

TWELFTH SESSION



PEOPLE'S COURT OF ATHENS, 399 BCE

BACKGROUND GUIDE





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LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

It is with immense pleasure that we welcome you to the *People's Court of Athens, 399 BCE* (PCA) at **La Martiniere Model United Nations 2025**. As you take your places within this ancient court, you are stepping not merely into a simulation, but into one of the most defining moments in the history of thought — *the trial of Socrates*.

For three days, you will breathe life into the city of Athens in 399 BCE — a city torn between tradition and transformation, between democracy and doubt. The trial before you is more than the judgment of one philosopher; it is the struggle between two enduring forces: *Can freedom of speech survive within the order of the law?*

Before us stands **Socrates**, son of Sophroniscus, accused of impiety and of corrupting the youth of Athens.

To some, he is a gadfly—stinging the complacency of the city and unsettling our traditions.

To others, he is the conscience of Athens itself—a man whose relentless questioning awakens us from moral slumber. But as citizens and jurors, you must decide whether his pursuit of truth has crossed the bounds of loyalty, piety, and civic duty.

As delegates, you will assume the roles of jurors, philosophers, politicians, and citizens.

You will weigh the charges of impiety and corruption of youth, question witnesses, file petitions, deliver speeches, and perhaps even summon oracles.

Your words will not only determine Socrates' fate but will also test the values that define a civilization — justice, piety, virtue, and truth.

Over the next three days, you will not only speak for or against a man but also for or against an idea: What kind of city should Athens be? One that prizes obedience and unity above all—or one that dares to let its citizens think freely, even at the risk of chaos?

As delegates in this simulation, we invite you to inhabit the world of 5th-century Athens—to think like Athenians, speak as citizens, and argue as philosophers. Your evidence, petitions, and pleas will shape the destiny of this trial. Remember, this is not merely a test of rhetoric but of wisdom. Every argument will echo the eternal struggle between truth and order.

This committee is designed to be both *philosophical* and *performative*. You will be challenged to think critically, and argue persuasively. Remember, this is not a conventional committee of resolutions and motions, but a dynamic courtroom — one where **every evidence, every petition, every word and every silence will count**.



LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

Our advice to you is simple:

1. Understand who your role represents and what they believe in.
2. Ask questions and think deeply
3. Present well-reasoned, critical arguments and avoid relying on AI-generated points.
4. Do not treat this guide as your sole source of research.

We wish you all an engaging and enjoyable experience and remember this court is not a mere stage for argument; it is a mirror held to the conscience of every citizen. Over the next three days, your words, petitions, and judgments will shape the moral fabric of Athens.

You will listen to accusers who speak in the name of the gods and tradition, and to defenders who champion inquiry and truth. Between these two forces lies the heart of the Athenian dilemma — between law and conscience, between stability and reason.

For queries contact us at- pca.lmun2025@gmail.com

ARUL KUMAR
Archon Eponymos

ABHIRAM KRISHNAN SHUKLA
Archon Eponymos



INTRODUCTION TO THE AGENDA

The World of Athens in 399 BCE

In 399 BCE, Athens stood at the crossroads of memory and change. Once the dazzling center of Greek art, philosophy, and democratic innovation, it now bore the heavy burden of military defeat, political instability, and moral uncertainty. The city that had produced Pericles, Sophocles, and Thucydides was still reeling from the long shadow of the Peloponnesian War. The trial and execution of Socrates that year revealed both the intellectual vibrancy and the deep anxieties of a wounded polis struggling to reconcile freedom with order, and thought with faith.

Aftermath of the Peloponnesian War and the Rule of the Thirty Tyrants

The Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) ended in catastrophe for Athens. Sparta's victory crushed the Athenian Empire, dismantled its naval supremacy, and stripped the city of its fortifications. Economic ruin followed—its treasury was empty, farmlands were ravaged, and plague had decimated the population. More than material losses, however, Athens suffered a **moral and psychological collapse**. The democratic pride that once fueled its imperial ambition turned to self-doubt. Many citizens began to question whether democracy itself had led them into ruin.

