

# The Socratic Rules of Engagement

1. **The Open Table:** Everything is open for inquiry; no view is immune from questioning if someone wants to offer it.
2. **The Purpose of Inquiry:** The purpose of inquiry is to reach the truth or get closer to it. The purpose is not to say or prove whatever will advance a goal in the background, or to make the partners to the inquire feel good, or to win an argument.
3. **Challenges Wanted:** Questioning is the natural and welcome response to any position one might take. Attempts at refutation are the acts of a friend and are presumptively offered and received in that spirit, even if — especially if — the challenge is made to a strongly held view. You might be wrong, or (if not) there might still be a little something right in what your challenger says. Being shown that you've erred or been imprecise is a favor. Comfort in confessing air is a sign of health.
4. **Arguments Met with Arguments:** The Socratic approach doesn't say that certain arguments don't deserve a reply because they're contemptible and shouldn't have been made in the first place. If someone thinks something is so and is wrong, the appropriate response is to explain why it isn't so.
5. **The Priority of Reason:** Arguments are judged on their merits — that is, on the quality of the evidence or reasoning that supports them, not on the identities of their makers. Claims that anyone's perspective is entitled to deference (or skepticism) are themselves judged on evidence and reasons – for example, reasons to believe that one person has access to evidence or experience that others don't, and that the answer to a question depends on it.
6. **Elenttic Reasoning:** Inquiry is made, wherever possible, by finding common ground of agreement from which to begin. Then each side does the favor of trying to help the other see inconsistencies between that point of agreement and their position on whatever else is under discussion. Consistency is treated as an important test of a set of claims.
7. **Self-Skepticism:** One's own partisanship is distrusted. "Partisanship," for these purposes, means a strongly felt commitment to a certain set of beliefs that makes one want and expect inquiry to come out a certain way, and that makes people who challenge those beliefs seem to be enemies. It's easy to bend reasoning and find it convincing when it leads to results that you like, and it's hard to see this happening

when you're the one who is doing it. Everyone stays conscious of this risk, and it's another reason why contradiction is welcome.

8. **Group Skepticism:** Popular opinion and easy consensus are likewise distrusted. A room full of people who all agree about something regarded as controversial outside the room, and especially a group feeling congratulatory about its agreement, is uncomfortable. It is too much like the Athenian jury with its hemlock. A group needs a gadfly.

9. **Manners:** Inquiry is expected to be rigorous, fierce, possibly relentless, but always courteous. Sarcasm and other forms of irony are principally directed at oneself and otherwise reserved for people who claim to have all the answers. There is no name-calling or denunciation. Nobody is shouted down. If someone insists on being wrong, their punishment is being wrong, and perhaps having this understood by others. All parties observe the principle of charity in interpreting what others say, and prefer to take on objections in their strongest rather than their weakest form.

10. **Candor:** Partners in inquiry say what they really think. They are not punished for it. Saying something unpopular is, to the contrary, considered admirable; even if it's wrong, it is a service to the cause of getting closer to the truth. If someone is willing to incur a personal cost to put forward a perspective, that perspective is probably shared by others who do not want to bear the cost. It needs to be said so that it can be tested and determined to be true or false.

11. **Offense:** Everyone tries to make claims in ways that do not give personal offense to their partners. Everyone tries to receive claims in ways that do not take offense from their partners. The giving or taking of offense is understood to be a serious threat to the process of getting anywhere in inquiry.

12. **Humility:** Conclusions are provisional. They may seem very probable, so much so that they are well worth fighting for. But there is always a reserve of doubt, an awareness of one's own ignorance and blind spots, and a recollection that others have been equally sure and have been wrong, over and over again. The result of all this is an attitude of humility at all times about how much you know and how sure you should be about it.

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**Source:** Farnsworth, Ward. *The Socratic Method: A Practitioner's Handbook*. Godine, 2021.