

The Greek word *sophistēs*, formed from the noun *sophia*, ‘wisdom’ or ‘learning’, has the general sense ‘one who exercises wisdom or learning’. As *sophia* could designate specific types of expertise as well as general sagacity in the conduct of life and the higher kinds of insight associated with seers and poets, the word originally meant ‘sage’ or ‘expert’. In the course of the fifth century BCE the term, while retaining its original unspecific sense, came in addition to be applied specifically to a new type of intellectuals, professional educators who toured the Greek world offering instruction in a wide range of subjects, with particular emphasis on skill in public speaking and the successful conduct of life. The emergence of this new profession, which was an extension to new areas of the tradition of the itinerant rhapsode (reciter of poems, especially of Homer), was a response to various social, economic, political and cultural developments of the period. The increasing wealth and intellectual sophistication of Greek cities, especially Athens, created a demand for higher education beyond the traditional basic grounding in literacy, arithmetic, music and physical training. To some extent this involved the popularization of Ionian speculation about the physical world (as discussed in Pre-Socratic Philosophy), which was extended into areas such as history, geography and the origins of civilization. The increase in participatory democracy, especially in Athens, led to a demand for success in political and forensic oratory, and hence to the development of specialized techniques of persuasion and argument. Finally, the period saw the flourishing of a challenging, rationalistic climate of thought on questions including those of morality, religion and political conduct, to which the sophists both responded and contributed. It is important to emphasize the individualistic character of the sophistic profession; its practitioners belonged to no organization, shared no common body of beliefs and founded no schools, either in the sense of academic institutions or in that of bodies of individuals committed to the promulgation of specific doctrines.

Sophism is an early Pre-Socratic school of philosophy in ancient Greece. It is the name often given to many other early Greek philosophers who were more concerned with Man himself and how he should behave than with big questions about the Universe. Rather than a well-defined school or movement, however, it is more of a loose grouping of like-minded individuals.

The term "sophism" comes from the Greek "sophos" or "sophia" (meaning "wise" or "wisdom"), and originally referred to any expertise in a specific domain of knowledge or craft. After a period where it mainly referred to poets, the word came to describe general wisdom and, especially, wisdom about human affairs. Over time, it came to denote a class of itinerant intellectuals who taught courses in "excellence" or "virtue", (often charging high fees for it), who speculated about the nature of language and culture, and who employed rhetoric to achieve their purposes (which was generally to persuade or convince others).

Sophists held relativistic views on cognition and knowledge (that there is no absolute truth, or that two points of view can be acceptable at the same time), skeptical views on truth and morality, and their philosophy often contained criticisms of religion, law and ethics. Many Sophists were just as religious as most of their contemporaries, but some held atheistic or agnostic views. Typical Sophist quotations include "Man is the measure of all things" (Protagoras) and "Justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger" (Thrasymachus, c. 459 - 400 B.C.).

Sophists had considerable influence in their time, and were largely well-regarded. They were generally itinerant teachers who accepted fees in return for instruction in oratory and rhetoric, and they emphasized the practical application of rhetoric toward civic and political life. Their cultural and psychological contributions played an important role in the growth of democracy in Athens, not least through their rhetorical teaching, their adoption of Relativism and their liberal and pluralistic acceptance of other viewpoints. Sophists were also some of the world's first lawyers, making full use of their highly-developed argumentation skill.