

Bringing Animal Issues Into the Classroom

Activities and Essays for Elementary and Middle School Students

Note to teachers: Acquaint students with animal protection issues. Encourage discussion in class, comparing older, widely held beliefs with a more modern understanding of our relationship to our fellow animals. Use any of the following ideas for class discussions, essay topics, or research projects.

If you could be any animal, what kind of animal would you be and why?

Describe a time you rescued an animal.

Write about something nice you did with or for an animal.

Describe a trip to the vet.

Explain why it is important to spay or neuter your companion animal.

Describe ways that you give attention to your companion animal.

Do one kind thing for an animal in the next week and describe the experience in an essay.

Write a story about an experience (such as going to the vet, getting lost, etc.) from the perspective of a companion animal. Tell how things look from where the animal is standing. How do things like chairs and stairs look different to animals from the way they look to humans? What might the animal be thinking? How does the animal let humans know his or her needs?

Read *Charlotte's Web*. Then, make a Venn diagram to describe the differences between the animals we see in books, cartoons, and comics, and the way animals really live (e.g., Wilbur in *Charlotte's Web* versus real pigs). Put information about fictional animals in one circle, information about the lives of real animals in the other circle, and information that is common to both fictional and real animals in the area where the two circles overlap.

Research ways that humans have used animals throughout history that were later replaced with more modern and humane alternatives. For example, animal bones were used for tools, and elephants' tusks were used to make piano keys. What other examples can you find? How are animals still being used today and what alternatives can you suggest?

Research the physical needs of a particular kind of animal: What does this animal need to be healthy? Don't pick an animal you know; try an exotic animal whom people shouldn't keep as a companion, like a lynx or a scorpion. What does the animal need for food? What temperature suits this animal the best? What else does this animal require? Make a diorama out of a shoebox showing the animal's proper habitat, or present drawings of the animal showing his or her unique characteristics. Write a report or give an oral report about this special animal.

Research the psychological needs of a particular kind of animal: What does this animal need to be happy? For example, does he or she need the companionship of similar animals, or the ability to perch? What else is needed? Make a chart comparing these needs to your needs. Draw a conclusion from your chart.

Use a flow chart to illustrate how a cat or dog who is not spayed or neutered is responsible for thousands of kittens or puppies in a short amount of time. Include the average number of offspring per litter and the frequency of reproduction. Use these statistics to argue the case for spaying and neutering companion animals.

Research a particular animal species, gathering information such as the animal's natural habitat, food, predators, physical characteristics, social structure, travel patterns, maternal and paternal behavior, etc. Next, find works of fiction that depict the animal, and gather the information presented there. Compare and contrast fact versus fiction.

Identify famous people throughout history who were vegetarians. What reasons did they give for their choice? Are they based on compassion for animals? What other reasons might there be for choosing a vegetarian lifestyle?

Choose a brief statement about the use of animals; for example, "Dissection is an important part of science education" or, "Animals should not be used for entertainment." Putting aside your personal feelings, write down the best arguments you can think of that agree and disagree with the statement. Get into pairs or groups to share your arguments and come up with the best "agree" and "disagree" arguments. Share these arguments with the whole class, and have the class choose the best overall arguments. Finally, write your own essay—using any of the arguments you've heard—to express your personal agreement or disagreement with the original statement.

Research and Discussion Topics for High School Students

- Describe the differences** between the “farm” animals we heard of as children (e.g., old McDonald’s farm, Wilbur in *Charlotte’s Web*) and the animals in modern agriculture’s factory farms.
- Find out the source** of animals at a local pet store and investigate the number of animals being raised by dealers and breeders to be sold in your area. Also, contact your local animal shelter and find out how many stray or abandoned animals are killed per year. Compare the data and formulate an argument for or against puppy mills and other dealers who breed animals to sell.
- Research the topic** of animal behavior. Is there evidence that animals experience stress and depression? What could be some causes? Give examples for companion animals as well as other animals (such as those who live in zoos or circuses). Are there solutions?
- Evaluate** how everyday speech (e.g., “work like a horse,” “be a guinea pig”) is a reflection of how we perceive the world and our relationship to its inhabitants.
- Discuss the question**, “Is it ever acceptable to break a law (such as breaking into a research facility and freeing animals) if there is proof that animals are being abused?”
- Choose an event** involving animals, such as an animal rights demonstration, a fur fashion show, or a circus. Examine and compare several perceptions of the same event. For example, discuss a circus from the point of view of an animal rights activist, a circus spokesperson, a spectator, and an elephant. What motivates each? Which argument is the most compassionate? Which is the most persuasive?
- Research ways** that humans have used animals throughout history that were later replaced with more modern and humane alternatives. For example, animal bones were used for tools, and elephants’ tusks were used to make piano keys. What other examples can you find? How are animals still being used today and what alternatives can you suggest?
- Examine the environmental impact** of classroom dissection. What happens when a large number of animals, such as frogs, are taken from the wild? How are the animals killed? What chemicals are involved when the animals are “processed,” and how are the chemicals disposed of? Are the chemicals dangerous to students? What happens to the animals after the dissection is completed?
- Identify famous people** throughout history who were vegetarians. What reasons did they give for their choice? Are they based on compassion for animals? What other reasons might there be for choosing a vegetarian lifestyle?
- Compare the progression** of the civil rights movement in the U.S. to the current animal rights movement. What methods did both use? What are the most effective in changing attitudes and changing traditions?
- Research the family** and social structure and mating patterns of various animal species. Discuss the strong bonds present among members of many species (for example, some animals mate for life; elephants stay with their mothers for years). When humans disrupt these patterns (for example, capturing animals for aquariums, zoos, and medical experiments; hunting; poaching), how are the animals affected?
- Some people say** that animals are so like humans that we must use them for medical experiments and even for organ transplants. On the other hand, they also say that animals are so dissimilar to humans that they do not experience pain, loneliness, and sadness and they have no souls; therefore, they are not due the same ethical consideration given to humans. Can both of these arguments be true, or are they contradictory? Debate the issue or research and present your own conclusions.
- Research the origins** of the practice of classroom dissection. How has the focus of science changed since then? Does dissection provide essential information that students need? If so, are there humane ways to learn it? Is there other information that you think is more worthwhile for students to learn?
- Investigate the sources** of animals used for classroom dissection. Are they bred for this purpose, captured from the wild, stolen from loving homes, purchased from a shelter, or a “byproduct” of the meat industry? Do their origins affect the ethical consideration we give them? Are some sources considered to be more acceptable than others? Why?
- Choose a brief statement** about the use of animals; for example, “Dissection is an essential part of science education,” or, “Animals should not be used for entertainment.” Putting aside your personal feelings, write down the best arguments you can think of that agree and disagree with the statement. Get into pairs or groups to share your arguments and come up with the best “agree” and “disagree” arguments. Share these arguments with the whole class, and have the class choose the best overall arguments. Finally, write your own essay—using any of the arguments you’ve heard—to express your personal agreement or disagreement with the original statement.

*For more information on any of these projects, contact Animal Protection League of NJ,
PO Box 174, Englishtown, NJ 07726, 732-446-6808, fax: 732-446-0227, e-mail: info@aplNJ.org*