

**CLASSICAL GREECE  
(4TH-5TH CENTURIES  
BCE): SOCRATES: AN  
OVERVIEW**



# CLASSICAL GREECE (4TH-5TH CENTURIES BCE): SOCRATES: AN OVERVIEW

## Description

Through the investigation of selected primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the basics of Socratic wisdom and thought, including what's now commonly referred to as the "Socratic Method" of investigation and inquiry, and will also be able to trace how the ancient Greek master's ideas influenced, and continue to influence, philosophical thought in the western world.

## Subjects

World History  
Philosophy

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Temple of Apollo, Delphi
- Athens Academy
- Athens Agora
- Socrates Prison, Athens

## Essential Questions

- Who was Socrates?
- How do we know about Socrates?
- What was Socrates' basic philosophy?
- What happened to Socrates?
- Why is Socrates considered to be the father of western philosophy?

## Academic Summary

He was my comrade from a youth and the comrade of your democratic party, and shared in the recent exile and came back with you. And you know the kind of man Chaerephon was, how impetuous in whatever he undertook. Well, once he went to Delphi and made so bold as to ask the oracle this question; and, gentlemen, don't make a disturbance at what I say; for he asked if there were anyone wiser than I. Now the Pythia replied that there was no one wiser...for when I heard this, I thought to myself: "What in the world does the god mean, and what riddle is he propounding? For I am conscious that I am not wise either much or little. What then does he mean by declaring that I am the wisest? He certainly cannot be lying, for that is not possible for him." And for a long time I was at a loss as to what he meant; then with great reluctance I proceeded to investigate him somewhat as follows.

I went to one of those who had a reputation for wisdom, thinking that there, if anywhere, I should prove the utterance wrong and should show the oracle "This man is wiser than I, but you said I was wisest." So examining this man—for I need not call him by name, but it was one of the public men with regard to whom I had this kind of experience, men of Athens—and conversing with him, this man seemed to me to seem to be wise to many other people and especially to himself, but not to be so; and then I tried to show him that he thought he was wise, but was not. As a result, I became hateful to him and to many of those present; and so, as I went away, I thought to myself, "I am wiser than this man; for neither of us really knows anything fine and good, but this man thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas I, as I do not know anything, do not think I do either. I seem, then, in just this little thing to be wiser than this man at any rate, that what I do not know I do not think I know either." From him I went to another of those who were reputed to be wiser than he, and these same things seemed to me to be true; and there I became hateful both to him and to many others.

...now from this investigation, men of Athens, many enmities have arisen against me, and such as are most harsh and grievous, so that many prejudices have resulted from them and I am called a wise man. For on each occasion those who are present think I am wise in the matters in which I confute someone else; but the fact is, gentlemen, it is likely that the god is really wise and by his oracle means this: "Human wisdom is of little or no value." And it appears that he does not really say this of Socrates, but merely uses my name, and makes me an example, as if he were to say: "This one of you, O human beings, is wisest, who, like Socrates, recognizes that he is in truth of no account in respect to wisdom."

Therefore I am still even now going about and searching and investigating at the god's behest anyone, whether citizen or foreigner, who I think is wise; and when he does not seem so to me, I give aid to the god and show that he is not wise.

*Socrates as quoted in Plato's Apology, 4th century BCE*

There is only one good...knowledge  
and only one evil...ignorance

*Socrates as quoted in Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers by Diogenes Laertius, 3rd century CE*

I myself know nothing, except just a little, enough to extract an argument from another man who is wise and to receive it fairly.

*Socrates as quoted in Plato's dialogue Theaetetus, 4th century BCE*

The unexamined life is not worth living for a human being.

*Socrates as quoted in Plato's Apology, 4th century BCE*

The hour is departure has arrived, and we go our separate ways – I to die and you to live. Which is the better is unknown to anyone, only heaven.

*Socrates as quoted in Plato's Apology, 4th century BCE*

Then holding the cup to his lips, quite readily and cheerfully he drank off the poison. And hitherto most of us had been able to control their sorrow; but now, when we saw him drinking, and saw too, that he had finished the draft, we could no longer forbear, and in spite of myself my own tears were flowing fast; so that I covered my face and wept over myself, for certainly I was not weeping over him, but at my own calamity at having lost such a companion. Nor was I the first, for Crito, when he found himself unable to restrain his tears, had got up, and moved away, and I followed; and at that moment, Apollodorus, who had been weeping all the time, broke out in a loud cry which made cowards of us all. Socrates alone retained his calmness.

What is this strange outcry? ...I sent away the women mainly in order that they might not offend in this way, for I have heard that a man should die in peace. Be quiet then, and have patience.

