

Introduction to Philately

Lecture script — 30 minutes, students aged 12–16

Presentation: “Introduction to Philately”, 13 slides

Format: lecture with built-in questions to the class and two short games

Aim of the lesson: the student should understand what a stamp is, why some stamps are worth thousands, and how to start a collection

Before the lesson

Prepare:

- A few real stamps — used ones, torn off an envelope, the sort that sits in every drawer. It is essential that the children handle something, not just look at a screen.
- If possible, one complete cover with a stamp and a postmark, and a magnifying glass.
- Chalk or a marker for the board.

Three rules for this age group:

1. Never talk for more than 3 minutes without a question to the class. Every slide below has at least one.
 2. Do not read the text off the slide — the slide is for the eye, you supply everything else.
 3. If one topic clearly catches fire (usually slide 10), stay there and cut slides 7 and 8 short.
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Timing

Min.	Slide	Section
0–2	1	Hook: “What are these bits of paper for?”
2–4:30	2	What philately is and where the word comes from
4:30–7	3	Why a stamp is a historical document
7–9:30	4	The six branches
9:30–11:30	5	What exactly gets collected
11:30–13:30	6	How a collection is built (5 steps)
13:30–14:30	7	Who organises all this
14:30–16:30	8	Exhibitions and awards
16:30–19	9	Bulgarian philately from 1879
19–23	10	Game: the famous Bulgarian stamps
23–25	11	Modern trends
25–26:30	12	How to begin

Min.	Slide	Section
26:30–30	13	Conclusion and questions

The lesson

Slide 1 — Title (0:00–2:00)

Do not open with a definition. Open with an object in your hand.

“I am holding something worth less than a stick of chewing gum. A piece of paper about two centimetres across. A hundred years ago it travelled across half of Europe. And its twin brother — same paper, same year — sold for eighteen thousand leva. Today you will find out why.”

Question to the class: “Who here has collected something? Anything at all — stickers, cards, badges, skins in a game?”

Let three or four hands go up. Then say:

“So all of you already understand the basic idea. The difference is that these stickers were issued by a state, they carry a date, and they tell you what was going on in the country at the time.”

Slide 2 — What philately is (2:00–4:30)

Explain the function before the term. For this age group a postage stamp is not an obvious object — they have never posted a letter.

“Today you write a message and it reaches the other person in a second, for free. Before that, somebody had to physically carry the sheet of paper — by horse, by train, by ship. That cost money. The stamp is the proof that you paid for that journey. That is why you stick it on the envelope — the way you validate a bus ticket today.”

Point at the etymology panel:

“The word comes from Greek. **Philos** means love — you know it from ‘philosophy’, the love of wisdom. **Ateleia** means exemption from a charge. So: love of the thing that frees the recipient from paying. Because before stamps existed, the person who received the letter paid for it — and people sometimes simply refused to accept it.”

Question: “Why is it better for the sender to pay rather than the recipient?” *Expected answers: so that letters are not refused; so the post office is sure of getting its money.*

Slide 3 — Why philately matters (4:30–7:00)

Here the frame shifts from hobby to historical science. This is the moment the more serious students get interested.

“A stamp carries four things at once: which state issued it, which year, what the postal service cost, and what mattered enough to those people to be printed on it. We call that a primary historical source.”

Class activity (1 minute):

“Imagine that in two hundred years an archaeologist finds only one object from our time — a single envelope with a stamp from 2026. What will they learn about us from that alone?”

Collect the answers on the board: the year, the language, the alphabet, the country, prices, what we celebrate, what we look like. That is precisely the argument of the slide — do not state it in advance, let them arrive at it.

Slide 4 — The main branches (7:00–9:30)

Move through the six quickly, but give each one live sentence.

- **Classical** — the earliest issues. This is where the rare and expensive material lives.
- **Thematic** — you collect by subject, not by country. Only space. Only cats. Only football.
- **Maximaphily** — a postcard, a stamp and a postmark that all show the same thing. A triple match.
- **Postal history** — you care about the journey of the letter, not the stamp. Where it started, what it passed through, what it cost.
- **Aerophilately** — mail carried by air, including the very first flights.
- **Revenue** — stamps that are not for postage at all, but for taxes and fees.

Question (show of hands): “If you had to pick a theme right now, what would it be? Space? Sport? Animals?”

Tell them that thematic philately is where almost everyone starts today, and that it needs an idea rather than money.

