

Discussion Questions for *Pickwick Papers*

1. The *Pickwick Papers* starts out as a series of unconnected travel stories relating to a social club involving Mr. Pickwick, Tracy Tupman, Nathaniel Winkle and Augustus Snodgrass. The plot doesn't develop until Mr. Pickwick meets Sam Weller, and then revolves around a series of travels, romances and situations which involve Mr. Pickwick and his friends. Do you think the plot is sufficiently developed in the book, or does it seem to be a series of loosely-related incidents?
2. Sam Weller is often viewed as the hero of the story. Do you believe that Sam or Mr. Pickwick is the hero of the story? Please provide details from the text to support your position.
3. During the early nineteenth century, class distinctions were important in England. Dickens portrays various classes of people in the story, and mixes them up in the narrative. Do you get a sense of the class distinctions that were prevalent in England at the time from reading the *Pickwick Paper*? Is Dickens intentionally mixing in these characters to show that the prevailing class distinctions were irrelevant?
4. Throughout the narrative, Dickens uses a series of tales ("The Stroller's Tale," "The Convict's Return," "A Madman's Manuscript," etc.) as breaks from the plot. Are these tales merely breaks in the plot, or do they relate to other events in the narrative? Do the tales help or impede the flow of the main plot (if there is one) in the novel?
5. As a child, Dickens's family was sent to the Marshalsea debtor's prison, a circumstance which plagued Dickens for the remainder of his life. In the *Pickwick Papers*, Mr. Pickwick is sent to the Fleet Street Debtor's Prison, where he attempts to relieve the suffering of the prisoners. Are Pickwick's efforts at the prisoner believable? Does Pickwick, in some way, reflect Dickens's life? In the Preface to the Cheap First Edition, Dickens mentions that the debtor's prisons were reformed, and the Fleet Street Prison closed. Was *Pickwick* in some way responsible for these reforms?
6. Is the *Pickwick Papers* a novel, or a series of related incidents?
7. The full title of the work is *The Posthumous Papers of The Pickwick Club*. Who, or what, has died?
8. The *Pickwick Papers* has been compared to *Don Quixote*, in part due to the mixture of comedy and pathos, and in part due to the nature of the travel commentary, a form which is known as a picaresque novel. Which of the three elements—comedy, pathos, travel commentary—did you enjoy most, and why?
9. At the time Dickens wrote the *Pickwick Papers*, many of the scenes and places no longer existed as they were depicted in the novel, causing some critics to claim that Dickens was engaging in a nostalgic look at the past. In fact, Dickens could not have experienced many of the events and places he depicts in the book. Why does Dickens set the novel in the recent past? What effect does this distancing have on the narrative? Is Dickens engaging in nostalgia, and if so, why?