

# **OBJECTING TO DISSECTION**

## **A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT'S HANDBOOK**

### **Introduction:**

Dear Student:

Whether you pursue a career in science or medicine, agriculture or business, or your ambitions lead you to an entirely different field, the lessons you learn today will influence the rest of your life. You need to understand how the world around you works, what makes your body healthy, and how to protect the earth. At the National Anti-Vivisection Society, we believe that how you learn is as important as what you learn. In your science classes there are better ways to learn about life than by dissecting animals.

By refusing to dissect, you have taken a brave stand in defense of animals. You have the right to refuse to do something you believe is wrong. And your decision deserves respect from your classmates, teachers and parents.

We hope that this book provides you with the information you need to support your compassionate decision. We understand that your raising an objection to dissection can be difficult. Rest assured that you are not alone in your concerns. Every week the NAVS Dissection Hotline receives hundreds of calls from like-minded students. Please call us if you have any questions or need additional assistance. Encourage your parents and teachers to call us too for current information about innovations in science education that do not inflict suffering on animals.

Be proud of having the conviction to say “no” to dissection. Thank you for standing up for what you believe and being brave enough to protect those unable to defend themselves. We at the National Anti-Vivisection Society applaud your efforts!

Sincerely,

Peggy Cunniff  
NAVS Executive Director

Dear Student:

By contacting the NAVS Dissection Hotline, you've already taken the first step toward protesting animal dissection in the classroom. This booklet is designed to help you down the path to obtaining a humane alternative to dissection.

Refusing to dissect animals can be a difficult choice. In 1987 a California student decided she didn't want to dissect a frog in her high school biology class. Her simple ethical objection spiraled into a two-year struggle to establish her right not to harm animals in the classroom.

In California, Florida, Illinois, New York, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island students in grades kindergarten through high school have now won the right to refuse to dissect, harm or kill animals in the classroom and the right to substitute an alternative project.

Other states have policies that guarantee a student's right to refuse dissection. I believe that all students deserve to have their rights respected.

We designed this handbook to assist students in taking a stand on their beliefs about humane education and respect for animals. Also check out our Alternatives Loan Program information to see what alternatives are available from our free-loan program.

If after reading this booklet you have more questions about how to proceed, feel free to call us at our toll-free number, **1-800-922-FROG (3764)**.

Sincerely,

Linda Petty  
*Director, NAVS Dissection Hotline*

## **TO DISSECT...OR OBJECT** **A question of conscience.**

When dissection was introduced into the educational curriculum in the 1920s, it was thought to be a good learning tool in the study of anatomy, physiology and the theory of evolution. Today, more sophisticated teaching methods have been developed which can replace dissection and save animals.

But dissection is a big business. Millions of animals are killed each year to be dissected for educational experiments. Many of these animals, such as frogs, earthworms, crayfish and perch, are collected from their natural environments. In the process, their habitats are decimated and entire ecologies are threatened. Many animals are subjected to cruelty and suffering in the process of becoming "dissection specimens."

Even more destructive is the desensitizing effect of mutilating and dismembering animals in the name of science education. Somehow the study of a "life science"--meant to instill wonderment and respect for life--has become the science of death. Dissection teaches students that animal life is expendable and unimportant. As a result, some of the best potential scientists, who have a deep respect for animal life, may end up dropping out of a field they love because they refuse to take part in senseless killing.

Despite the availability of numerous educational alternatives, animal dissection remains a fixture in many science courses for students in grades 7 through 12. Year after year, millions of animals die to demonstrate basic anatomy and physiology that could easily be taught by more humane means.

Students around the country have begun to speak out against this misguided practice. As students' objections to dissection become more vocal and visible, the movement toward nonanimal alternatives grows.

Every time a student exercises his or her right **not** to dissect animals, the awareness of the entire academic community is increased. By exercising your right as a student, you can help create an environment where respect for animals is considered the norm.

## **SAYING NO TO DISSECTION**

### **Guidelines to consider when raising your objection to your teacher.**

Not all students choose to approach their teachers directly. Sometimes the simplest thing to do is to ask your parent(s) to write a note to your teacher. Often a note from a supportive parent is all that is needed to make teachers or administrators more accommodating. Here is a sample note:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Please excuse \_\_\_\_\_ from participating in or observing animal dissection. She/he is willing to do an alternative project of equal time and effort.

(signed)

Mr. and or Mrs./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_.

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_ .

However, it is not necessary to get your parent's support. If you want to proceed on your own, here are some guidelines.

### **1. KNOW YOURSELF**

Examine your motives and decide how far you are prepared to go in order to establish your right not to dissect. Are you willing to present your case to your teacher and principal? Find or design your own alternative? Take legal action? Accept your limits, given the risks involved, and adjust your goals accordingly.

