

Socratic Seminar Guidelines.

Remember, this is a collaborative DIALOGUE, not a DEBATE!

Socrates, a Classical Greek philosopher, was convinced that the surest way to attain reliable knowledge was through the practice of disciplined conversation. He called this method dialectic, meaning the art or practice of examining opinions or ideas logically, often by the method of question and answer, so as to determine their validity.

The Socratic method of teaching is based on Socrates' theory that it is more important to enable students to think for themselves than to merely fill their heads with "right" answers. A Socratic Seminar is a method to try to understand information by creating a dialectic in class in regard to a specific text. In a Socratic Seminar, participants seek deeper understanding of complex ideas in the text through rigorously thoughtful dialogue. This process encourages divergent thinking rather than convergent.

Students are given opportunities to "examine" a common piece of text, whether it is in the form of a novel, poem, art print, or piece of music. After "reading" the common text "like a love letter", several questions are posed -- primarily open-ended, world connection, universal theme, and literary analysis questions. Such questions allow students to think critically, analyze multiple meanings in text, and express ideas with clarity and confidence. After all, a certain degree of emotional safety is felt by participants when they understand that this format is based on dialogue and not discussion/debate.

Dialogue is exploratory and involves the suspension of biases and prejudices. Discussion/debate is a transfer of information designed to win an argument and bring closure. Americans are great at discussion/debate. We do not dialogue well. However, once teachers and students learn to dialogue, they find that the ability to ask meaningful questions that stimulate thoughtful interchanges of ideas is more important than "the answer."

Participants in a Socratic Seminar respond to one another with respect by carefully listening instead of interrupting. Students are encouraged to "paraphrase" essential elements of another's ideas before responding, either in support of or in disagreement. Members of the dialogue look each other in the "eyes" and use each other names. This simple act of socialization reinforces appropriate behaviors and promotes team building.

Dialogue and Debate

Dialogue	Debate and/or Discussion
Dialogue is collaborative; multiple sides work toward a shared understanding.	Debate is competitive and/or oppositional; two opposing sides try to prove each other wrong.
In dialogue, one listens to understand, to make meaning, and to find common ground. Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.	In debate, one listens to find flaws, to spot differences, and to counter arguments. Debate affirms a participant's point of view.
Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude; an openness to being wrong and an openness to change.	Debate defends assumptions as truths.
In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, expecting that other people's reflections will help improve it rather than threaten it.	In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.
Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending of one's beliefs.	Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.
In dialogue, one searches for strengths in all positions.	In debate, one searches for weaknesses in the other positions.
Dialogue respects all the other participants and seeks not to alienate or offend.	Debate rebuts contrary positions and may belittle or disrespect other participants.
Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of answers and that cooperation can lead to workable solutions.	Debate assumes a single right answer that somebody already has.
Dialogue remains open-ended.	Debate demands a conclusion.
Dialogue is mutual inquiry; collective knowledge.	Discussion is individual opinions; individual knowledge.

DURING SOCRATIC SEMINAR:

Socratic Seminar Rules

- Discuss, do not debate.
- Be courteous, NO PUTDOWNS.
- Goal is the pursuit of deeper understanding.
- Respect different thoughts and ideas.

Socratic Seminar Tips

Your Goal is to Understand...

- the ideas,
- issues,
- concepts,
- and values reflected in the text....

So...

- Refer to the text when needed during the discussion. This is not a test of memory.
- Do not stay confused; as for clarification of both ideas and definitions.
- Discuss ideas, rather than other's opinions.
- It's OK to pass when your turn comes; participate at another time instead.
- Do not participate if you are not prepared.
- Stick to the point currently under discussion; [write down inspirational ideas so you can bring them up at a more appropriate time in the conversation.](#)
- Listen carefully, especially when you are waiting to speak, as they may be moving on to another point.
- [Speak up so that all participants can hear you; don't speak while others are.](#)
- Remember that this is a conversation between students, not between student and teacher.

Keep going....

Seminar Questioning Cheat Sheet—bring this to seminar!

Clarification Questions:

- What do you mean by ?
- What is your main point?
- How does __ relate to __ ?
- Could you put that another way?
- What do you think is the main issue here?
- Let me see if I understand you; do you mean or ?
- Jane, would you summarize in your own words what Juan has said?... Juan, is that what you meant?
- Could you give me an example?
- Would this be an example: ?
- Could you explain that further?
- Could you expand upon that?

Questions About the Initial Question or Issue:

- How can we find out?
- What does this question assume?
- Would put the question differently?
- How could someone settle this question?
- Can we break this question down at all?
- Is the question clear? Do we understand it?
- Is this question easy or hard to answer? Why?
- Does this question ask us to evaluate something?
- Do we all agree that this is the question?
- To answer this question, what question would we have to answer first?
- I'm not sure I understand how you are interpreting the main question at issue.
- Is this the same issue as ?
- How would put this issue?
- Why is this question important?
- Does this question lead to other questions or issues?

Assumption Probes:

- What are you assuming?
- What is Erika assuming?
- What could we assume instead?
- You seem to be assuming . Do I understand you correctly?
- All of your reasoning depends on the idea that . Why have you based your reasoning on rather than ?
- You seem to be assuming . How would you justify taking this for granted?
- Why would someone make this assumption?

Reason and Evidence Probes:

- What would be an example?
- How do you know?
- Why do you think that is true?
- Do you have any evidence for that?
- What difference does that make?
- What are your reasons for saying that?
- What other information do we need?
- Could you explain your reason to use?