



# HOW TO HAVE A CONVERSATION

Lesson Plan for Grades 4-12

## Lesson Plan: How to Have a Conversation

Grade Levels: 4<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> Grade

Duration: 45-60 minutes

**Overview:** This lesson explores how conversation and listening shape understanding, community, and democracy. Drawing on the life and words of Justice Robert H. Jackson, students will examine what makes a conversation respectful and productive, and practice skills for listening, questioning, and reasoning. By the end of the lesson, students will understand how civil conversation, like Jackson's example at the Supreme Court and the Nuremberg Trials, can uphold fairness and justice.

## Learning Goals

- Identify the elements of respectful and productive conversation
- Explain how conversation and listening connect to democratic values and justice
- Practice conversation skills inspired by Robert H. Jackson's example of reasoned dialogue and fairness

## Learning Standards

- New York State
  - o Social Studies: 1.2, 1.4, 5.3, 5.4
  - o ELA Literacy in History/Social Studies: RH8, WHST1a, WHST1b, WHST1c, WHST2b
- Pennsylvania
  - o History: 8.1
  - o Civics and Government: 5.2
  - o Reading in History and Social Studies: 8.6A

## Materials Needed

- For Students:
  - o Conversation prompt cards
  - o "Jackson Framework" for Civil Conversations handout
- Teacher Resource: Background and Introduction to Robert H. Jackson
- Teacher Resource: Example Chart of A Good Conversation vs. A Poor Conversation

## Lesson Flow

1. Introduction (5 minutes)
  - a. Introduce Robert H. Jackson as a Supreme Court Justice and Chief Prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials. Introduce the idea that he believed that justice begins with reason and dialogue.



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- i. Quote: “It is not the function of the government to keep the citizen from falling into error; it is the function of the citizen to keep the government from falling into error.” - Robert H. Jackson, *American Communications Assoc. v. Douds* (1950)
  - b. Discuss:
    - i. What does this tell us about why it is important to listen, think, and talk to each other in a democracy?
2. What makes a Jackson Conversation? (10 minutes)
  - a. Create a class chart (draw on the board or use chart paper) and have students give examples.
    - i. Good conversations value reason over passion and understanding over judgment
3. Practice the “Jackson Framework” for a Conversation (15 minutes)
  - a. Break students into groups of two or four and give them the Jackson Framework for Civil Conversations as well as their conversation prompt
  - b. Students should practice having civil conversations using the framework and the rules they came up with as a class.
4. Reflect like Jackson (10 minutes)
  - a. Discussion
    - i. What did you notice about listening vs. waiting to speak?
    - ii. How does conversation build understanding?
    - iii. Why would someone like Justice Jackson value this skill in a democracy?
5. Wrap-Up/Homework (5 minutes)
  - a. Exit Ticket:
    - i. One thing I learned about civil conversation is...

### Assessment/Evaluation

- Participation in discussion and group work
- Evaluate reflection responses for understanding
- Extension Idea
  - Have students look at a modern civic or political debate and compare for respectful dialogue



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## Teacher Resource: Brief Overview of Robert H. Jackson

### Overview:

Robert H. Jackson (1892–1954) served as U.S. Solicitor General, Attorney General, and Associate Justice of the Supreme Court before becoming the Chief U.S. Prosecutor at the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg after World War II.

Born in Spring Creek, PA, and raised in Frewsburg, NY, Jackson did not go to college and only studied law for one year at Albany Law School before completing legal education through apprenticeship. He rose to national prominence through his sharp intellect, clear writing, and unwavering belief that justice depends on reasoned, respectful dialogue and fair process. His legacy continues to guide conversations about democracy, civil liberties, and the rule of law.

### Key Ideas:

- **Reason and Fairness:** Jackson believed that democracy thrives when citizens think critically, listen carefully, and treat others with respect.
- **Civic Responsibility:** He argued that citizens, not just the government, are responsible for protecting democracy and holding power accountable.
- **Justice through Dialogue:** In his speeches and opinions, Jackson demonstrated that justice begins with understanding different perspectives before making judgments.
- **Respectful Disagreement:** Whether in the Supreme Court or at Nuremberg, Jackson modeled how to engage in disagreement without hostility, grounded in evidence and empathy.



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Teacher Resource: Example of Chart Good v. Poor Conversation

What Makes a Conversation....	
Good?	Poor?
Active listening – listen fully before responding, seek to understand the other person’s point of view	Passive listening – lack of attention to what is being said, waiting for your turn to speak rather than hearing what is said
Respectful – treat other viewpoints or opinions with dignity, even in disagreement	Disrespectful – dismiss or mock other viewpoints or opinions
Evidence and Reasoning – use facts, logic, and examples to support ideas.	Anecdotal and Bias – rely on emotion, rumor, or personal attacks.
Curiosity – ask thoughtful questions and show genuine interest in other perspectives	Closed off – make assumptions; show no interest in understanding others
Goal – seek mutual understanding, fairness, and truth.	Goal – try to “win” or prove others “wrong”.
Creates civic connection by modeling the kind of dialogue essential in a democracy: open, honest, and respectful.	Undermines civic connection by fostering distrust and division in a community.
Speak calmly and kindly	Use sarcasm and insults or angry language
Stick to the topic and ideas being discussed	Bring up unrelated points or make it personal.



