

Socratic Seminar

W I C R

Goal: To support students in deep exploration of a text through collaborative dialogue with their peers.

Key Elements	Information and Procedures
Rationale	<p>It is through exploration, dialogue, and constant questioning that students develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills and their ability to acknowledge and consider viewpoints different from their own. Socratic seminars (if used in a climate of continued exploration) help students develop confidence in presenting their ideas to others for consideration, supporting their claims with reasoned thinking and evidence, and negotiating multiple meanings or ideas.</p> <p>“The goal of the Socratic seminar in elementary and secondary schools is not to arrive at a ‘correct’ interpretation of a text via the seminar teacher’s skillful questioning. Instead, it is the assumption of this method that knowledge and understanding are constructed by learners themselves, rather than discovered or received. In other words, understanding is emergent, uncertain, and subject to revision; it is connected to what learners already know; and it is a new creation by cooperative action, rather than a product solely of the author’s or teacher’s effort.” —Peter Winchell, <i>Socratic Seminars West</i></p>
Basic Procedure	<p>Steps:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Give students a text (print or non-print) to read and prepare prior to the seminar. Socratic seminars always include a text. Sample readings might include: mathematical proofs, logic “arguments,” primary or secondary source documents, historical speeches, songs, poems, laws, edicts, treaties, historical literature, short stories, essays/articles, editorials, photographs and art pieces. 2. When students read the text and prepare, they are encouraged to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Read the material closely <input type="checkbox"/> Mark the text (numbering paragraphs, circling and underlining designated parts of the text) <input type="checkbox"/> Make notes (margin notes, sticky notes, dialectical journal, Cornell notes, etc.) <input type="checkbox"/> Form open-ended, higher-level questions relating to the text. (A presentation or review of Costa’s levels of thinking is suggested prior to students writing their own questions.) 3. It is often helpful to model close reading, note-making, and developing open-ended questions before students read their own seminar text.

Using a short text on an overhead transparency/document camera and marking the text, making notes, identifying important parts, and thinking aloud for students can help them to be clear on the expectations for Socratic seminar.

4. Discuss the difference between dialogue and debate (see “Dialogue versus Debate”)
5. To start the seminar, students are seated in a circle, and only the students in the circle participate in the dialogue. The teacher (or a student, if the class is experienced) poses an opening question relating to the text to initiate the dialogue. A good option when starting out is to have each student read one of their questions around the circle with the teacher or student leader listening carefully and choosing one question with which to open the dialogue. This makes it possible for every student to speak as a "warm up" before the actual dialogue; speaking once makes it easier to speak a second time.
6. Students begin by responding to the question. They examine the reading to support answers to the question, citing specific passages from the text. Students should clarify or restate their viewpoints and defend statements made, using examples from the text. Students should also paraphrase other students for clarification and ask additional questions to continue deeper and deeper exploration of the text and one another’s thinking. The opening question is only a starting point; it should be a catalyst that moves students to additional questions.
7. During the seminar, the teacher acts as a facilitator, when needed, to remind students of the dialogue guidelines, to direct them back to the text, or to offer a personal viewpoint about the text. The teacher is NOT the leader; he/she is a co-learner, participant, and occasional moderator/facilitator. The goal is to support students in maintaining their own dialogue.
8. After the conversation has become exhausted and all the students have had the opportunity to participate in the dialogue, facilitate a debriefing activity. Activities could be a quickwrite about new thoughts, ideas, or understandings they’ve reached about the text, a seminar evaluation, etc.
9. After students complete the writing assignment, facilitate a whole class discussion about the activity based on the students’ writing.

