



# Socratic Seminar

Teacher and Student  
Guide

# Socratic Seminar

## What is Socratic seminar?

It is a method of discussion inspired by Socrates. Socrates believed in order to teach people you would not give them answers. Rather you would ask questions and help them arrive at answers on their own.

## Guidelines for Socratic Seminar:

1. Come prepared having read the required reading and with some questions or topics to discuss.
2. Be an active listener and speaker. Contribute to the discussion.
3. One Voice - only one person can speak at one time.
4. Be respectful (even if you do not agree).
5. Use evidence or examples from your reading.
6. Explain your answers - a simple yes or no is not acceptable you must explain.

## Socratic Seminar Preparation

Required Reading: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Socratic Seminar: \_\_\_\_\_

**Instructions:** 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...

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...



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## Levels of Participation

### Level A

- Participant offers enough solid analysis, without prompting, to move the conversation forward
  - Participant, through her comments, demonstrates a deep knowledge of the text and the question
  - Participant has come to the seminar prepared, with notes and a marked/annotated text
  - Participant, through her comments, shows that she is actively listening to other participants
  - Participant offers clarification and/or follow-up that extends the conversation
- Participant's remarks often refer back to specific parts of the text.

### Level B

- Participant offers some analysis, but needs prompting from the seminar leader
  - Through comments, participant demonstrates a general knowledge of the text and question
  - Participant is less prepared, with few notes and no marked/annotated text
  - Participant is actively listening to others, but does not offer clarification and/or follow-up to others' comments
- Participant relies more upon his or her opinion, and less on the text to drive her comments

### Level C

- Participant offers solid analysis without prompting
  - Through comments, participant demonstrates a good knowledge of the text and the question
  - Participant has come to the seminar prepared, with notes or a marked/annotated text
- Participant shows that he/she is actively listening to others and offers clarification and/or follow-up

### Level D/F

- Participant offers little commentary
  - Participant comes to the seminar ill-prepared with little understanding of the text and question
  - Participant does not listen to others, offers no commentary to further the discussion
- Participant distracts the group by interrupting other speakers or by offering off topic questions and comments.

# Teacher Information

## **What is a Socratic Seminar?**

A Socratic Seminar is a form of teaching. Socrates believed that students learned best when they had to think for themselves. Socrates would respond to student questions not with answers, but rather with more questions. Rather than the teacher simply filling the students' heads with ideas students form their own thoughts and share them with the rest of the class. Students examine a similar piece of text or problem and then share a dialogue to come to a better understanding.

## **How do you make sure students keep discussing?**

Always, always, always have a pre-discussion activity. This will ensure students come prepared and ready to discuss. Also, it will be important for the teacher to have some open-ended questions ready.

## **Do students actually like this?**

Yes! Students love having those "Ah-HA!" moments. The Socratic Seminar is the perfect place for them to take place. They love that they are running the class and answering (and asking) the questions that interest them.

## **There is no way that this works.**

That's not a question, and yes it does. Since expectations are always made clear ahead of time students know what they are supposed to do, plus they like it! Management is rarely a problem when students are doing something they enjoy. While some students may be hesitant to offer opinions and add to the dialogue at first, with continued practice they will become pros! **It is also a great way to build a culture of collaboration in a class!!**

## **At the beginning of Socratic Seminar:**

I go over and stress the guidelines of Socratic seminar. Then I tell the students how many times I want them to contribute.

## **During Socratic Seminar:**

I use the check sheet and check each time a student participates. At the end I evaluate and decide whether the participation was at the A, B, C, D or F level.

## Guidelines

It is not a debate, but rather a discussion.

Students must address each other by name and use “I” phrases.

I agree with \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_

I disagree with \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_

No raising hands (everyone’s favorite rule)

You must back up statements with textual evidence (with specific page numbers) or theories/methods discussed in class.

No side discussions.

No talking over each other.

Respect everyone’s opinions.

Anyone may ask questions of the group at any time.

Talk to the group, not to the teacher.

Because this is a dialogue and not a debate we must:

Suspend judgment

Explain reasoning and be able to see its limits

Communicate assumptions

Exploring many viewpoints

## Set-Up

**For classes of 20 or fewer:**

Students should arrange desks in a circle facing inward.

**For classes of more than 20**

Students should split in half and arrange two sets of circles—an inner circle and an outer circle.

The inner circle will participate while the outer circle does a related activity.

Take notes

Keep “score” for a partner in the inner circle (see “Scoring and Rubrics” on page ).

Fill out a graphic organizer related to the seminar

Circles will switch halfway through so all students get a chance to complete all activities.

## **Sample Questions**

### **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?