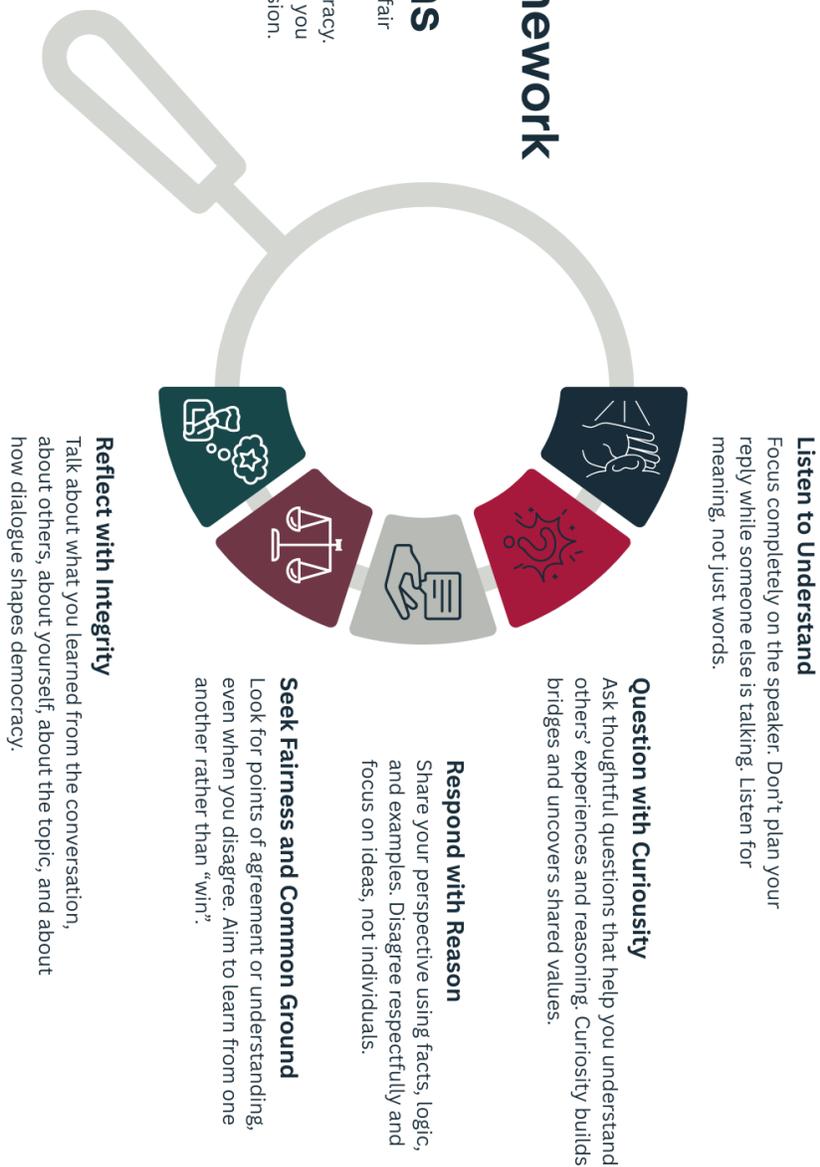
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## Student Handout: Jackson Framework for Civil Conversations

### Jackson Framework for Civil Conversations

Robert H. Jackson believed that fair and respectful conversation is a foundation of justice and democracy. Use this framework to guide how you listen, speak, and think in discussion.





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## Student Handout: Conversation Prompts

### 1. Perspective-Taking Prompts

- Imagine you and a friend disagree about whether students should have more homework. How would you explain your opinion while listening to theirs?
- You hear someone in class say that one group of people doesn't deserve a voice in a school decision. How could you respond respectfully?
- A family member has a very different opinion about a current event. How can you ask questions to understand their reasoning?

### 2. Moral & Ethical Prompts

- Is it ever okay to break a rule for a good reason? Why or why not?
- If you witnessed someone being treated unfairly, what would you say or do in a civil conversation to make a difference?
- Should people always tell the truth, even if it hurts someone's feelings? How could a conversation about this be respectful?

### 3. Civic & Justice Prompts

- Why is it important for citizens to listen to each other in a democracy?
- Imagine you are on a jury, and two jurors disagree about the case. How could you work together to reach a fair decision?
- If you could make one law to improve fairness in school, what would it be, and how would you convince others respectfully?

### 4. Everyday Life Prompts

- Should schools require students to do community service? Why or why not?
- A friend wants to play a video game during study time. How would you have a civil conversation about balancing fun and responsibilities?
- If two friends are arguing over who gets to sit in a special spot at lunch, how could they solve it without yelling?