



WHAT IS A FLOURISHING LIFE?

"You were born with a song in the seat of your soul; let the life that you live be the singing of it."

— LaShaun Middlebrooks Collier

OVERVIEW

Students explore and write about what makes a good life, using Aristotle as a guide.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- Anytime during the school year, but especially at the beginning to help students recognize the agency they have in creating flourishing lives

TIME REQUIRED

- Multiple Days

LEVEL

- High School

MATERIALS

- Writing materials
- Handout "[Sample Lives According to Aristotle](#)"
- Handout "[Aristotle's Thoughts on Candidate Lives](#)"
- Handout "[Aristotle's Suggestions for a 'Good Life'](#)"

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Reflect on what creates a flourishing life
- Write about the kind of life they want to create for themselves

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Responsible Decision-Making

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

Take a moment to reflect on your own definition of a “flourishing life”. What are you already doing to live this life? What might you shift, change, or remove from your life to increase a sense of “flourishing”?

INSTRUCTIONS

This practice can be done on its own or as a foundation for the practice [The Virtue of Good Sense](#).

PART 1: EXPLORING STUDENTS’ DEFINITION OF A “GOOD LIFE” (30-45 MINUTES)

- Read aloud to students the following scenario:
 - *Imagine this. It is some 70 or 80 years from now. You look back over your life. Unlike many you knew and traveled with you, you have been blessed with a particularly long life. You are thinking through what you felt, what you did and why you did the things you did. You look at what you enjoyed, and what pained you. You look at what you gained and what you lost. You look at what you achieved and where you failed. You see where you were strong, and where you were weak. You think through what you came to know, and what you may have missed. You think through whom you loved and the quality of love that you showed them.*
- Have students discuss their thoughts with a partner or in a small group:
 - *What will have counted as a “good life”, as a life well-lived for them?*
 - *What do they hope to be able to say at the end of their lives?*
- Have students write a short imaginative piece, or act out a role-play that explores the issues raised above—from a perspective that fits them.
- Discuss students’ responses as a whole class.
- Ask students to write a short personal reflection on the following:
 - *How do your current actions further or undermine the “good life” that you hope to have led, at the end of the next 70 or 80 years, or so...?*

PART 2: EXPLORING DIFFERENT KINDS OF LIVES (15-20 MINUTES)

- Say to students:

- *Humans have grappled with the question of what makes a "good life" since time immemorial, and their answers have differed immensely. Aristotle had some clear and strong views on this subject. He set them out in his classic book of ethics, entitled "The Nicomachean Ethics".*
- Display overhead or give students the handout "[Sample Lives According to Aristotle](#)" and ask them to read through the scenarios. Say:
 - *Clearly, most lives will be made up of different components and elements of these, but one ingredient will dominate, and animate all that you do.*
- Have students discuss in pairs or a small group:
 - *Which of these "candidate lives" for "the good life" corresponds best to the one you imagined in the first exercise?*
 - *Have you thought of a kind of life that is not covered by one of these candidate lives? If so, what is it?*
- Have students share their thoughts with the whole class.

PART 3: EXPLORING ARISTOTLE'S OPINIONS ABOUT DIFFERENT KINDS OF LIVES (15 MINUTES)

- Say to students:
 - *Aristotle has his own views on the various kinds of life on offer.*
- Display overhead or give students the handout #2 [Aristotle's Thoughts on Candidate Lives](#).
- Have students discuss in pairs what they think about what Aristotle thinks about these various kinds of life, encouraging them to agree or disagree with him.
- Have students share their thoughts with the whole class.

PART 4: EXPLORING ARISTOTLE'S VERSION OF WHAT MAKES A "GOOD LIFE" (20 MINUTES)

- Say to students:
 - *Now we're going to consider Aristotle's own suggestions for what makes a "good life".*
- Give students the Handout #3 [Aristotle's Suggestions for a 'Good Life'](#).
- After reading through the handout, ask students to discuss in pairs, small groups, or as a whole class:
 - What do you think of Aristotle's answer? Is he on to something, or is he completely off the mark? Why or why not?
 - Which other qualities, or virtues would you add to the list and why?

CLOSURE

- Have students choose a virtue either from Aristotle's list or something else that they would like to cultivate in their lives. Have them write a few paragraphs about why they chose this virtue, what it looks like in action, and what they might do to practice it.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

How did students respond to this practice? Did it make them more aware of creating their lives more intentionally and geared towards what is good for both them and others?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Even though [Aristotle](#) proposed the markers of a “flourishing life” over 2,000 years ago, modern-day scholars do not agree on what it means to flourish as a human being.

The field of positive psychology has suggested using the PERMA model as a framework: Positive emotions, Engagement, positive Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement. Indeed, research on teaching skills related to these factors to students has shown [positive results](#), such as an improvement in social skills and learning strengths (e.g., curiosity, love of learning, creativity).

However, Aristotelian ethics places virtue at the center of a flourishing and happy life. When considering individual virtues such as [gratitude](#), [generosity](#), and [kindness](#), scientists have found that practicing these virtues does indeed increase both adults’ and children’s happiness and/or well-being.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Even though no exact definition of a flourishing life exists, just presenting students with the idea that they have agency in creating a life of meaning and happiness is powerful—especially as so many suffer from [mental health challenges](#) such as depression and anxiety.

While schools may be hesitant about taking away time from academic content to teach students the skills that cultivate a flourishing life, the [extraordinary popularity](#) of university courses on happiness should be evidence enough of the tremendous need and desire for this guidance.

SOURCE

[Secondary Programme of Study](#) was originally developed by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue, in partnership with the John Templeton Foundation.

The Jubilee Centre is a pioneering interdisciplinary research centre focussing on character, virtues and values in the interest of human flourishing, based at the University of Birmingham. The Centre is a leading informant on policy and practice in this area and through its extensive range of projects contributes to a renewal of character virtues in both individuals and societies. In addition to the Secondary Programme of Study linked above, a full suite of free teaching resources can be accessed here: <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/432/character-education>