Slide 5 — What philatelists collect (9:30–11:30)

This slide has one key idea, and it is counter-intuitive:

“A beginner tears the stamp off the envelope and throws the envelope away. That is the most expensive mistake in the hobby. The whole cover — with the address, the postmark and the date — is worth more than the stamp on its own, because it tells a story. The stamp alone tells you what the service cost. The cover tells you who wrote to whom, from where, when, and how long it travelled.”

If you brought a cover, send it round the class now. Keep talking while it circulates; do not wait in silence.

Explain the two terms they will need later:

- **Mint stamp** — unused, never stuck on a cover.
 - **Used stamp** — it has been through the post and carries a cancel.
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Slide 6 — How a collection is built (11:30–13:30)

Five steps, but the emphasis falls on the last one.

“The first four steps are the ones you would expect: choose a theme, acquire material, arrange it, describe it. The fifth is the one that separates a collection from a pile.”

“A collection does not mean ‘I own a lot of stamps’. It means ‘with these stamps I prove something’. For example: how the Bulgarian post operated during wartime. Or how the image of women on stamps changed over a hundred years. The material is the evidence, and you are the one telling the story.”

Question: “Which do you think a jury values more — a collection of 500 random stamps, or 30 stamps that prove one clear point?” *The answer is the second and they almost always get it. Praise them for it.*

Slide 7 — International organisations (13:30–14:30)

The duller slide for this age group. Keep it under a minute and frame it as sport.

“Just as football has FIFA and UEFA, philately has FIP — the world federation — and FEPA, the European one. They write the rules by which exhibitions are judged, so that the standard is the same everywhere. Below them sit the national federations, and the museums look after what has already become history.”

Slide 8 — Philatelic exhibitions (14:30–16:30)

“Yes, this is a sport. There are competitions, there are judges, there are points and there are medals.”

Read the scale from the bottom up and stop at the top:

“Bronze, silver, vermeil, gold, and at the very top Large Gold. Vermeil sits between silver and gold — it is gilded silver.”

The sentence that matters:

“What is judged is the exhibit, not the collector and not how much money was spent. The very same material can take silver when badly arranged and gold when well

arranged. In other words — the winner is the one who thinks, not only the one who buys.”

Question: “Which of the four criteria strikes you as the hardest: the content, the originality, the research or the presentation?”

Slide 9 — Bulgarian philately (16:30–19:00)

“The Principality of Bulgaria comes into being in 1878. How long do you think it takes before it issues its own stamps?”

Let them guess. The answer is on the slide:

“One year. 1879. The first Bulgarian issue is known as ‘**Santimi**’ — because the values are in centimes — and it carries the Bulgarian lion. A country one year old already has its own post and its own coat of arms on paper that travels across Europe. That is a political statement: we are a state.”

Link it to the three blocks on the right:

“After that come the royal issues, the military posts of the wars, the airmail. Today Bulgarian stamps are sought abroad as well — not only because they are handsome, but because there is dense history behind each one.”

Slide 10 — Better-known Bulgarian stamps (19:00–23:00)

The main interactive section — do not cut it

These are the four stamps with photographs. Work through them as puzzles.

1) “Views and Portraits”, 1911 — the Inverted Cavalry (BK 90K1, artist Yaroslav Veshin)

Show the two images side by side — the issued stamp and the error — but do not say which is which.

“These two stamps come from the same issue. One is worth a few leva. The other, eighteen thousand. You have thirty seconds to find the difference.”

Let them hunt. If they cannot see it, steer them: “Look at which way up the picture in the middle is.”

“The centre has been printed upside down. The stamp is printed in two passes — first the frame, then the picture inside it. One sheet went into the machine the wrong way round. It is a mistake. And it is precisely the mistake that makes it priceless — because sheets like that number in single figures, while the correct ones number in the millions.”

The key conclusion — say it in as many words:

“Remember the principle: value comes from **rarity**, not from beauty. A handful of flawed copies is worth more than a million perfect ones. The same is true of anything you collect — the rare appreciates, the mass-produced does not.”

If the group is curious: the most famous case of this in the world is the American ‘Inverted Jenny’ of 1918 — an upside-down aeroplane, the same mechanism, the same cause.

2) 25 years since the April Uprising, 1901 — the “Cherry-wood cannon” (BK 51-52, artist Haralampi Tachev)

Question: “Does anyone know what a cherry-wood cannon is?”