VARIATION: Arrange students in inner and outer circles (a "fishbowl") where the inner circle engages in a dialogue and the outer circle observes, taking notes on the seminar process and new understandings about the text. The outer circle can share their observations as part of the debriefing process, with the teacher guiding how to offer constructive criticism. Students in the outer circle can keep track of comments/points made to

	<p>which they would like to respond if the circles switch places or as part of the debrief.</p>
<p>Differentiation: Increased Scaffolding</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin with shorter periods of time, perhaps half a period (non-block) or 20 minutes. • Begin with short works or quotations in which the students can closely observe key words or lines. Contrasting two short paragraphs works well. • Develop teacher questions to use as models, and then develop questions together as a class based on the teacher models. • Pay close attention to everything said during the beginning seminars, collecting sample student responses that can be used for later debrief and coaching. • Allow students to “pass” if they wish, but teach the skills and expectations for active listening; the teacher should be able to tell that a student is an active listener. • Teach and help students to disagree in a way that continues the dialogue, not in a way that seems combative or the work of a “devil’s advocate.” • To keep all students focused, have students in the outer circle pair up with a student in the inner circle and keep track of how often his/her partner is participating and in what manner (see “Fishbowl Feedback”).
<p>Differentiation: Increased Rigor</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work from a longer or more complex text. • Have students develop their own higher-level questions. • Consistently require students to build on the comments and analysis of others. • Use student facilitators who moderate smaller groups of Socratic seminars that can occur simultaneously in class (rather than one large seminar). • In a fishbowl arrangement, have the outer circle responsible for tracking particular kinds of questions and ideas around theme(s), author’s style, arguments and counterarguments, patterns, etc. This can be particularly useful in an honors or Advanced Placement course.
<p>Differentiation: Increased Technology</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video tape the discussion and have students critique their own performance or the performance of the group as a whole. • Extend the discussion to a web-based medium so that the dialogue may continue after class has dismissed, or the entire dialogue can be conducted online with each student having a minimum required number of responses.

The Elements of Socratic Seminars

A good seminar consists of four interdependent elements: (1) the text, (2) the questions raised, (3) the seminar leader, and (4) the participants. A closer look at each of these elements helps explain the unique character of a Socratic Seminar.

The Text

Socratic Seminar texts are chosen for their richness in ideas, issues, and values, and their ability to stimulate extended, thoughtful dialogue. A seminar text can be drawn from readings in literature, history, science, math, health, and philosophy or from works of art or music. A good text raises important questions in the participants' minds, questions for which there are no right or wrong answers. At the end of a successful Socratic Seminar participants often leave with more questions than they brought with them.

The Question

A Socratic Seminar opens with a question either posed by the leader or solicited from participants as they acquire more experience in seminars. An opening question has no right answer; instead, it reflects a genuine curiosity on the part of the questioner. A good opening question leads participants back to the text as they speculate, evaluate, define, and clarify the issues involved. Responses to the opening question generate new questions from the leader and participants, leading to new responses. In this way, the line of inquiry in a Socratic Seminar evolves on the spot rather than being pre-determined by the leader.

The Leader

In a Socratic Seminar, the leader plays a dual role as leader and participant. The seminar leader consciously demonstrates habits of mind that lead to a thoughtful exploration of the ideas in the text by keeping the discussion focused on the text, asking follow-up questions, helping participants clarify their positions when arguments become confused, and involving reluctant participants while restraining their more vocal peers.

As a seminar participant, the leader actively engages in the group's exploration of the text. To do this effectively, the leader must know the text well enough to anticipate varied interpretations and recognize important possibilities in each. The leader must also be patient enough to allow participants' understandings to evolve and be willing to help participants explore non-traditional insights and unexpected interpretations.

Assuming this dual role of leader and participant is easier if the opening question is one which truly interests the leader as well as the participants.

The Participants

In Socratic Seminar, participants share with the leader the responsibility for the quality of the seminar. Good seminars occur when participants study the text closely in advance, listen actively, share their ideas and questions in response to the ideas and questions of others, and search for evidence in the text to support their ideas.

Participants acquire good seminar behaviors through participating in seminars and reflecting on them afterward. After each seminar, the leader and participants discuss the experience and identify ways of improving the next seminar. Before each new seminar, the leader also offers coaching and practice in specific habits of mind that improve reading, thinking, and discussing. Eventually, when participants realize that the leader is not looking for the "right" answers but instead is encouraging them to think out loud and to openly exchange ideas, they discover the excitement of exploring important issues through shared inquiry. This excitement creates willing participants, eager to examine ideas in a rigorous, thoughtful manner.

