# The Human Sorting Machine

Write a sorting rule for a fictional decision before you know who it affects — then find out who your 'neutral' rule actually excluded, and why.

| AGE BAND | DURATION | GROUP SIZE | CONCEPT |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ages 11–15 | 30–40 minutes | Small groups | Justice |

Learning objective

Students can **identify how a rule built from a limited set of categories can produce an outcome that feels unfair, without anyone intending it to.**

## What you need

- A one-line scenario (for example, 'ten students want one spot on the class trip')
- Applicant cards, one set per group, each with 4–5 visible traits (grades, activity, distance from school, home language)
- One hidden 'context card' per excluded applicant, revealed only after the rule is applied

## Why this works

A rule almost never announces who it will exclude — that only becomes visible once real cases pass through it. Writing the rule *before* seeing the people it will sort, the way this activity forces, is close to how many real systems actually get built: the categories come first, the consequences come later, and by the time the consequences are visible the rule already feels settled.

## How it works

1. Groups receive the scenario, but not the applicant cards yet.
2. Using only the category names they'll be given — not the real data — groups write a sorting rule to decide who gets the spot.
3. Reveal the applicant cards. Apply the rule exactly as written.
4. Reveal who got the spot, and reveal one hidden context card about a student the rule excluded — something the rule's categories couldn't see, like having never had this opportunity before.
5. Give groups one chance to revise their rule, and discuss what changed and why.

## Talk about it

- Which category in your rule turned out to be standing in for something else it wasn't meant to measure?
- Was your rule unfair, or was it just missing information? Is that a meaningful difference, or does it matter equally to the person it excluded?
- Who should get to revise a rule like this — only the person who wrote it, or the people it sorts?