Skeptic Faction Handout

Delegation to King Menander's court • Sāgala, c. 150 BCE

Test competing claims fairly and resist certainty when the arguments do not justify it.

Your objectives

Primary — Win the court. Receive more allegiance votes than any rival faction for an outright victory; an absolute majority is not required. If two or more factions tie for the most votes, each tied faction earns a partial victory. Your case for skepticism should rest on reasons for suspending judgment.

Secondary — Royal patronage. Persuade Menander to award the skeptical faction one year of royal patronage.

Your responsibilities

- Challenge the Stoic, Epicurean, and Buddhist accounts using specific arguments; do not declare doubt without reasons.
- Explain skepticism as a way of life and present three substantive objections, one to each rival school. You may adapt the Skeptical Examination's format or design your own. Share questions and advice; everyone contributes.
- Question and advise court members when dilemmas are revealed; respond to their actual reasons and circumstances.

What your school believes

Your faction includes Carneades, Damaris, Clitomachus, Menodora, and Philista. You offer a possible way of life: carefully examine claims, avoid premature assent, and continue acting when ultimate questions remain open. Your characters draw from related but distinct ancient skeptical traditions.

Academic inquiry. Carneades, a leading figure in Plato's Academy in the second century BCE, developed arguments for and against apparently secure philosophical claims. The point is to test whether evidence establishes knowledge, not to assume in advance that every claim is false. In practical affairs, one may use persuasive appearances without claiming certainty.

Pyrrhonian suspension. Later Pyrrhonian writers describe setting arguments and appearances against one another. When the competing considerations are equally persuasive, judgment is suspended (epochē), and tranquility may sometimes follow. They do not demand suspension when one side has better evidence.

Living without a settled theory. A skeptic may follow appearances, bodily needs, customs, and learned arts. Physicians still treat the sick; people still make decisions under uncertainty. Your task is to explain how careful action is possible without premature philosophical certainty.

Fair criticism. The benefits of a practice do not automatically prove its metaphysics. Stoic attentiveness need not establish cosmic providence; Epicurean calm does not prove atomism or the extinction of the soul; Buddhist meditation cannot by itself establish rebirth. But skepticism itself must face the objection that doubt can become an excuse for inaction.

Your hardest question. Can someone suspend judgment about the good life and still make serious commitments? What would count as adequate evidence for a philosophical system?

Required practice: The Skeptical Examination (adaptable format)

After hearing the other schools, present ONE cogent philosophical objection to a central doctrine of EACH. Adapt the presentation as you wish, provided your exercise remains grounded in skeptical inquiry.

How to prepare

1. Identify the claims. Choose one central doctrine from each school. Understand its meaning and why its followers accept it. Use the readings and presentations.

2. Develop three objections. Give a plausible reason or counterexample against each doctrine and explain its force. Asking “How do you know?” or expressing disbelief does not suffice.

Possible starting points (develop your own arguments):

- Stoicism: Even if virtue is essential to living well, is it enough for happiness in the face of devastating loss?
- Epicureanism: Might death harm us by depriving us of future pleasures, despite never being experienced?
- Buddhism: Does observing that bodily and mental experiences change establish that none is a permanent, controlling self?

3. Share the work. Decide who explains skepticism, presents objections, engages replies, and advises the court. Everyone contributes; no speaking parts are assigned.

What to do at court

4. Present the objections. State each school’s claim fairly, then give ONE reasoned objection. Question the doctrine, not its supporters.

5. Hear the replies. Allow each school to respond. Acknowledge convincing answers, and revise or withdraw objections when appropriate.

6. Explain what you do NOT claim. Challenging Stoic sufficiency does not prove virtue insufficient; challenging Epicurus does not prove death harmful; questioning not-self does not establish a permanent self. You may suspend judgment without embracing an opposite doctrine.

7. Show how to act. Explain how a physician could choose a treatment based on the best available observations while remaining uncertain about the underlying medical theory.

Discuss briefly. When does a serious objection justify withholding judgment? What answer or evidence would make you reconsider?

Sources: Cicero, Academica 2.7–9, 2.99–104, and On Duties 2.8. These later accounts illuminate Academic skeptical inquiry.

Preparation for debate and negotiation

Practice the three objections, but do not script replies. You may use a creative format supported by research into ancient skepticism. Advise the court as well as criticizing doctrines. An objection is not automatically a refutation.

After the final judgments

Give ONE collective rating (1–5) of the court’s Philosophical Deliberation. Evaluate whether court members understood competing positions and gave thoughtful reasons. Do not reward or penalize them for agreeing or disagreeing with your faction. The Game Master will announce the court’s average rating.

Sources and historical cautions

Carneades belongs to Menander’s era; Cicero and Sextus wrote later. Developed Pyrrhonian methods postdate this court. This examination is a classroom adaptation, not an ancient script. Academic and Pyrrhonian skepticism are related but distinct.