*Socrates as quoted in Plato's dialogue Phaedo, 4th century BCE*

It is said that his appearance disgusted many who saw him. It is said he had a big nose and large bulging eyes. By all accounts he was poor, dirty and unkempt, with long hair and a ragged beard. He seldom bathed, and it is said that every day he wore a dirty thin robe and no shoes. He claimed to know nothing, and yet claimed to be the wisest man in Athens. About his life before age 30 we know almost nothing. He wrote nothing, and yet his words have come down to us through the ages of history. It is possible that he may have been illiterate, yet he is considered by many in the western world to have been one of, if not the, greatest teacher of all time. In the end, he was arrested as an enemy of the state under the charge of corrupting others and blasphemy against the state religion. He was brought to trial and convicted by the citizens of the city for what today we would call treason and

heresy. He was sentenced to death and although he had an opportunity to escape, he instead went willingly to his fate, drinking poison and dying in excruciating pain. Reports of his death, written later by his loyal followers, describe the event as a sacrifice worthy of the ages, where he freely offered his life as an example to others. The legacy of his teachings have inspired countless generations of people for centuries and continue to do so today. His name was Socrates.

What we know of Socrates comes mostly from Plato, a student of Socrates, although not in the modern sense of the word. According to traditions written later about Socrates from his students, Socrates was an old stonecutter who one day put down his tools and proceeded to spend the remainder of his life wandering the streets of Athens questioning people and trying to gather knowledge and wisdom in an effort to prove that he was not the wisest man in the city (he was trying to prove the oracle at Delphi wrong). His efforts would prove fruitless, as everyone who claimed to be wise was instead proven by Socrates to be a fool. In the end, he determined that the oracle must have been right. He never claimed to know anything, but he also recognized that fact, whereas those who claimed to know everything really knew nothing.

Along the way, the master (as Plato called Socrates) acquired a following of men hungry for that knowledge. After Socrates was convicted and executed by the Athenian court in 399 BCE, Plato went on to write and publish stories about his mentor, and it is through those writings (probably biased through Plato's eyes) that those of us in the modern world have come to know the wisdom and philosophy of Socrates. It has been said that philosophical thought since 399 BC has been in response to or as a result of Socratic virtues and ideas.

Through the investigation of selected primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the basics of Socratic wisdom and thought, including what is now commonly referred to as the "Socratic Method" of investigation and inquiry, and will also be able to trace how the ancient Greek master's ideas influenced, and continue to influence, philosophical thought in the western world.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the story behind Socrates' life as told through the writings of his students, especially Plato.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the basics of Socratic wisdom and thought.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the basics of what is commonly referred to as the "Socratic Method" of inquiry and investigation.
4. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how Socrates' ideas influenced, and continue to influence, philosophical thought in the western world.

## Procedures

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: What is the difference between knowledge and wisdom? Can a person without knowledge be wise? Can a person with knowledge be foolish? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of documents and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Socrates and the Socratic Method (15 min)
- Video – The Western Tradition: Greek Thought (25 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the articles and sources on Socrates and the Socratic Method, taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles and sources for homework before class.
- Suggestion: Advanced/AP students should focus on Plato's writings.
- Suggestion: See links below for a worksheet using the Apology.
- Group Activity – Socratic Seminar: Discussion on Socrates and the Socratic Method (15 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment / DBQ – Essay: Explain in detail the basics of Socratic wisdom and thought, including what is now commonly referred to as the "Socratic Method" of investigation and inquiry, and will also be able to trace how the ancient Greek master's ideas influenced, and continue to influence, philosophical thought in the western world.

## Extension

### **On tour: Ancient Agora, Athens**

While on tour, students in Athens can visit the Ancient Agora in the city center. The Agora was the public center of Ancient Athens, and was the center of government, commerce and daily life. Like the Ancient Roman Forum, the Agora was an open air space where Athenians would come to discuss everything from political issues to business transactions. Socrates would have been a daily fixture in the Agora during his lifetime. It is also where he was probably tried and convicted in 399 BCE. Excavations in the Agora, under the direction of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, have been ongoing at the site since 1931. Just outside the southwest boundary of the Agora, archaeologists discovered a series of ancient jail cells, and tradition now holds that one of them was where Socrates died.