### **2. VOICE OBJECTIONS EARLY**

Before the term starts, or as soon as possible thereafter, ask your teacher whether you will be expected to dissect. Find out precisely what you will be asked to do. Don't rely on your teacher to give you advance warning. Tell your teacher of your intention not to participate in dissection experiments as soon as possible; do not wait until the day of the dissection lab to voice your objection. This will give both you and your teacher enough time to work out an acceptable alternative.

### **3. BE FIRM, BE CALM**

State your objections calmly and clearly, and be prepared to discuss (not argue) your reasons for refusing to dissect. Never approach your teacher in an arrogant, self-righteous or confrontational manner. Presume that he or she may have a different belief system on the issue of animal use, and it is unlikely that you will change those views. On the other hand, stress that you do not wish this value system to be imposed upon you, as it conflicts with your ethical or spiritual beliefs.

#### **4. SUGGEST ALTERNATIVES**

Suggest reasonable alternatives that will meet the teaching goals of the course by some method that doesn't involve the harmful use of animals. There are many innovative alternatives available today. This could include writing a paper, using a computer simulation, preparing anatomical charts or studying diagrams, videos or models. The alternative project should take an equivalent amount of time and effort and be relevant to the course work. Be prepared to be tested on the same materials as other students, as long as the test itself does not include a practical dissection, or the use of dissected specimens. You should not be penalized for doing an alternative project. If you need specific suggestions for alternative course work, see the Alternatives Loan Program listing or call NAVS at **1-800-888-NAVS (6287)**.

#### **5. ASK FOR A STRAIGHT ANSWER**

Ask your teacher to respond promptly to your request for an alternative project so you'll have enough time to complete it. If you get a noncommittal or negative response, take your request to the head of the science department or the principal. Call on your parents for support if possible.

#### **6. ORGANIZE OTHERS**

Another approach is to organize like-minded students and go to your teacher or science department head as a group. Use the school media, especially the newspaper and radio station, as a forum for discussion. Introduce the ethical issues surrounding dissection at student government meetings. For information on passing a choice policy in your school or district, see page 10.

#### **7. GET LEGAL ADVICE**

The NAVS Dissection Hotline has had great success in negotiating with educational institutions on this issue. If you want legal advice or need to take legal action to defend your right to object to dissection, the NAVS Dissection Hotline will direct you to an attorney organization that specializes in animal issues.

### **PUTTING IT INTO WORDS**

#### **Communicating your thoughts and feelings about animals and dissection.**

*Some students who refuse to dissect encounter resistance and even hostility from teachers, department heads and principals. When your ethical beliefs are challenged, it's important to be prepared. Here are some arguments that you might come up against if you object to taking part in dissection, along with some possible responses.*

**TEACHER:** Dissection is a course requirement, and you have to do what's required to pass the course.

**STUDENT:** *I'm willing to be tested on my knowledge acquired by means other than dissection. I'm willing to do as much work as anyone else--by studying books, computer programs, videos or models--to meet the standards of the course.*

**TEACHER:** You don't have to kill the animal, it's already dead.

**STUDENT:** *Using an animal that was captured, raised or killed for dissection still contributes to the cruelty involved. Even if the animal was killed for other reasons (such as a dog or cat euthanized at an animal shelter), using the animal for educational purposes is supporting the notion that animals are merely "tools."*

**TEACHER:** You don't have to dissect, just watch.

**STUDENT:** *I can't watch someone else doing something that I think is wrong. Watching is still taking part in the dissection, and I am unwilling to do that. I would like to be excused from the lab while the dissection is taking place.*

**TEACHER:** You are just being squeamish. You should face your fears and make yourself do the dissection anyway.

**STUDENT:** *Refusing to dissect has nothing to do with being afraid. Being opposed to dissection is not a sign of emotional immaturity, but of compassion for animals.*

**TEACHER:** The hands-on experience of dissection is essential to understanding biology. It teaches us to understand life.

**STUDENT:** *Biology is supposed to teach respect for life, but dissection teaches us that animal life is cheap and expendable. I can get "hands-on" experience by using detailed models of animal anatomy, observing live animals, or dissecting plants. Also, some people learn more from clear, detailed diagrams or computer simulations than from animal specimens. Even most medical schools no longer require the use of non-human animals in their classrooms.*

**TEACHER:** If one student is allowed to refuse to dissect, what is to stop all students from doing so?

**STUDENT:** *Any student with sincere objections to dissecting should have his or her beliefs respected. Many schools have allowed alternatives for a long time without any problems.*

**TEACHER:** What if a student of one race refuses to sit next to a student of another race? What if students decide they don't want to take part in gym class? If I give in to you, I will have to give in to other students on other issues.

**STUDENT:** *It isn't fair to compare me to a bigot or a student who doesn't want to run in gym class. My objection to dissection is based on moral principles. This is completely different from a student with racial prejudices or one who is trying to avoid class work. A teacher needs to discriminate between students with moral objections and those who simply want their own way.*

**TEACHER:** You are not a vegetarian (or you wear leather shoes), so therefore you are not entitled to object to dissection.