SOCRATIC SEMINAR GUIDELINES

Before the Socratic Seminar

1. Read and prepare your text before the seminar. Be ready to discuss the text like the scholar you are! You should make notes in one of the following ways:
 - Mark the text by:
 - numbering the paragraphs, if appropriate
 - circling key terms, as related to your text
 - underlining main/significant ideas as related to your text
 - Make notes in the margin of the text.
 - Use sticky notes to note specific passages and write your thoughts and/or questions on the sticky notes.
 - Use Cornell notes, a dialectical journal, or some other form of notetaking to keep track of your thoughts, paying close attention to noting passages/paragraph numbers, page numbers, etc. You want to easily reference the text.
2. Prepare three opening questions that have no single right answer and will help foster discussion. Things to consider:
 - Ask about viewpoint, perspectives (realist, pessimist, optimist, etc.)
 - Examine the title, or tone of the text, or connect to current issues, theme, etc.
 - Ask, “If the author were alive today, how would s/he feel about...?”
 - Ask questions that explore your own interpretation of the reading.
 - Ask about importance: “So what . . . ?” “What does it matter that . . . ?”
 - “What does it mean that . . . ?”

During the Seminar

1. Be courteous. No put-downs or sarcasm.
2. Allow each speaker enough time to begin and finish his or her thoughts—don’t interrupt.
3. Involve others in the discussion and ask others to elaborate on their responses (use “Academic Language Scripts”).
4. Build on what others say: ask questions, re-state and add, clarify, synthesize a variety of different views in your own summary. Example: “I’m not sure I understand what Jeff is saying. What is...”
5. Use your best active listening skills: nod, make eye contact, provide feedback, and listen carefully to others.
6. Participate openly, knowing you may pass whenever you need to. Support your opinions with evidence from the text. Example: “The author has clearly stated in line 22 that...”
7. Remember the goal is EXPLORATION—keep an open mind and push for deeper interpretations.

After the Seminar

1. Be reflective about the process of the seminar--both your contribution and the group's process.

Examples of Reflection Questions/Prompts:

- How did I contribute to this discussion—what did I add to it?
- What do I better understand about this text after the seminar?
- What questions do I now have as a result of this seminar?
- Who helped move the dialogue forward? How?
- At what point did the seminar lapse into debate/discussion rather than dialogue? How did the group handle this?
- Did anyone dominate the conversation? How did the group handle this?
- What would you like to do differently as a participant the next time you are in a seminar?

2. Use writing to think about and summarize the content of the seminar, especially to capture new understandings of the text.

Examples of Summary Questions/Prompts:

- Based on this seminar, what are the most important points about this text?
- How does my understanding of the text connect to other things I'm learning?
- There are three main ideas I'm taking away from this seminar...

3. Be prepared to help set goals for improvement in the next seminar.

Examples of Goal-setting Questions/Prompts:

- Two things I will do in the next seminar to be a more active listener....
- What will I do differently to make the next seminar better?
- To be better prepared for the seminar, I will do _____ with the text.

Socratic Seminar

Typical Problems and Suggested Solutions

- 1. The class has 35 students. How can they all participate?***

 - Split the class in half and use an inner and outer circle (fishbowl). Rotate these groups at pre-set intervals.
 - Establish a “hot seat” in the inner circle. This will allow those who do not originally volunteer for the inner circle to jump in, participate, and then step back out.
 - Split the class in half with two separate activities, one in seminar, the other in another quiet, focused activity.
 - Once the class is proficient at seminars, you might conduct two or three separate groups simultaneously, with students leading/moderating.
- 2. How does the teacher make this activity different from normal classroom discussion?***

 - Rather than the teacher asking all the questions and the students attempting to give correct answers, students should be encouraged to ask the questions of each other.
 - As often as possible, questions should be **why** questions rather than **what happened** questions.
 - Encourage students to **listen** carefully to what others say, and **add** to their comments rather than look to refute them, ignore them, or wait for the teacher’s “correct” answer.
 - Have students reiterate what was said before responding to a comment. For example, "I heard you say ... , but I found ...". This allows for acknowledgement of other's opinions and differences.
 - Establish that teacher and students are **co-learners**.
- 3. Some students always want to dominate the conversation. How can the teacher give everyone an equal chance?***

