

# Socratic Seminar

## Summary

The National Paideia Center, which has developed extensive materials on using seminars in classrooms, defines a Socratic seminar as a ‘**collaborative, intellectual dialogue facilitated with open-ended questions about a text.**’

**Student Handouts:** Open-Ended Questions and/or Critical Reasoning Analysis Sheet, Discussion Partner Evaluation

## Purpose

The purpose of a Socratic Seminar is to achieve a deeper understanding about the ideas and values in a text. In the Seminar, participants systematically question and examine issues and principles related to a particular content, and articulate different points-of-view. The group conversation assists participants in constructing meaning through disciplined analysis, interpretation, listening, and participation.

## Background

In a Socratic Seminar, the participants carry the burden of responsibility for the quality of the discussion. Good discussions 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. The discussion is not about right answers; it is not a debate. Students are encouraged to think out loud and to exchange ideas openly while examining ideas in a rigorous, thoughtful, manner.

## Key Elements

There are several basic elements of a Seminar:

- Text
- Classroom Environment
- Questions

### Text

All participants read the text in advance. The text (or article, film clip, or other artifact) should contain important and powerful ideas and values. It should be at the appropriate level for the students in terms of complexity, and should relate directly to core concepts of the content being studied. A certain degree of ambiguity or potential for different interpretations also makes for richer discussion. *It is extremely helpful to number the paragraphs in a text so that participants can easily refer to passages.*

### Classroom Environment

The classroom should be arranged so that students can look at each other directly. A circle or square works well. Some teachers like to use desks and have students use name card tents; others prefer simply to use chairs without desks.

The discussion norms should be prominently posted. Some teachers like to also post the initial key question.

## Socratic Seminar continued

### Questions

Prepare several questions in advance, in addition to questions that students may bring to class. Questions should lead participants into the core ideas and values and to the use of the text in their answers. Questions must be open-ended, reflect genuine curiosity, and have no 'one right answer'! Choose one question as the key interpretive question of the seminar to focus on and begin discussion.

During the seminar, use particular questions to move the discussion along. Towards the end of the seminar, some teachers like to use closing questions that encourage participants to apply the ideas to their personal experiences and opinions. Answering these closing questions does not require use of the text but provides students with the chance to share their own perspectives. Lastly, debriefing questions help students reflect on the process of the seminar.

- **Sample questions to serve as the key question or interpret the text:**
  - What is the main idea or underlying value in the text?
  - What is the author's purpose or perspective?
  - What does (a particular phrase) mean?
  - What might be a good title for the text?
  - What is the most important word/sentence/paragraph?
- **Sample questions to move the discussion along:**
  - Who has a different perspective?
  - Who has not yet had a chance to speak?
  - Where do you find evidence for that in the text?
  - Can you clarify what you mean by that?
  - How does that relate to what (someone else) said?
  - Is there something in the text that is unclear to you?
  - Has anyone changed their mind?
- **Sample questions to bring the discussion back to students in closing:**
  - How do the ideas in the text relate to our lives? What do they mean for us personally?
  - Why is this material important?
  - Is it right that....? Do you agree with the author?
- **Sample debriefing questions:**
  - Do you feel like you understand the text at a deeper level?
  - How was the process for us? Did we adhere to our norms?
  - Did you achieve your goals to participate?
  - What was one thing you noticed about the seminar?

## Socratic Seminar continued

### Seminar Structure

The Seminar can be divided into three time periods:

#### Before the Seminar

- Introduce the seminar and its purpose (to facilitate a deeper understanding of the ideas and values in the text through shared discussion).
- Have students read the text. They may use one of several formats to process the information. The Open-Ended Questions and/or the Critical Reasoning Analysis Sheet can be used to help students understand the content. These can be used as the 'ticket' to participate in the seminar. Share any expectations related to assessment.
- Review the Discussion Norms
- In addition to the classroom discussion norms you may have already set, it is important to include the following norms, or ones that are similar:
  - Don't raise hands
  - Listen carefully
  - Address one another respectfully
  - Base any opinions on the text

Additional norms might include

- Address comments to the group (no side conversations)
- Use sensitivity to take turns and not interrupt others
- Monitor 'air time'
- Be courageous in presenting your own thoughts and reasoning, but be flexible and willing to change your mind in the face of new and compelling evidence

#### During the Seminar

- Be seated at the level of the students and remind them to address each other and not you!
- Pose the key question.
- Ask participants to relate their statements to particular passages, to clarify, and to elaborate.
- If the conversation gets off track, refocus students on the opening question by restating it.
- Use additional questions to move the discussion along.
- Invite those who have not spoken into the conversation. Some teachers use talking chips (each student is allotted a number of chips that they use when they make a contribution) or a talking chain (asking each person to comment or pass in a circle). The chips may be especially useful when working with very young children but should be used only until students 'get the idea'.
- You may wish to record for your own purposes the main ideas discussed and the contributions people make (using a shorthand or diagram) to refer to as you facilitate.
- It can be helpful to summarize the main points made in the discussion, either at a quiet point or towards the end of the discussion.