In the immediate aftermath, Sparta installed a puppet oligarchic regime known as the **Thirty Tyrants**, headed by **Critias** and **Charmides**—both former pupils or admirers of Socrates. Their brief rule (404–403 BCE) was marked by violent purges, confiscation of property, and political executions. Some 1,500 Athenians were killed without trial. The regime alienated almost everyone, and Athens descended into fear and mistrust. It was a time when neighbor suspected neighbor, and open discussion—the lifeblood of Athenian democracy—was silenced by terror.

Restoration of Democracy under Thrasybulus

Democracy was restored only a year later, through the courage of Thrasybulus and his band of exiled democrats, who launched an uprising from Phyle and retook the city. Their victory marked one of the earliest recorded acts of reconciliation in political history. Rather than pursue vengeance, the restored democracy declared a general amnesty—forgiving all but the leaders of the tyranny. This remarkable act of civic mercy helped prevent another civil war, but it did not erase the deep wounds of mistrust. Many Athenians lived in silent resentment; the city was democratic again, but unity was fragile.

Deep Social and Political Divisions

By 399 BCE, Athens remained deeply divided. The **rich and educated elite**, who often admired Spartan discipline or philosophical rationalism, distrusted the volatile masses. The **common citizens**, in turn, viewed these elites as arrogant and unpatriotic. The trauma of civil strife (stasis) had made Athenians suspicious of radical ideas and personalities who challenged traditional authority. The institutions of democracy—the Assembly, the Council, and the People's Courts—had been restored, but the **faith in open debate** was no longer unshaken. Athens sought stability above all else, and this new mood made the city increasingly intolerant of dissenting voices.



INTRODUCTION TO THE AGENDA

The Man in the Middle: Socrates, the Gadfly [1]

At the very center of all these rifts stands Socrates. He is a paradox: a seventy-year-old man who is both the most famous and the most infuriating person in Athens.

He is not a wealthy Sophist; he is a stonemason by trade, a decorated veteran of the war, and he has never taken a single coin for his conversations. He shuffles through the Agora barefoot, in a simple tunic, engaging anyone from a general to a poet to a blacksmith in conversation.

His philosophy begins with a declaration that the Oracle at Delphi proclaimed him the "wisest of all men." But this, he says, is only because he alone is aware of his own ignorance: **he knows that he knows nothing**. He believes "the unexamined life is not worth living" and that his divine mission is to act as a "gadfly" for Athens—to sting the lazy, complacent horse of the state into thinking for itself.

His method is the **Socratic method (elenchus)**. It is not a polite debate; it is a public, logical humiliation. He will ask a powerful politician, "What is justice?" Through a series of relentless, piercing questions, he will masterfully lead the man into a web of contradictions, proving to the crowd of assembled youths that the man has no idea what he is talking about.

For decades, this has earned him the admiration of Athens's brightest young men and the burning hatred of its most powerful. He is not just questioning ideas; he is publicly embarrassing the city's leaders and, in their view, teaching the youth to disrespect them.

And so, Athens finds itself divided — not between good and evil, but between two visions of what it means to be a just city. On one side stand those who believe that reverence for the gods, loyalty to tradition, and respect for authority are the pillars of civic order. To them, Socrates represents dangerous questioning — a man whose words unsettle young minds and weaken the sacred bond that holds the polis together.

On the other side stand those who see in Socrates not a threat, but a mirror — one who forces citizens to confront their own contradictions and to think honestly about virtue, justice, and truth. To them, silencing such a voice would betray the very principles of democracy that Athens claims to defend.

Each side claims to defend Athens; each fears that the other will destroy it.

This is the crossroads at which you, the delegates of the People's Court, now stand. And so the question remains — what does a city owe to its thinkers, and what do thinkers owe to their city?

As the court gathers, the Agora grows silent. The fate of one man will soon be decided — and with it, perhaps, the soul of Athens itself.

