

Lesson Plan: Good News, Bad News**Topic/Question:** Critical Thinking/How Do We Reason in Philosophy?**Age Group:** Middle-school and up**Time:** about 20 minutes**Materials:** It's helpful to have pre-made sheets of paper with alternating lines reading "The good news is...." and "The bad news is...." (see appendix) but they're not crucial; students can make their own.**Description:**

One of my professors in grad school, William Talbott, would introduce students to the concept of "dialectical reasoning." Broadly, this is reasoning in two directions, from premises to conclusions, and then backwards from conclusions to premises. The basic idea is that when you reason from premises to conclusion, you may arrive at a conclusion that doesn't seem right—even if that conclusion is implied by the premises. At that point, you are entitled to reason "backwards," from the conclusion to the premises, examining the truth or falsity of each premise in the argument. While students, by and large, seemed to understand the concept, many, if not most, considered this so-called "dialectical reasoning" to be something that only happened in philosophy class, as opposed to something that happens in "real life."

This exercise is intended to help student see that they engage in dialectical reasoning all the time, that it's something we all do naturally, and that it has application not only in the classroom but in all arenas of life.

My graduate school colleague, David Nixon, shared with me an exercise he did that had students sharing "good news" and "bad news," as a way to encourage them to see both sides of an issue. I drew upon his idea for this exercise, connecting it to the concept

of dialectical reasoning, and creating a written component that has been effective in getting students to engage in that process.

To begin the exercise, say a few words about dialectical reasoning, making the point that while it sounds rather technical, it is something that students do all the time, notably when they notice two sides of an issue, especially when realizing the good news and bad news about a given situation. As an example, consider that old joke: “A guy goes to the doctor for some tests. He comes back a week later and the doctor says, ‘Well, I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is, the tests came back and we determined that you only have 48 hours to live.’ The guy says, ‘That’s the good news?! What’s the bad news?’ The doctor says, ‘Well, we tried to get in touch with you all day yesterday.’”

After the groans that this inevitably solicits, another less obnoxious example might be in order, something like, “The good news is, our hometown baseball team won yesterday. The bad news is, their star player was injured.”

With this basic illustration of dialectical reasoning on the table, are then ready to move into the exercise.

Pass out sheets of paper on which are pre-printed alternating lines of “The good news is: _____,” and “The bad news is: _____” The paper is filled; there are six or seven of each, alternating one after another. (If these are not available, no problem; simply have students write the phrases before each sentence during the exercise. Still, experience has proven that that the exercise works better when pre-printed sheets are used.)

Explain to students that the sheets will be used to do an exercise in dialectical reasoning, in which the class will get to see how following a line of reasoning can often lead to an unexpected conclusion—an outcome very much in keeping with the philosophical enterprise. Philosophy, when done as it's supposed to be done, doesn't look for evidence to support a claim we already believe in; rather, when it's done the right way, we simply follow the argument to whatever conclusion the premises lead us to, being quite willing to be surprised by the result.

The way the exercise works, then, is as follows: Students begin by writing one piece of good news on their paper. Emphasize this! Often a student (usually a high-achiever) will already be in the process of filling out the entire sheet. Reiterate that students have been asked to merely fill out the first piece of good news; go no further!

After all the students have completed writing their first piece of good news, they then hand that paper to the person next to them; that person reads the good news and writes a piece of bad news that follows from it. Again, emphasize, just the bad news! That second student then folds down his or her paper so only the last piece of bad news is visible. He or she then hands that paper to another student who reads the visible piece of bad news, writes an associated good news, then folds down the paper so only the good news just written is visible, and then hands it to another student, and so on and on until the paper is completely filled.

Highlight two things while this process is going on. First, students are only allowed to read the one piece of news—good or bad—that is visible; they aren't allowed to unfold their papers and read back. And second, students are encouraged to get up and move

around the room to pass their papers around so that the readers and writers get all mixed up; you don't want students passing their papers to the same person every time.

As each paper is completed—it ends with a piece of bad news—have students return them to the a pile in the front of the room. When all the papers are turned in, hand each back to its original writer of good news. Students read the papers and are asked to notice especially the first and last lines and the degree to which they could have predicted that last line from the first.

Common practice is to ask students to volunteer to read their entire sheet aloud and reflect together as a class on how the first piece of good news and the last piece of bad news are connected or not. Usually, some have a kind of tenuous connection while others seem completely disconnected. The point to make here is that this is what often happens—or should happen—in philosophy. We should be willing to explore the dialectic and see where it takes us, even to unexpected places.

The exercise tends to be pretty fun, albeit a bit silly. Students routinely use the opportunity to be somewhat inappropriate in what they write, or scatological, or just goofy. It's a good idea to set as a ground rule that no names of anyone in the class can be mentioned, though, so even if students use the anonymity of the exercise as an opportunity to be nasty, no one's feelings will be hurt. (And indeed if they so, an opportunity for discussion—about how people treat each other differently when they're anonymous, for instance—can ensue.)

Despite the somewhat frivolous nature of the activity, real philosophy is done. Students reflect on written claims and respond to those statements in their own words. They allow themselves to follow an argument where it leads with them without any

preconceived notion of where it's supposed to end up. And they discuss these arguments afterwards, looking for connections among the various statements. Would that, as philosophers, we could only hope for such a result in all our discussions.