#### After the Seminar

- Ask debriefing questions of the students.
- Share your own experience with the seminar as a facilitator.

## Using Interpretive, Literal, and Evaluative Questions

### Interpretive Questions

*A Socratic discussion is a text-based discussion in which an individual sets their own interpretations of the text alongside those of other participants. The aim is a mutual search for a clearer, wider and deeper ('enlarged') understanding of the ideas, issues, and values in the text at hand. It is shared inquiry, not debate; there is no opponent save the perplexity all persons face when they try to understand something that is both difficult and important.*

— Walter Parker, PhD,  
University of Washington

The core of the Socratic Seminar is devoted to considering interpretive questions. These are questions that ask students to interpret the text. They should be genuine questions - ones that you are also interested in. No single right answer exists, but arguments can be made to support different positions. Students need to make their points using passages from the text to answer these questions. Sample interpretive questions might ask for the values evidenced by the author within the text, or might ask students to choose the most important word/sentence/paragraph and describe why it is the most important.

### Literal Questions

Literal questions are used by some teachers at the very beginning of a seminar, to ensure comprehension of the text. These are questions that can be answered directly from the text. The answers are contained within the text and are stated clearly. Sample literal questions might ask for an important text detail, fact, or quote.

### Evaluative Questions

Evaluative questions are sometimes used at the very end of a seminar, to allow students to share their own positions and opinions. Answers to evaluative questions rely on student's own experiences, not on the text itself. Students will not need to cite particular passages to answer these questions. Sample evaluative questions might ask for student opinions about the author's position, or how the ideas in the text relate to their own lives.

### Variation: Fishbowl

If you have a large class, it may be helpful to divide the students into two groups and use a fishbowl format.

One half of the class is in the 'center' facing each other and discussing the text, while the remainder is on the 'outside' observing and listening. Members of the outer circle can take notes or use an evaluation form to track the overall conversation or to focus on specific participants. The Rubric for Evaluating Classroom Discussions, as well as the Socratic Seminar Fishbowl Discussion Partner Evaluation could be used for this purpose.

During the seminar, some teachers reserve an empty 'hotseat' for those in the outer circle who really want to jump in to make a contribution and then leave.

At the end of the conversation, the outer circle can share their observations. The groups then switch to allow the outside group a chance to discuss.

### Assessment

A rubric for evaluating a Socratic Seminar discussion is provided in the assessment section. This rubric may also prove useful to students who are evaluating other students or reflecting on their own participation.

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### Socratic Seminar Discussion Partner Evaluation

Name of person you are observing \_\_\_\_\_

Your name \_\_\_\_\_

Seminar Topic \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

1) Record a check for each time your partner contributed in a meaningful way: \_\_\_\_\_

2) On a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the highest, how well did your partner do at the following?

- \_\_\_\_\_ Analysis and Reasoning
  - Did your partner...
    - Cite reasons and evidence for his/her statements with support from the text?
    - Demonstrate that they had given thoughtful consideration to the topic?
    - Provide relevant and insightful comments?
    - Demonstrate organized thinking?
    - Move the discussion to a deeper level?

Notes/Comments:

- \_\_\_\_\_ Discussion Skills
  - Did your partner...
    - Speak loudly and clearly?
    - Stay on topic?
    - Talk directly to other students rather than the teacher?
    - Stay focused on the discussion?
    - Invite other people into the discussion?
    - Share air time equally with others (didn't talk more than was fair to others)?

Notes/Comments:

- \_\_\_\_\_ Civility
  - Did your partner...
    - Listen to others respectfully?
    - Enter the discussion in a polite manner?
    - Avoid inappropriate language (slang, swearing)?
    - Avoid hostile exchanges?
    - Question others in a civil manner?

Notes/Comments:

## Open-Ended Questions for a Socratic Seminar

When preparing for a Socratic Seminar, write questions using these sentence frames to stimulate your thinking about the article(s) you read. Choose and complete 5 of the following:

- What puzzles me is...
- I'd like to talk with people about...
- I'm confused about...
- Don't you think this is similar to...
- Do you agree that the big ideas seem to be...

## Student Handout

- I have questions about...
- Another point of view is...
- I think it means...
- Do you think...
- What does it mean when the author says...
- Do you agree that...