[1] <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/socrates/>: Delegates are expected to engage in an in-depth study of the life and times of Socrates, drawing upon the comprehensive entry provided by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. This reading will offer valuable insight into Socrates' philosophical contributions, historical context, and enduring influence on Western thought.

Plato's *Apology* is also worth consulting if you have the time and patience, as several sections offer particularly valuable insights.



KEY THEMES AND QUESTIONS

The trial of Socrates stands at the intersection of philosophy, politics, and civic duty. It raises questions that have challenged societies for centuries — questions about the balance between personal freedom and public responsibility, the nature of justice, and the role of truth in a democracy. As delegates of the People’s Court of Athens, your task is not only to decide whether Socrates is guilty or innocent, but also to reflect on these deeper moral and political issues.

The first and most direct question before the court is “**What is piety?**” Socrates is accused of impiety — of not recognizing the gods of Athens and introducing new ones. To his accusers, this charge represents disloyalty to the values and traditions that hold the city together. To his defenders, however, Socrates’ questioning of religion is not blasphemy but a search for understanding — an attempt to find reason within faith. This raises the larger issue of whether piety lies in unquestioning obedience or in thoughtful reflection about the divine.

A second major question concerns **the limits of free speech in a democracy**. Athens prided itself on being a democracy — a city where citizens could debate and decide together. Yet, like all democracies, it faced the dilemma of how much dissent it could tolerate. Can a society that allows complete freedom of expression also protect its unity and stability? The accusers argue that Socrates’ teachings encourage rebellion and undermine respect for law and authority. His supporters counter that silencing him would betray the very democratic principles Athens claims to uphold.

Another theme is the conflict between **conscience and law**. Should individuals obey the state’s commands even if they believe those commands to be unjust? Socrates, throughout his life, claimed that moral duty to truth was higher than obedience to any authority. The Athenians, however, feared that if every citizen placed personal conscience above the law, order would collapse. Delegates must consider whether civic harmony depends on obedience, or whether true justice requires the courage to defy unjust commands.

The trial also raises the question: **Can philosophy threaten social order?** Socrates’ method of questioning — the Socratic dialogue — encourages doubt and self-examination. Yet to many Athenians, this appeared dangerous in a city recovering from war and political instability. They believed philosophy could confuse the young and weaken faith in democracy. Delegates should debate whether intellectual freedom strengthens or endangers a state, and whether critical thinking is a tool of reform or a path to chaos.

Finally, the trial compels us to ask, “**What is justice — law, virtue, or truth?**” The People’s Court must decide whether justice lies in following the law as written or in following a higher moral principle. This is a tension every society faces — between maintaining order and pursuing truth.

In this committee, delegates are encouraged to think through these questions using reason, ethics, and persuasion.

This list of themes is not exhaustive; you are encouraged to bring in more ideas and perspectives that deepen the discussion and connect with the broader questions of justice, democracy, and truth.



RULES OF PROCEDURE

1. Opening Statements

- Each delegate will begin by presenting their opening statements.
- The purpose is to outline the case, highlight key arguments, and present the overarching narrative.
- Each statement should be concise, logical, and supported by initial evidence or reasoning.
- No interruptions are allowed during opening statements unless a procedural point is raised.

2. Discussion Hour (Moderated Caucus)

- This is a structured, moderated session where arguments are debated.
- **Order of Speaking:**
 - Prosecution presents their arguments.
 - Defense responds with their arguments.
 - Neutral participants

Any participant may raise points of intervention (Points of Interjection, point of enquiry, or point of evidential demand (point of order)) during the session.

An official accusation report should ideally follow every 2-3 moderated caucuses.

3. Strategy Hour (Unmoderated Caucus)

- An informal, unmoderated session to discuss.

4. Points:

Participants may use specific points to maintain order, clarify issues, or challenge arguments.

1. Point of Interjection (POI)

- Used to interject with a brief question during another participant's speech.
- The question should be short, crisp and to the point.