 - Remind students before the seminar begins that they are there to listen as well as to speak. With practice, they will police themselves.
 - Create a small group of student observers (perhaps the ones who want to dominate) who will sit outside the circle and remain silent until such time as they are asked to evaluate the flow of the seminar.
 - Have the students pass a beanbag or other object. Whoever is holding the beanbag is the only one allowed to speak. This is a great opportunity to teach students how to restrain themselves and make notes on what they would like to say when they have their opportunity.
- 4. How does the teacher ensure everyone has the opportunity to participate, especially quiet students or those reluctant to speak?***

 - Ensure that all students are able to read the text closely and generate their own questions. Offer individual guidance for students who need help generating open-ended questions for dialogue. For students with low confidence or fear of public speaking, the teacher might provide some "stock" questions for students to use as models/practice.
 - Have every student read their question aloud before starting the dialogue; this gives everyone a safe chance to speak--it doesn't require unrehearsed speaking.

- ☑ Invite reluctant speakers to develop several observations/insights to some pre-determined teacher questions and then have them practice responding aloud to the questions with another partner in class or with the teacher. Use some of these pre-determined questions in the Socratic seminar, making sure the targeted students know which questions to expect so they can offer their practiced answers before others jump into the conversation.
- ☑ Using sticky notes, the teacher writes comments to students during the seminar, delivering them without interrupting the seminar. Comments can encourage individuals to speak, praise a particular behavior that pushes the dialogue further, remind students who dominate to invite others to speak instead, etc. It's a form of "silent" coaching.

5. ***What if the dialogue stalls and no one is talking?***

- ☑ Resist the urge to jump in and fill the silence. Let the students look at each other and experience silence; often someone will fill in the gap with a question or another comment that jumpstarts the dialogue.
- ☑ If students continue to sit in silence, ask a question to help direct their next steps. Questions might include: "What can you do when your discussion has stalled?" "Who can help us get started again by posing a different question?" "Who can recap the last major point to remind us where we were?" "What part of the text have we not explored yet?" The goal of these questions is to prompt students to figure out how to continue a conversation; it is not an opportunity for the teacher to assume control of the discussion.
- ☑ Sometimes silence means that the dialogue really is exhausted. If that's the case, acknowledge it and coach students to pose a closing question to help wrap up more "officially" and then move to a debrief activity.

6. ***What should be done about students who do not read the text?***

- ☑ One of the main goals of Socratic seminar is close analysis. Students who come in unprepared should be excluded from participation. The incidence of this decreases when you've created a climate where people want to explore ideas and want to know what their peers think.



Dialogue and Debate

Dialogue	Debate
Dialogue is collaborative with multiple sides working toward shared understanding.	Debate is oppositional with two opposing sides trying to prove each other wrong.
In dialogue, one listens to understand, to make meaning, and to find common ground.	In debate, one listens to find flaws, to spot differences, and to counter arguments.
Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.	Debate affirms a participant's point of view.
Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude developing an openness to being wrong and an openness to change.	Debate defends assumptions as truth.
In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, expecting that other people's reflections will help improve it rather than threaten it.	Debate creates a closed-minded attitude, a determination to be right.
Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.	In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.
In dialogue, one searches for strengths in all positions.	Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.
Dialogue respects all the other participants and seeks not to alienate or offend.	In debate, one searches for weaknesses in the other position.
Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that collaboration can lead to workable solutions.	Debate rebuts contrary positions and may belittle or deprecate other participants.
Dialogue remains open-ended.	Debate assumes a single right answer that someone already has.
In dialogue participants often leave with more questions than they brought with them.	Debate demands a conclusion and a winner.

Developing Opening, Core, and Closing Questions

Use this page to guide you as you develop questions in the categories of opening, core, and closing. Opening questions should get the seminar off to a start, core questions should help participants examine deeper meanings in the text, and closing questions should help the group bring the seminar to a close, though not necessarily a conclusion. Use the template on the following page to record your questions as you prepare to lead the seminar.

