

Emma Discussion Questions

1. *"Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her."*

It has been said that great novelists introduce the main themes of a book in the first sentence. What themes are suggested in the first sentence of *Emma*? What does it tell us about Emma Woodhouse? Discuss the use of the word "seemed," which implies that all is not as it appears. Are the rich without cares? Is Emma as happy and clever as the first sentence states? Examine Austen's choice of other words and phrases in this sentence.

2. Describe Highbury and its social classes and ranks. Does its size hamper Emma's growth? In what way is the setting important to the novel?
3. Mr. Woodhouse says, "Emma never thinks of herself if she can do good to others." Is this a positive or negative attribute? What is significant in Austen's word choice here?
4. Describe Mr. Woodhouse. What are the reasons for his fears? Is he a hypochondriac or is he in ill health? What kind of a daughter is Emma?
5. *"Altogether, she was quite convinced of Harriet Smith's being exactly the young friend she wanted--exactly the something which her home required."*

Discuss Emma's choice of friends. Why does she befriend Harriet? Does Harriet benefit from Emma's friendship? Why isn't Harriet a good companion for Emma? Why doesn't Emma befriend Jane Fairfax?

6. Emma discourages Harriet from accepting Mr. Martin's proposal on the basis of his not being a "real gentleman." Is this true? Who measures up to being a real gentleman?
7. What is the importance of Mr. Knightley asking Harriet Smith to dance? How does this dance change the relationship between Mr. Knightley and Emma?
8. Why does it take Frank Churchill so long to pay his respects to Mrs. Weston? How and why does Emma's initial opinion of him change? What are the sources of Mr. Knightley's dislike of Frank Churchill?
9. Did you spot any clues that showed an understanding between Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill?
10. Why does Miss Bates talk so much? Compare and contrast two compulsive talkers—Miss Bates and Mrs. Elton.
11. What revelations or lessons does Emma experience that contribute to her growing self-awareness? To "thoroughly understand, her own heart" becomes Emma's "first endeavor." How has she changed since the beginning of the novel? Compare and contrast her views on marriage at various points in the novel with attitudes of the time.
12. Do Mr. Knightley's feelings for Emma change over the course of the story, and, if so, how do they change?
13. Marriage is a central device in *Emma*, but not all of the marriages are necessarily good. Discuss the matches between Mr. Weston and Miss Taylor, Mr. Elton and Mrs. Elton, Emma

and Mr. Knightley, Harriet and Mr. Martin, and Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill. What traits do the characters in each couple possess that make them suited or unsuited for each other?

14. Talk about the games people play in the novel—verbal games, parlor games, and games of social behavior.
15. What does the novel say about the options of women of different classes in Highbury?
16. One criticism leveled at Austen is that her novels do not address the events of her day and lack historical perspective. Do you think this is true in *Emma*?
17. What point is Austen making by including gypsies and poultry thieves in her plot?
18. According to her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh, Jane Austen said when she started to write *Emma*, "*I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like.*" Do you like Emma? Is it necessary to like the heroine to appreciate the character or the novel?
19. It is often said that great literature bears rereading. How is that particularly true with *Emma*?