**STUDENT:** *I have the right to draw the line where my conscience dictates, and to have my beliefs respected. Some people believe that it is necessary to use animals for food (or clothing) while at the same time believing it is wrong to eat dogs and cats, or to hunt.*

*Everyone draws the line somewhere, and because of my moral beliefs, I draw the line at dissection.*

**TEACHER:** The teacher's academic freedom is at stake.

**STUDENT:** *My freedom of belief is what really is at stake. All the teacher is being asked to do is agree to allow an alternative procedure for me because I am morally opposed to dissection. Students who are willing to dissect can still do so. I know that other school systems offer alternatives to dissection. California, Florida, Illinois, New York, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island even have laws saying that students have the right not to dissect. I only ask for the same respect.*

## **PUTTING IT IN WRITING**

**When you refuse to dissect, it may be necessary to send letters to your teacher, science department head and, if necessary, your principal in order to formally explain your beliefs. Here are some suggestions for writing these letters:**

Keep it short and to the point.

Do not be defensive or argumentative.

Stick to the issue, i.e. your right to have your beliefs respected, and your willingness to perform an alternative project.

Be sure to include a statement as to why you feel dissection violates your ethical or spiritual beliefs.

Provide suggestions for alternatives--show your teacher the pullout dissection alternatives section in the center of this booklet or call us for suggestions.

Ask for a prompt reply to your request to do an alternative project.

State your willingness to commit an equivalent amount of time and energy to alternative study.

Always keep copies of your letters for your own file, as these will be important if you ultimately take legal action. You should always keep a diary or written summary of your actions. Include dates, times and subjects of conversations, as well as people involved.

## **PASSING A STUDENT CHOICE POLICY IN YOUR SCHOOL OR DISTRICT**

**Many students want to pass a student choice policy in their own school or school district. Here are some suggestions:**

**1.** Start a petition and collect as many signatures from other students, parents, and teachers as possible. The petition should be short and simple. You may want it to read as follows:

“We request that \_\_\_\_\_ school (or School District) institute a formal policy whereby all students are given, without penalty, the option of a non-animal alternative to dissection.”

2. Prepare to make a presentation requesting alternatives. This can be done in the form of a letter. Make it clear that “alternatives” do not include dropping the class, taking a lower grade, watching the teacher or another student dissect, or being tested using dissected specimens. Some points you may want to make in your presentation:

Students have a right to have their feelings and beliefs respected. Many schools allow alternatives to dissection, and six states have passed laws protecting the student’s right to a humane alternative.

Offering alternatives encourages an enthusiasm for science. Many students avoid science classes because of dissection requirements.

Many innovative alternatives to dissection exist and are more cost effective over time than dissection specimens.

Many students object to the cruelty involved in raising, capturing and killing animals for dissection purposes.

Dissection is not necessary to science education. Even most medical schools no longer require the use of non-human animals. Using alternative teaching methods encourages respect for life.

3. Make an appointment to meet with your school principal, or get on the agenda for the next school board meeting. Find out how long you will be allowed to speak.

4. When the student choice policy is approved, be sure it is formalized in writing. Follow up to make sure that students are informed of their right to choose and that alternatives are readily available. And make sure that this policy is publicized so that students in the future know that they have a choice not to dissect before they are faced with the dissection in science class.

## **OTHER STEPS TO TAKE**

**Now that you’re aware of your right to refuse participation in dissection and know of viable, humane alternatives, you may wish to pursue animal advocacy to a greater degree. Listed are some suggestions:**

### **JOIN NAVS**

As a student member of the National Anti-Vivisection Society, you will be kept informed about issues relating to animals in research, education and product testing. Your membership includes a year’s subscription to the NAVS *Animal Action Report*, a copy of *Personal Care for People Who Care*, Action Alerts and access to our library of resources.

### **BECOME A CRUELTY-FREE CONSUMER**

Purchase only those cosmetics and personal care products which are not tested on animals. NAVS regularly produces a guide, *Personal Care For People Who Care*, identifying the animal testing policies of major manufacturers and distributors of personal care products. The most recent edition contains the names and addresses for more than 700 companies that do and do not test their products and ingredients on animals. A copy of *Personal Care* is included with each NAVS membership or can be purchased separately.

### **ACTIVELY PURSUE HUMANE SCIENCE**

Look to science fairs and other extracurricular endeavors to demonstrate scientific progress achieved without the use of animals. Reference science fair guidelines and encourage your school to adopt rules which prohibit any invasive animal experimentation.

### **ILLUSTRATE YOUR COMPASSION FOR ANIMALS**

Enter the annual NAVS Art for Animals Contest. Submit original paintings, poetry, drawings, sculpture, music or videos that best express your feelings for animal welfare and against vivisection. Call NAVS for details at 1-800-888-NAVS (6287).