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.en.wikisource.org/wiki/Lives\\_of\\_the\\_Eminent\\_Philosophers/Book\\_II#Socrates](http://www.en.wikisource.org/wiki/Lives_of_the_Eminent_Philosophers/Book_II#Socrates)  
Lives of the Eminent Philosophers: Socrates (primary source) – from Diogenes Laetius, a 3rd century Greek writer. The link above goes directly to the selection on Socrates.
- <http://eawc.evansville.edu/anthology/apology.htm>  
The Apology by Plato (primary source) – full text version from the University of Evansville (IN)
- <http://socrates.clarke.edu/>  
The Last Days of Socrates (website). Contains primary and secondary sources from Plato's writings. It is specifically designed to help students read the Euthyphro, the Apology, the Crito and the Phaedo – from Clarke University (IA).
- [www.philosophypages.com/ph/socr.htm](http://www.philosophypages.com/ph/socr.htm)  
Socrates (website). Great overview of the man and his teachings. Highly recommended for all students and teachers.
- [http://home.wlu.edu/~mahonj/Ancient\\_Philosophers/Socrates.htm](http://home.wlu.edu/~mahonj/Ancient_Philosophers/Socrates.htm)  
Socrates (website) – from James E. Mahon, Professor of Philosophy and Law at Washington & Lee University
- [www.qcc.cuny.edu/socialSciences/ppecorino/INTRO\\_TEXT/Chapter%20%20GREEKS/Socrates\\_prison.htm](http://www.qcc.cuny.edu/socialSciences/ppecorino/INTRO_TEXT/Chapter%20%20GREEKS/Socrates_prison.htm)  
Socrates in Prison (textbook / secondary source) – from Philip Pecorino, Professor of Philosophy at Queensboro Community College (NY)
- [www.roangelo.net/logwitt/delphi.html](http://www.roangelo.net/logwitt/delphi.html)  
Socrates and Apollo's Oracle at Delphi (website)
- <http://harju.org/frfenton/pub/Death%20of%20Socrates%20Worksheet.pdf>  
Socrates Worksheet (worksheet / primary source) – from Cabrini Catholic High School (MI)
- <http://philosophy.tamu.edu/~sdaniel/Notes/01class2.html>  
Presocratics and Socrates (class notes) – from Stephen H. Daniel, Professor of Philosophy at Texas A&M
- [scottfenwickteachingeconomics.wikispaces.com/file/view/socrates+powerpoint.pptx](http://scottfenwickteachingeconomics.wikispaces.com/file/view/socrates+powerpoint.pptx)  
Socrates and the Socratic Method (PowerPoint). Basic outline of the man and his philosophy.
- [loh.loswego.k12.or.us/noblem/ppt/wcv\\_ancient\\_greek\\_philosophy.ppt](http://loh.loswego.k12.or.us/noblem/ppt/wcv_ancient_greek_philosophy.ppt)  
Greek Philosophy (PowerPoint). Broader overview of Socrates and his place in Ancient Greece.
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqUCS0-Essl](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqUCS0-Essl)  
Greeks: Crucible of Civilization Part III (video). This video, part of the PBS documentary on the Ancient Greeks, contains the story of Socrates (starting at the 10 minute mark). This video is about 55 minutes long, and so is probably too long for most in-class showings, but is highly recommended for students.
- [www.learner.org/resources/series58.html?pop=yes&pid=824#](http://www.learner.org/resources/series58.html?pop=yes&pid=824#)  
The Western Tradition #6: Greek Thought (video). This 25-minute video, although perhaps too long for many in-class showings, is well worth watching. It is part of a much larger (52-part) series produced by WGBH TV in Boston in 1989 and features Dr. Eugen Weber, former history professor at UCLA and one of the foremost experts in Western History before his death in 2007. The series, called "The Western Tradition" consists of 52 lectures of 30 minutes each, and covers subjects from the Dawn of History to the Twentieth Century. Highly recommended for students and teachers.

### Background Information

- [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socrates](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socrates)  
Socrates – Wikipedia article
- [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socratic\\_method](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socratic_method)  
Socratic Method – Wikipedia article
- [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trial\\_of\\_Socrates](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trial_of_Socrates)  
Trial of Socrates – Wikipedia article

### Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/ancient-greece-homer-iliad](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/ancient-greece-homer-iliad)  
Ancient Greece – Homer's Iliad
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/ancient-greece-homer-odyssey](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/ancient-greece-homer-odyssey)  
Ancient Greece – Homer's Odyssey
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/ancient-greece-minoan-civilization](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/ancient-greece-minoan-civilization)

Ancient Greece – Minoan Civilization on Crete

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/classical-greece-alexander-the-great](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-alexander-the-great)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Alexander the Great
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/classical-greece-sparta](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-sparta)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Sparta
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/classical-greece-athens-democracy](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-athens-democracy)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Athens
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/classical-greece-battle-of-marathon](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-battle-of-marathon)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Battle of Marathon 490 BCE
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/classical-greece-battle-of-thermopylae](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-battle-of-thermopylae)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Battle of Thermopylae: Leonidas and the 300
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/plato-allegory-of-the-cave](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/plato-allegory-of-the-cave)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Plato: Allegory of the Cave
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/classical-greece-plato-euthyphro](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-plato-euthyphro)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Plato: Euthyphro
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/plato-republic-philosopher-kings](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/plato-republic-philosopher-kings)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Plato: Philosopher Kings and the Republic
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/classical-greece-socrates](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-socrates)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Socrates: Father of Western Philosophy

## Key Terms

- Ancient Greece
- Philosophy
- Platonic Dialogues
- Socrates
- Socratic Method
- Wisdom vs. Knowledge

