



## René Descartes

Learning about existence through the philosophical work of René Descartes

<b>Learning Objectives</b>	This lesson plan aims to introduce students to the life and contributions of René Descartes, one of the most influential philosophers in Western history. Students will familiarise themselves with Descartes' key ideas and concepts and they will be encouraged to use critical thinking and reflection on Descartes' philosophy.
<b>Subjects</b>	Physics, Science, Astronomy, Metaphysics
<b>Recommended Age (10-12 or 12-14)</b>	12-14
<b>Number of students involved</b>	20 (divided into groups of 4 to 5 students per group)
<b>Duration</b>	90 minutes
<b>Skills Developed</b>	Critical thinking, scepticism, open-mindedness, cooperation skills
<b>Material Needed</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whiteboard or blackboard</li> <li>• Markers or chalk</li> <li>• Paper and pencils for students</li> <li>• Laptop/Internet</li> <li>• Puzzles</li> </ul>
<b>Inclusion Best Practices</b>	<p>This is a lesson plan based primarily on group discussion, aiming to engage all students. You should ensure that all students feel safe to participate actively throughout the lesson plan.</p> <p>Depending on the class dynamics and time available, you may need to adjust the lesson plan to suit the needs and engagement level of the students.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some examples of additional activities include: Organize a class activity where students debate the validity of Descartes' method of doubt.</li> <li>• Assign a writing task for students to reflect on their own beliefs and apply Descartes' method of doubt to challenge them.</li> </ul>



- Create a classroom project where students design a visual representation of mind-body dualism.



## Introduction

This lesson plan aims to introduce students to the philosophy of René Descartes. The main objective of this lesson plan is to explain students how philosophy can contribute in advancing critical thinking and how it has contributed in different academic fields throughout the years.

This is an example of a short video you can show to your students as an introduction to the philosophy of René Descartes: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CAjWUrwvxs4>. The video is in English, but there are embedded subtitles on Youtube in different languages.

## Step 1: Who Was René Descartes? (20 minutes)

At this stage you should provide a brief overview of Descartes' life, including his birth in France, his education, and his travels. It might be helpful to highlight Descartes' role as a mathematician and philosopher, emphasizing his contributions to both fields as a way to explain the influence of philosophy in other academic fields.

Show a picture of Descartes, if available. Here is an example you can use:



Source: 'René Descartes', Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Rene-Descartes>.

At this stage, the Little Philosophers e-book on Descartes might be helpful to introduce Descartes' philosophy. Link to the e-book: <https://littlephilosophers.eu/r2-e-books-and-augmented-reality-books/>.

## Step 2: Descartes' Method of Doubt (20 minutes)

After introducing your students to Descartes, you can start a more in-depth introduction to Descartes' method of doubt as a key aspect of his philosophy.

You should explain how Descartes sought to doubt all beliefs and ideas he had previously held in order to find a foundation of knowledge that could not be doubted.



You should engage students in a group discussion about the importance of scepticism and questioning in the pursuit of truth. As these might be complex topics for children, you can give them some questions and hypothetical scenarios to help them engage with the discussion. Some examples include:

- Have you ever played a guessing game? What if you couldn't trust any of your guesses? How would you figure out what's really true?
- If you were a detective trying to solve a mystery, what questions would you ask to make sure you're getting to the truth?
- Descartes said that sometimes our senses and thoughts can be like silly friends who play tricks on us. How do you think we can be sure about things even when our senses and thoughts are being tricky?

### Step 3: Cogito, Ergo Sum (40 minutes)

At this stage you should introduce Descartes most famous philosophical quote, the famous statement, "**Cogito, ergo sum**" (**I think, therefore I am**).

Explain how Descartes used this statement as a starting point for his philosophy, aiming to show that only the act of doubting and thinking can prove one's existence. In more simple terms, Descartes argues that the simple act of thinking and questioning things in our daily lives is proof that one exists, even if they cannot be sure about the existence of their surroundings.

You should encourage your students to reflect on what existence means to them and how they can apply this concept in their own lives.

One example to help your students familiarise with this philosophical statement could be; Imagine that you are trying to complete a puzzle, and there are still many pieces missing. You take a few pieces and try to see if the colours are matching with any part of the puzzle, you completed so far. By trying to find similar colours, you are showing that you're thinking and being aware of yourself.

At this stage, you should divide your students into groups of four to five students per group. Give one puzzle to each group and ask them to discuss and try to solve as much of the puzzle as they can in the next 15 to 20 minutes.

Then, ask them to share some of the questions and thoughts they had while solving the puzzles. Explain to your students that all these questions are proof of their existence, according to Descartes' 'I think, therefore I am' statement.

### Step 4: Reflecting on Descartes' Ideas (10 minutes)



Towards the end of the lesson plan, you should ask your students to take a few minutes to write down their reflections on Descartes' ideas, specifically focusing on the method of doubt, "Cogito, ergo sum," (I think, therefore I am).

Invite some volunteers to share their thoughts or insights with the rest of the class and answer any remaining questions that your students might have

### References:

'René Descartes', Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Rene-Descartes>.

Little Philosophers, <https://littlephilosophers.eu/?lang=en>.

Youtube, PHILOSOPHY - René Descartes, The School of Life, <https://youtu.be/CAjWUrwvxs4?si=O8Fo24h5LRmMShse>.