Opening Questions

- Stem from context
- Direct participants into text
- Elicit more than one-word responses
- Are generally concrete questions

Examples

- What is the theme of the reading?
 - What significance is this to _____?
 - What are the assumptions of this text?
 - Could the two main characters have switched places? Why or why not?
 - What might be some other good titles?
 - Is it better to be _____ or _____?
 - In recent times, what well-known people are like _____?
-

Core Questions

- Are content-specific
- May ask for the interpretation of a specific line or passage; often “how” or “why” questions
- Generally move the discussion into the abstract

Examples

- Why does the main character think _____?
 - How do you support that position from the text?
 - How does this idea connect to _____?
 - If _____ is true, then _____?
 - Can you define what you mean by _____?
-

Closing Questions

- Establish relevance
- Connect to the real world
- Relate to the lives of the participants
- Are generally abstract

Examples

- If you were writing this work, what would the ending be?
 - How does this idea connect to _____?
 - Explain the consequences of the ideas in the text.
 - Predict/justify future developments.
-

Questions Planning Template

Opening Questions

Core Questions

Closing Questions

Academic Language Scripts

Asking for Clarification

- Could you repeat that?
- Could you give me an example of that?
- I have a question about that: ...?
- Could you please explain what _____ means?
- Would you mind repeating that?
- I'm not sure I understood that. Could you please give us another example?
- Would you mind going over the instructions for us again?
- So, do you mean . . . ?
- What did you mean when you said ...?
- Are you sure that ...?

Requesting Assistance

- Could you please help me?
- I'm having trouble with this. Would you mind helping me?
- Could you please show me how to do this . . . write this . . . draw this . . . pronounce this . . . solve this?

Interrupting

- Excuse me, but (I don't understand.)
- Sorry for interrupting, but (I missed what you said.)
- May I interrupt for a moment?
- May I add something here?

Expressing an Opinion

- I think/believe/predict/imagine that
- In my opinion
- It seems to me that
- Not everyone will agree with me, but

Responding

- I agree with what _____ said because
- You're right about that, and I also think

- That’s an interesting idea. I wonder . . .? I think . . . Do you think . . .?
- I thought about that also, and I’m wondering why . . .?
- I hadn’t thought of that before. You make me wonder if . . .? Do you think . . .?

Disagreeing

- I don’t really agree with you because
- I see it another way. I think
- My idea is slightly different from yours. I believe that I think that
- I have a different answer than you. . . .

Soliciting a Response

- Do you agree?
- _____ (name), what do you think?
- We haven’t heard from YOU yet.
- _____ (name), what did YOU understand from that answer?

Offering a Suggestion

- Maybe you/we could
- Here’s something we/you might try.
- What if you/we . . . ?

Classroom Reporting

- _____ told me that
- _____ explained to me that
- _____ pointed out that
- _____ mentioned that
- _____ emphasized that
- _____ shared with me that
- _____ brought to my attention that
- _____ pointed out something (interesting, intriguing, surprising).
- I found out from _____ that
- I learned from _____ that
- I heard from _____ that
- I discovered from _____ that





Socratic Seminar Observation Form

Your name _____ Partner's name _____

Directions: Each time your partner does one of the following, put a check in the box.

Speaks in the discussion:

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Looks at the person who is speaking:

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Refers to the text:

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Asks a new question: Literal questions (level 1) do NOT count.

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Asks a clarifying questions:

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Responds to another speaker:

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Interrupts another speaker:

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Engages in side conversation:

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

AFTER the discussion: What is the most interesting thing your partner said?

AFTER the discussion: What would you like to have said in the discussion?



Socratic Seminar Fishbowl

Directions: Choose three participants in the inner circle to observe during the seminar. Take careful notes and pay close attention to the dialogue, individual behaviors, and the group’s dynamics.

Participant Name	New Idea	Asked a Question	Referred to Text	Positive Comment	Negative Behavior	Other Notes/Observations
1.						
2.						
3.						