Stoic Faction Handout

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

Train your judgment; make virtue, not fortune, the measure of a good life.

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.

Secondary — Royal patronage. Persuade Menander to award the Stoic delegation one year of royal patronage.

Your responsibilities

- Explain and defend your school's central teachings. Decide together how to divide the presentation, questions, advice, and patronage case; everyone should contribute.
- Lead a short exercise: use or adapt a suggested practice, or invent one rooted in your school's philosophy. Explain its purpose.
- When the court receives its dilemmas, offer concrete advice grounded in your school's teachings and the primary sources. Respond to skeptical and rival objections.

What your school believes

You represent the school founded by Zeno at Athens around 300 BCE. Human flourishing depends on excellence of character—wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation—not on riches, fame, pleasure, office, or even health. This is a demanding thesis: virtue is not merely important to happiness; virtue is sufficient for it.

Nature and the good life. The Stoics regard nature as a causally ordered whole structured by reason (logos). Because people are rational and social creatures, living in agreement with nature means judging carefully, acting justly, and taking seriously our obligations to others. The cosmos may be providential, but its events are not arranged to satisfy our wishes.

What depends on us. Events generate unbidden impressions—fear, anger, or the thought that we have been humiliated. We can practice examining them before giving our assent. Deliberate judgments and intentions are "up to us" in a way that victories, reputations, and other people's reactions are not. This does not mean that feelings can be turned off at will.

What about everything else? Epictetus puts the claim provocatively: what is not up to us is "nothing to us" (Handbook 1)—not a genuine good or evil that determines our happiness. Health, friendship, safety, and peace remain worth pursuing as "preferred indifferents." We should work for these outcomes, but never at the expense of virtue, and never as if fortune could determine our worth.

Duties and relationships. Far from encouraging withdrawal, Stoicism gives weight to the roles of ruler, parent, friend, and citizen. But no role authorizes injustice. Explain how a Stoic can love deeply and take serious risks for other people while denying that another person's survival determines whether one lives well.

Your hardest question. If grief, illness, or torture can destroy so much that people value, is it credible to say that virtue alone guarantees a good life? And how much of Stoic ethics depends on divine providence?

Two suggested philosophical practices

The following exercises are options, not requirements. Use one as written, adapt it, or develop another exercise rooted in Stoic teachings, using the sources or further research. Keep it to about two minutes; invite participation without requiring personal disclosure. Explain the philosophical point and distinguish a useful practice from proof of the doctrine.

Option 1 The control line

Purpose. Practice shifting attention from an outcome you cannot guarantee to a choice you can make.

1. Set up two choices. Label two sides of the room UP TO US and NOT UP TO US. Participants may move, point from their seats, or choose silently.

2. Explain the distinction. Say: “Up to us means our deliberate judgments and choices. Not up to us includes other people’s responses, outcomes, and our first flashes of emotion. We may influence these things without controlling them.”

3. Read and choose. Read the six statements below in a mixed order, one at a time. Ask everyone to choose a side. Invite a few explanations; use the column headings as your answer key.

UP TO US	NOT UP TO US
I choose to speak truthfully.	The king believes me.
I choose to care for the sick.	My patient survives.
I examine an insult before responding.	I never feel a flash of anger.

4. Try the shift in attention. Ask everyone to imagine the king rejecting their advice. Pause. Then say: “Notice any urge to make him agree. Now replace ‘He must agree’ with ‘I will explain my reasons honestly and listen carefully.’ What can you do next?”

5. Practice the central thought. Invite everyone to repeat silently: “What is not up to me is nothing to me as a good or evil.” Explain: “An outcome cannot by itself make me a good or bad person or take away my ability to live well. I can still work hard to help a patient or persuade the king.”

Discuss briefly. What changed when you focused on your response? How can someone’s safety be “nothing to us” in this sense while still deserving our deepest care?

Sources: Epictetus, Handbook 1–2; adapted from Massimo Pigliucci and Gregory Lopez, A Handbook for New Stoics, Weeks 1–2.

Preparation for debate and negotiation

Make the positive case that virtue—not success—is the good. Plan a philosophically grounded practice together. Decide how to share explanations, practical advice, and responses to objections. Bring one objection for a rival school and an answer to the skeptic’s challenge about providence and certainty.

A useful exercise does not by itself establish that its underlying worldview is true.

Option 2 The Stoic word challenge

Purpose. Practice noticing a judgment, pausing before accepting it, and describing the situation in Stoic terms.

1. Explain two kinds of value. Write these labels on the board, or read them aloud:

- GOOD OR BAD: qualities of our choices, such as honesty or dishonesty, justice or injustice.
- PREFERRED OR DISPREFERRED: outcomes we want or would rather avoid, such as health or illness. These do not by themselves determine whether we live well.

2. Notice the added judgment. Read: “The court rejected our advice, so we are failures as people.” Ask participants to imagine hearing this. Pause. Then ask: “What happened? What judgment about our worth have we added?” Encourage them to think: “I do not have to accept that judgment immediately.”

3. Model a different response. Say: “The court rejected our advice. I wanted its support, but losing does not make me a bad person. I can examine my argument and continue speaking honestly.” The outcome matters to us, but our response is where virtue is at stake.

4. Let everyone try. Offer these two statements: “The patient died, so the physician is worthless”; “The king praised me, so I am a good person.” Have pairs choose one and rewrite it. They may also work silently. Use this pattern:

“What happened was _____. I wanted _____. This outcome does not settle whether I acted well. My next wise or just choice is _____.”

5. Compare and reflect. Invite two examples. Ask: “Did the new wording change what you noticed or felt? What responsibility still remains?” Clarify that an outcome alone does not prove virtue or vice. A careless physician still needs to acknowledge and correct the carelessness.

Discuss briefly. Does refusing to call illness or defeat “bad” help us live well, or understate a real loss?

Sources: Epictetus, Handbook 1; Seneca, On the Happy Life 16; adapted from Pigliucci and Lopez, A Handbook for New Stoics, Week 9.

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

The earliest Stoic writings survive mostly in fragments. Cicero, Seneca, and Epictetus wrote after Menander; treat them as later witnesses. Group activities adapted from Massimo Pigliucci and Gregory Lopez, A Handbook for New Stoics (2019), Weeks 1, 2, and 9.