

Socratic Questioning

What is the Socratic technique?

- ✦ This type of questioning fosters critical thinking, evaluation, and knowledge application in students. It is a simple, yet strong method for exploring ideas or statements in depth and breadth. It is applicable in all courses and an essential tool of all teachers of thinking.

The Socratic Technique involves:

- ✦ Listing and critical examination of *support, reasons, evidence, and assumptions* related to the central statement
- ✦ Developing and critically examining the *implications and consequences* of the statement
- ✦ Seeking and fairly examining *conflicting views*

What are Socratic Seminars?

- ✦ A highly motivating form of intellectual and scholarly discourse conducted in K-12 classrooms.
- ✦ They offer great intellectual challenges for gifted learners.
- ✦ They usually range from 30-50 minutes.
- ✦ The focus is on presenting students with questions, not answers.
- ✦ Socratic Seminars foster active learning as participants explore and evaluate the ideas, issues and values in a particular text.
- ✦ An effective seminar consists of four interdependent elements: text, questions, leader, participants.

The Text

- ✦ A seminar text can be drawn from readings in literature, history, science, math, health, and philosophy or from works of art or music. The text can be in the form of a selected passage, poem, song lyrics, an open-ended question, play, painting, speech, sermon, story, essay, editorial, film, cartoon, music, clips from a movie or video production, or other works.
- ✦ **Selecting Text:** Artifact; basis for extended conversation about ideas; discussable; rich with ideas, issues, complexities and ambiguities, contradictions or mysteries
- ✦ **Not Textbook:** Information, not discussable, organized knowledge for a didactic purpose

The Questions

- ✦ **Opening:** The opening question should be broad, open-ended, and provocative. An opening question has no right answer; instead it reflects a genuine curiosity on the part of the leader. An effective 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. The questions are meant to deepen understanding rather than to challenge another's beliefs.
- ✦ **Core:** Two to five core questions designed to reflect back into the text to specific content or to central points should be developed for use in the seminar. These questions are used if the dialogue begins to stray too far away from the text or stagnates. The questions should be of interest to the leader and cause participants to focus in on the text. Often, these will be "how" or "why" questions asking students to interpret a passage or explore a quotation. Some of the questions may be answered in the course of the dialogue without being asked.
- ✦ **Closing:** The closing question establishes relevance by seeking a connection to the real world and encouraging application of the discussion content to one's self.

The Leader

- ✦ In a Socratic Seminar, the leader plays a dual role as leader and participant. The leader consciously demonstrates habits of mind that lead to a thoughtful exploration of the ideas in the text. As a participant, the leader actively engages in the group's exploration of the text.
- ✦ **A Socratic Questioner's Role:**
 - ✦ Keep the discussion focused
 - ✦ Keep the discussion intellectually responsible
 - ✦ Stimulate the discussion with probing questions
 - ✦ Periodically summarize what has and what has not been dealt with and/or resolved
 - ✦ Draw as many students as possible into the discussion

The Participants

- ✦ In a Socratic Seminar, participants share with the leader the responsibility for the quality of the seminar. Effective 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. Students, through practice, analyze inferences, implications and assumptions in the text. They seek clarification of other's statements, rather than jump to conclusions. The seminar can only be successful if the participants listen attentively to their classmates and appreciate exactly what they hear.
- ✦ **Participant Reflection:** Participants acquire good seminar behaviors through participating in seminars and reflecting on them afterward. After each seminar, the leader and students discuss the experience and identify ways of improving the next seminar.
- ✦ **Participant Review:** Before each new seminar, the teacher should offer coaching and practice in specific habits of mind that improve reading, thinking and discussing. Eventually, when students realize the teacher is not looking for right answers, but is encouraging them to think out loud and to exchange ideas openly, 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.

A Socratic Seminar is:

- ✦ Strenuous practice in careful reading, thinking, listening and speaking skills.

A Socratic Seminar is NOT:

- ✦ A question and answer session in which the teacher

- ✦ A search for an enlarged understanding of a specific statement or reading.
- ✦ An open-ended forum for valued opinion with supporting arguments.
- ✦ A forum where all participants, including the teacher, are equals.

