

# What is the “Harkness Method”?

## History of Harkness

Harkness refers to a method of teaching that was developed in the 1930s at the Phillips Exeter School in New Hampshire. The philanthropist Edward Harkness challenged Exeter with an offer: he would make a sizable donation of money to the school if they could originate and implement a radically student-centered method of teaching, and then use this method in all classes. After having their first proposal rejected by Mr. Harkness as “not radical enough,” Exeter eventually committed to moving away from the traditional model of teaching in which the teacher lectures information to students, the students copy the information onto paper, and later, the “regurgitate” the previously instructor-fed information back onto tests and essays. In a Harkness class learning takes place through discussions held around a circular “Harkness Table.” Sitting at the table, all members of the class must question, contribute, and contemplate in order to learn and succeed. Today all classes at Exeter, from English Literature to Algebra, from African History to Chemistry, are held around Harkness tables and use the Harkness method of learning.

## Why Harkness?

Of the many different arguments in favor of the method, the most important may be that it goes beyond the mechanistic transmitting of information, and experientially teaches students how to learn. It is false to assume that students know how to learn. Academic learning requires a series of complex skills, such as the ability to analyze texts, verbal and written articulation of questions and ideas, listening, critical thinking, dialogue and research, to name a few. If students only learn in the traditional way, receiving information from their instructors in bite-sized chunks, and then later repeating the information onto tests, the skills they will have learned from this experience can be called little more than “parrotting”: a parrot can be trained to repeat what it hears, but it holds little, if any, understanding of the meanings of the words it says. Likewise, students can learn to repeat what they are told without having to actually understand what they are repeating. Furthermore, the implicit message of lecture instruction is one that ultimately disempowers students.

As “unbiased” as teachers try to be, educating is, based on the content and pedagogical approach to the curriculum chosen, a political endeavor. By maintaining their place at center stage—their classrooms filling stations for the empty-vesseled students, and they the Guardians of Truth—teacher-centered teachers convey the lesson that their students’ ideas and questions have no explicit worth outside of how well they relate to the teacher’s own ideas and questions. Additionally, teacher-centered classes reinforce the state of intellectual powerlessness common to most students and adults: only “qualified” authorities possess truth, and their opinions we must seek: truth is had by only “qualified” authorities, and we must seek their opinions. While the results of the teacher-centered method may be a pleasant boost to the teacher’s own sense of intellectual superiority, the students are taught to distrust their individual ideas, and to rely too heavily upon the opinions of others; they learn not to trust in their own capacities to discern truth.

The Harkness class lessens students’ ability to simply “parrot” information. As members of the learning group, students must engage with the class by asking questions and contributing their own thoughts. In general, Harkness teachers will minimize the amount of information and answers they give directly to their students. Instead, they will give their students’ resources in which the information and ideas can be found, or at the very least, they will help their students locate the necessary resources. Because of this approach, students will experience the complex process of learning. This is a process in which they must involve themselves to a much greater degree than they

may normally be required: students may not simply write down what teachers say. They must search for the ideas and information and then wrestle with that which they find. Students who engage themselves with the Harkness class will finish with a greater sense of autonomy and empowerment, knowing that they know how to learn. They will also finish the class with an increased ability to verbally articulate their questions and opinions in discussions. Additionally, Harkness students will come away with the important understanding of the power and necessity of listening, as well as the skills needed in order to be effective listeners.

## What Harkness is Not

**Harkness is not the Socratic method of teaching.** As it is generally understood, Socratic teaching involves asking students questions about their ideas, continually pointing out weaknesses in the ideas until students “realize” the correct conclusions. The conclusions, however, are predetermined by the teacher, and the students only qualify as having realized if they agree with, or surrender to, the teacher’s ideas. This type of teaching is teacher centered: the teacher is the *sage on the stage*, throwing forth pearls of wisdom to the flock of befuddled and bewildered minds below. Socratic teaching is excellent in terms of providing students with the experience of intensive critical thinking, of seeing an intelligent and intellectually engaged adult in action. The downside, however, is that the method focuses too much on the personality and interests of the teachers, perhaps leaving them feeling masterful and smart, but imparting feelings of subordination, stupidity, and even harassment onto their students. The Harkness class will generally have, nonetheless, a Socratic feel, in that students’ ideas are questioned and commented upon. For the most part though, these questions and comments will come from the students’ peers rather than the teacher.