“A cannon made from a cherry tree trunk, bound with iron hoops. The rebels had no weapons, so they made them out of whatever there was. It fired two or three times and then burst. And it is that object, rather than some general, that Bulgaria puts on a stamp in 1901. Ask yourselves why. Because a stamp does not show what was strongest — it shows what mattered most to the memory.”

3) “Surva”, Pernik, 2004 — mini-sheet (BK 4627, artist Lyudmil Veselinov)

“A modern stamp, and the subject is thousands of years old — the masked mummers. This is where philately meets ethnography. If any of you are into folklore, this is your theme.”

4) 50 years of a woman in space, 2013 — souvenir sheet (BK 5070, artist Rosen Toshev)

Question: “Do the arithmetic: if 2013 marks fifty years, in which year did a woman first go into space?” 1963 — *Valentina Tereshkova*.

“Notice what the stamp is doing: it turns an event into official state memory. Somebody decided that this, specifically, deserved to be printed.”

Summary of the slide (30 seconds):

“Four stamps, four different reasons to be interested: a printing error, national memory, living folklore and science. There is no single way to collect.”

Slide 11 — Modern trends (23:00–25:00)

Connect this to their world — this is where the hobby stops sounding like something for grandfathers.

“Today you do not need to trawl flea markets. The catalogues are online, the archives are digital, exhibitions are held virtually, and a collector in Varna can show an exhibit to somebody in Japan.”

The most interesting part for this age group is the science:

“How do you prove that a stamp worth eighteen thousand leva is not a forgery? With physics. You shine infrared light or a laser at the paper and the ink — these are the FTIR and Raman spectroscopy methods — and you get the chemical ‘signature’ of the

materials. If the ink contains a compound invented in 1950 and the stamp is supposedly from 1911, the forgery is exposed. Which means philately today is also a job for a chemist.”

Slide 12 — How to begin (25:00–26:30)

Be concrete and be cheap. If it sounds like an expensive hobby, you lose them.

“You do not need money to start. You need a theme and patience.”

1. Pick **one** theme. Not “stamps”, but “space” or “bridges”.
 2. Ask at home — grandparents, old letters. For almost everyone, the first fifty stamps come free from the attic.
 3. An album and a catalogue. Michel and Scott are the world references; FEPR is the Bulgarian one.
 4. A club or an online community — there they will explain in fifteen minutes what would take you a year alone.
 5. An exhibition — even if only to walk round it.
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Slide 13 — Conclusion and questions (26:30–30:00)

“We started with a piece of paper worth two stotinki. It turned out that it can be evidence of history, a printing error worth eighteen thousand leva, a reason for physical analysis, and a reason for people across the world to write to each other.”

“Philately is not collecting bits of paper. It is attention to detail — the ability to see the difference that other people miss. That ability is useful everywhere.”

Closing assignment (choose one):

- “Before the next lesson, find one stamp at home. Any stamp. Tell me three things about it: which country, which year, and what is pictured on it.”
- “Invent a theme for your own collection and state it in one sentence beginning ‘My collection proves that...’.”

Leave the last two minutes for questions. If you brought stamps and a magnifying glass, now is the moment for them to reach the children’s hands.

Glossary for the board

Term	Explanation for students
Issue	A group of stamps released together for one occasion
Cancel (postmark)	The post office mark on the stamp, so it cannot be used twice
Mint / used	Unused / having passed through the post
Error	A stamp with a printing fault

Term	Explanation for students
Souvenir sheet	A small sheet with one or several stamps and a border around them
Face value	The value printed on the stamp
BK no.	The stamp's number in the Bulgarian catalogue
Exhibit	A mounted collection presented at an exhibition

Questions you are almost certain to be asked

“How much is this stamp worth?” — Almost any ordinary stamp is worth pennies. Only the rare ones are expensive: those with an error, with a small print run, or very old and in excellent condition. Condition changes the price several times over.

“Isn’t this a hobby for old people?” — The average age really is high, and that is exactly why beginners are welcome everywhere. Thematic philately and the digital tools are entirely contemporary.

“Can I get rich from it?” — Not quickly and not reliably. The people who profit are the ones who know more than everybody else — that is, the ones who studied. The knowledge is the profit.

“Why bother, when we have the internet?” — Because this is the only object you can hold that was actually there when it happened, and that nobody can delete or edit.

If you run out of time

Cut in this order: slide 7 (down to 30 seconds), slide 8 (the award scale only), slide 11 (the scientific methods only). **Do not cut slide 10** — it is the reason the lesson will be remembered.