What motivates people to have certain beliefs? What are their values? A team should also ask, "Why is this case hard?" If it doesn't seem hard, it is a good sign a team is not probing deeply enough. The cases are supposed to challenge worldviews. Asking questions like these will help a team solidify its own position.

Can we change our minds?

On occasion, team members may discover that they want to modify or perhaps change an aspect of their initial "position" as a result of the second team's commentary. Some judges may think this indicates that the team did not fully think through its initial position. However, because the ethics bowl is about ethical inquiry, and because changing one's mind can be considered a sign of fluid rather than crystallized intelligence – a hallmark of higher-order thinking – *changing or modifying a position is not necessarily negative.*

What can I bring to the EB?

You don't need to bring anything except a pen, though pens will be available. You'll also receive scrap paper and copies of the cases and questions. You can't bring any device that connects to the Internet. You can bring any other non-internet timepiece but only the moderator will keep official time.

What should I wear?

Avoid the winter equivalent of shorts and flip-flops. Some wear suits, some don't. Business casual.

What awards are presented?

Trophies are presented to:

- winning team
- second place team
- two teams that were in the semifinals but didn't advance.

There are two Honorary Mention awards:

- team that scores highest on Commentary
- team that scores highest on Judges Questions

The Robert Ladenson Spirit of the Ethics Bowl is awarded to the team that scores highest in Respectful Dialogue.