**Harkness is not just “teaching through discussion.”** While many teachers use class discussions in their courses, the discussions still tend to be very teacher driven: the teacher asks the questions, keeps the class focused, decides when to move on, and for the most part, still sits in the dominant role as expert holder of Truth. Conversely, some class discussions become very loose “blow-off-steam” forums in which members of the class (usually the dominant ones) shout out their opinions and argue back and forth. Unfortunately, these quasi-debate style classes almost always contain more hot air than substance—they lack the structure necessary for the type of critical inquiry that leads to substantive conclusions upon which a class may build in the future. Furthermore, these types of discussions give students a bad model of intellectual dialogue: combativeness, blind position-taking, and immaturity are the lessons learned.

## Teaching a Harkness Class

Different teachers have different approaches, and many will change their techniques based on the chemistry of their particular class. For the most part, the following description accurately portrays how I run my Harkness classes.

With the nightly reading is assigned, I try to include specific and overarching questions on which the students should focus as they read; they are told to make margin notes about these specified topics and questions, and sometimes to write prepared notes on separate paper. When they come to class, I’ll appoint some or all of the following roles to students: moderator, participant, observer, and note-taker. Occasionally I will notify students the day before that they will moderate the following day’s Harkness. I tend to do this if I know the topic will be difficult, and thus I want the moderator to be very well prepared.

The role of moderator is the most crucial. The **moderator**, and I must stress this often, is not the de facto teacher. Rather, their job is to introduce topics, organize the flow of the conversation, ask participants to specify and/or provide textual references, and generally set an intellectually engaged

and stimulating tone; I let the moderator decide if they want participants to raise hands, or to just speak as they wish. The **participant** is the student (For a good sense of the expectations of participants, see the next section in this packet on evaluating Harkness students.)

The **observer's** role is to silently monitor the discussion. They may take notes on what works well, and what does not. They might also draw a Harkness discussion diagram: they draw a circle, put down the names of each person around the circle such that the drawing mirrors the arrangement of the people at the table, and then draw lines to and from each person as they speak. In the end this diagram offers a powerful visual reflection of how the conversation flowed. If one area is dark with lines, while others are blank, it becomes clear that the discussion was unbalanced. The **note-taker's** job is to take notes from the discussion about information and ideas that might be useful for future test or essay preparation; the notes are written in the communal class journal.

I will start class by clarifying any issues or questions left over from my last time with the class, and then I'll announce the moderator and the focus questions for the day's discussion. I try to pose questions and ideas that are broad enough to allow fluidity of discourse, but not so broad that students don't know what their focus should be. For very difficult readings, I will, however, often narrow my questions, being very specific so students don't feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the piece or topic. Ultimately, I'm still very much in the development stage of learning this art form of setting up Harkness discussions.

During the discussion I intentionally sit removed from the circle. This is symbolic as well as practical: symbolically, it demonstrates that the students and their ideas are central. Practically, it weans students off of their tendencies to look and speak to me; even with sitting outside the circle, I still notice some students always looking at me when they speak. I do not remain completely silent during the discussions. Sometimes I offer an opinion, but often when I speak it will be to clarify or pose a question, assert an opinion different from the group's consensus, or provide the class with some necessary piece of historical background on the topic. I generally end the discussion five to ten minutes before the class time finishes. The rest of our time together is spent evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the conversation—this makes explicit the lessons about academic discussion dynamics—and making plans for how to improve future discussions. I might also use this time to summarize what I heard, or to offer feedback and clarification on the content of the conversation