2. Point of Enquiry (Procedural Point)

- Raised to ask about procedural matters, rules, or clarifications regarding the conduct of the court.
- #### 3. Point of Order / Evidential Demand
- Raised when a participant believes a procedural rule has been violated or when evidence is improperly presented or referenced.



DOCUMENTATION

The Accusal Report [2] (Graphē)

Purpose and Structure

The Accusal Report serves as the formal indictment brought before the People's Court.

In Athenian law, this document (graphē) outlined the specific charges [3] against the accused and presented evidence supporting these allegations.

The report should clearly state the charges based on Athenian law, include evidence like testimonies, records, laws, philosophical texts or examples, explain how the actions harm the city, and be signed by all prosecutors in agreement, ideally.

The prosecutors must collaborate to produce a unified document that clearly articulates the above.

The Philosophical Treatise [4] (Apologia)

Purpose and Structure

The Defense Report—known as an apologia (meaning "defense" or "account of oneself")—provides the accused's systematic response to all charges. This document allows the defense team to present their counterarguments, clarifications, and alternative interpretations of evidence.

A strong defense should include several key components presented cohesively.

It begins with a **point-by-point refutation**, directly addressing and disproving each accusation listed in the graphē.

This is followed by a **clear philosophical context**, situating the accused's actions, teachings, or statements within their proper intellectual or ethical framework to reveal their true intent. Alongside these, legal counterarguments must challenge the prosecution's interpretation or application of the law, exposing inconsistencies or overreaches.

To strengthen the case, an **alternative narrative** should be constructed— one that coherently reinterprets the evidence and presents a persuasive account of events favorable to the defense.

The defense must collaborate to produce a unified document that clearly articulates the above.

[2] The term graphē is the Ancient Greek word for "writing." In Athenian law, its meaning was specialized to denote this formal, written indictment, distinguishing it from an oral accusation.

*Those with a genuine intellectual curiosity will find much to engage with in the **Graphē Paranomōn** against Aristocrates.*

[3] Precise legal accusations grounded in Athenian law

[4] From the Ancient Greek apologia, "a speech in one's own defense," derived from apologeisthai, "to speak in defense." This was the formal, technical term for the defendant's speech responding to the graphē. While the Greek apologia is the root of the modern word "apology," its meaning is the opposite of expressing regret. *It is, in fact, a forceful, systematic legal and philosophical defense of his life and actions.*



DOCUMENTATION

Proclamations (Communique's)

Proclamations are formal, public announcements delivered to the Court. These are the official messages furnished by the Prosecution Team, Defence and Neutral Members.

The Decree of the People's Court (Psēphisma)

Purpose and Structure

The **Decree (Psēphisma)** represents the final, authoritative judgment of the *People's Court of Athens*. It is the polished and collective document that encapsulates the reasoning, verdict, and implications of the trial. In this simulation, **both the Prosecution and the Defense** will draft their own decrees, each seeking to present the more persuasive and substantively grounded judgment.

The Decree should reflect the essence of Athenian justice — one that balances legal reasoning with moral reflection. It serves as the permanent historical record of the trial's outcome and demonstrates how the jury, as citizens of Athens, reached its conclusion through reasoned deliberation and democratic procedure.

Procedure

1. Both sides — the **Accusers (Prosecution)** and the **Defenders (Supporters of Socrates)** — will collaboratively draft their respective decrees.
2. Only accepted evidence, testimonies, and reports with at least **one approved or passed point** may be added. Reports with no approved points, or unverified/rejected evidence, cannot be included.
3. **Neutral delegates** must, by this stage, align with one side and contribute to the drafting of that side's decree.
4. Each Decree must be **submitted to the EB** for review, after which both versions will be presented before the court.
5. The final choice of which Decree is adopted as the official Decree will be voted upon its **clarity, coherence, and philosophical depth**.

The trial of Socrates remains history's most famous example of this system in action, raising eternal questions about the relationship between the individual philosopher and the democratic state.



THE TWELFTH SESSION