

# Conscientious Objection in the Classroom

## Elementary and Secondary Schools

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### About Dissection

Dissection was introduced into education in the 1920s as a way of studying anatomy, biology, physiology, and the theory of evolution. It was during a time when people were not so aware—or not at all aware—of issues involving the environment and animal life.

Approximately half of the animals dissected in elementary and secondary schools are frogs. Others include mice, rats, worms, cats, rabbits, fetal pigs, birds, and fish. The animals come from breeding facilities, slaughterhouses, their natural habitats, pet stores, local pounds, and even animal dealers and thieves. Most are killed and “processed” at biological supply companies.

### Why Be Concerned?

- Key members of ecosystems around the world, frogs are disappearing fast. Dissection is partly to blame for this depletion because frogs used in school science labs are often collected from the wild. Even frog breeders restock their captive frog population by periodically taking more frogs from the wild.
- Animals used for dissection can have a miserable existence in the process of being captured, transported and ultimately killed.
- Animals used in dissection are often embalmed with formaldehyde, a chemical preservative linked to cancer of the throat, lungs, and nasal passages. Formaldehyde can also damage the eyes, cause asthma attacks and bronchitis, and severely irritate the skin. So far, people can only speculate how inhaling and touching formaldehyde affects the long-term health of students and teachers.
- Dissection has become big business. About six million animals are dissected in U.S. schools. The nation’s largest biological supply company alone grosses \$25 to \$30 million annually in sales of animals for dissection.
- These costs are borne by schools. For the average-sized science class, 35 bullfrogs cost around \$265, nearly \$1,325 every year for a school with five biology classes. Many

alternatives, which can be used for years by an unlimited number of students, are much less expensive. For example, the CD-ROM *The Digital Frog* sells for a one-time cost of \$197. The hundreds of dollars saved each year can help fund other student needs and activities.

- Biology courses are intended to expose students to useful concepts and stimulate an interest in the life sciences, but dissections can interfere with these goals. Dissection devalues life and teaches insensitivity by treating living beings as disposable objects.

Because so many students in high schools and elementary schools have refused to dissect, the right to refuse has been established in many schools across the country. But there always has been someone—a student or a parent—at every school who was the *first* person to say *no* to dissection. At your school, you may be that person. It is not always easy to set a precedent, but it is well worth taking that first step. One of the most important things you can do is to assert your right to an education which does not violate your principles. Remember, many medical schools, such as Harvard, Stanford, Yale, and Columbia Universities, have eliminated the animal laboratories which were once used for teaching.

### What You Can Do

Students, parents, teachers, and concerned taxpayers can all act to end dissection. Here’s how students can help:

- As early as possible in the school year, find out if you will be expected to perform or watch a dissection. Do not wait until the last minute. If a dissection lab is planned, tell your teacher that you do not want to participate. With enough time, you and your teacher should be able to choose another project.
- When talking with your teacher, calmly and plainly state your reasons for refusing to dissect. Emphasize that you cannot comfortably participate in dissection because of the

values and beliefs you hold. Ask your teacher to respond as soon as possible to your request for a lesson without dissection. If he or she refuses your request, take your concern to the principal.

- Suggest alternatives that will allow you to gain the same knowledge as your classmates who participate in the dissection. Most students do not accept watching other students dissect as an alternative, as this puts them in the position of participating in the use of animals as educational tools. You should expect to be given the same tests as the other students, provided they do not include a dissected animal, and you should not receive a reduced grade for doing an alternative project.
- It may help to put your statements into writing, either to help you speak with your teacher, or to give directly to him or her to read before you discuss the matter. If you give a statement to your teachers, keep a copy of it for future reference.
- You might want to involve other students who oppose dissection. Use any available student forum, such as the school newspaper or student government, to encourage awareness and discussion. Most students will support the right to not dissect.

For additional information, please refer to PCRM's fact sheets entitled, "Dissection Alternatives" and "Cost Analysis of Dissection Versus Nonanimal Teaching Methods."

## **Additional Resources**

A booklet, *Objecting to Dissection*, counseling, and alternative loan information are available from:

**National Anti-Vivisection Society (NAVS)**  
53 W. Jackson Blvd.  
Chicago, IL 60604-3795  
Dissection Hotline: 800-922-FROG  
[www.navs.org](http://www.navs.org)

A catalog of alternatives, *Beyond Dissection*, is available from:

**Ethical Science Education Coalition**  
333 Washington St., Suite 850  
Boston, MA 02108  
617-367-9143  
[www.neavs.org](http://www.neavs.org)

A collection of information on specific alternatives, *Alternative Project Sheets*, is available from:

**National Association for Humane and Environmental Education (NAHEE)**  
67 Norwich Essex Tpke.  
E. Haddam, CT 06423  
860-434-8666  
[www.nahee.org](http://www.nahee.org)

A program to teach students about environmental and animal issues, *Animal Learn*, is available from:

**American Anti-Vivisection Society (AAVS)**  
801 Old York Rd., # 204  
Jenkintown, PA 19046  
800-SAY-AAVS  
[www.aavs.org](http://www.aavs.org)

Additional information on dissection is available from:

**People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)**  
501 Front St.  
Norfolk, VA 23510  
757-622-7382  
[www.peta-online.org](http://www.peta-online.org)

Alternative loans are also available from:

**Humane Society of the United States (HSUS)**  
2100 L St., N.W.  
Washington, DC 20037  
301-258-3042  
[www.hsus.org](http://www.hsus.org)