



Legal vs. Moral: Lesson Plan

Topic	
An action is considered legal if it does not violate any of the state’s written rules. An action is considered moral if it fits within one’s definition of what is good, though everyone has different standards. Laws and morals have similarities and differences, but the two certainly influence each other.	
Possible subjects/classes	Time needed
Government, Philosophy, Law, Civics	35-45 minutes
Video link:	
https://academy4sc.org/topic/legal-vs-moral-written-vs-right/	
Objective: <i>What will students know/be able to do at the end of class?</i>	
<p>Students will be able to...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define legality and morality. • Compare the differences and similarities between legality and morality. • Analyze the impact that changes to morality or law have on the other. 	
Key Concepts & Vocabulary	
Legal system, religion	
Materials Needed	
Worksheet	
Before you watch	
<p>Poll the class: Ask the class why certain actions are considered wrong. Start with obviously wrong actions like murder. Then ask about actions that are illegal, but not “wrong,” like jaywalking. Finally, ask about mean actions that aren’t illegal, like lying. Pay specific attention to when students object morally versus when they object legally.</p>	
While you watch	



1. List one similarity and one difference between legality and morality.
2. Which emerged first, morals or law?
3. What effect can changes to the law have on society?

After you watch/discussion questions

1. What is the goal of law? What is the goal of morality?
2. Describe your own morality with some traits that you try to emulate. What influenced your sense of morality?
3. Which is more important, following the law or following your own moral compass? Defend your reasoning.

Activity Ideas

- **Venn Diagrams:** Split the students into two groups. Both groups will be creating Venn diagrams to categorize actions. One group will create a diagram of actions that are legal, moral, or both. The other group will create a diagram of actions that are illegal, immoral, or both. Have the students come up with as many examples as they can. Once they are finished, have the groups share as a class to compare their diagrams.
- **Problem Analysis:** Present the class with an ethical dilemma. One example could be an honors student has become overwhelmed working a job to help her family. She copies parts of an essay from the internet and gets caught by her teacher. She profusely apologized and re-wrote the essay before being asked. She was recently accepted into a good college and is worried she could have her offer revoked. Ask the students what the Honor Council should do. Ask them to consider what the school rules say and moral arguments both in favor of a harsh punishment and against it.
- **Worksheet Discussion:** Have the students independently complete the Worksheet. After the students have finished, go around the room and have everyone share their examples of immoral but legal acts. As students share, ask them to identify the lasting legacy of the law and state whether law or morality changed first.

Sources/places to learn more

1. Huang, Bert I. "Law and Moral Dilemmas." *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 130, 2017, pp. 659–699.
https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3022&context=faculty_scholarship.



2. Koch, Peter. "How Should We Balance Morality and the Law?" *Center for Medical Ethics and Health Policy*, Baylor College of Medicine, 19 Dec. 2019. <https://blogs.bcm.edu/2019/12/20/how-should-we-balance-morality-and-the-law>.
3. Machan, Tibor R. "Law vs. Morality." *Cato Institute*, 21 Mar. 2002. <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/law-vs-morality#related-content>.