- ✦ attempts to cover the materials or extract correct answers.
- ✦ An attempt at adding to the students' storehouse of factual knowledge.

Socratic Seminar is Dialogue not Debate

Dialogue	Debate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Is collaborative: multiple sides work toward shared understanding. ✦ One listens to understand, to make meaning, to find common ground. ✦ Enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view. ✦ Creates an open-minded attitude: an openness to being wrong and an openness to change. ✦ In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, expecting that other people's reflections will help improve it rather than threaten it. ✦ Calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs. ✦ One searches for strength in all positions. ✦ Respects all the other participants and seeks not to alienate or offend. ✦ Assumes that many people have pieces of answers and that cooperation can lead to greater understanding. ✦ Remains open-ended 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Is oppositional: two opposing sides try to prove each other wrong. ✦ One listens to find flaws, spot differences, and counter arguments. ✦ Defends assumptions as truth. ✦ Creates a close-minded attitude: a determination to be right. ✦ In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right. ✦ Calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs. ✦ One searches for weaknesses in the other position. ✦ Rebutts contrary positions and may belittle or depreciate other participants. ✦ Assumes a single right answer that somebody already has. ✦ Demands a conclusion.

Socratic Seminar is not a Class Discussion

Seminar	Class Discussion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ 97% student talk ✦ Student average response: 8-10 seconds ✦ No teacher approval or disapproval (affirming feedback is taboo) ✦ Thinking is paramount, backed up with textual evidence ✦ Students listen to peers ✦ Student ownership for "flow" ✦ Specific accountability as testing/documenting evidence for grading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ 97% teacher talk ✦ Student average response: 2-3 seconds ✦ Teacher judgment-emphasis on correctness; limited extended thinking. ✦ Rightness is paramount; thinking ends as soon as one is right ✦ Students listen primarily to teacher ✦ Teacher ownership for "flow" ✦ A "frill"; nebulously, it counts as participation grade. If absent, didn't really miss anything-just a class discussion

Guidelines for Socratic Seminar Participants	Guidelines for Socratic Seminar Leader
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Refer to the text when needed during the discussion. ✦ It's OK to "pass" when asked to contribute. ✦ Do not participate if you are not prepared. A seminar is not a bull session. ✦ Do not stay confused, ask for clarification and offer assistance to classmates when they do not understand. ✦ Ask questions about what you read, hear, and see. ✦ Stick to the point currently under discussion; make notes about ideas you want to come back to. ✦ Explore multiple ideas simultaneously. ✦ Search for relationships between ideas being expressed. ✦ Don't raise hands: take turns speaking. ✦ Listen carefully to others ideas. ✦ Pause and think before you answer. ✦ Speak up so that all can hear you. ✦ Talk to each other, not just to the leader. ✦ Be courteous to each other. ✦ Discuss ideas rather than unsupported opinions. ✦ Be critical (not criticizing) of each other's responses. ✦ Keep your mind open to differing opinions. ✦ Be willing to change your opinion when presented with more information or for compelling reasons. ✦ Give your opinions and tell them clearly. ✦ Make judgments and defend them. ✦ Tell how you solved a problem or arrived at an answer. ✦ Provide reasons from the text to explain answers. ✦ Find examples to support what you say. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ Do any necessary background teaching before the seminar. ✦ Have an idea of what you hope to accomplish in a seminar, but don't attempt to lead the seminar in the direction you think it should go. You facilitate the students own. Rarely will two groups take the discussion in the same direction. ✦ Have your questions ready for the seminar. Know your students. The same questions may not work with different groups of students. ✦ Use text that enriches or clarifies the current course of study. Find pieces that spark student interest, but do not have to be as controversial as for a debate. ✦ If students have not read, the seminar will fail. If you have reason to believe they have not read, cancel the seminar and make another assignment. ✦ Stress that the discussion of concepts and generalizations does not take the place of knowing and remembering facts and details. ✦ Ask students for a moment of silence before focusing on the first question for a higher quality seminar. ✦ Ask questions that allow for a range of answers. Avoid yes-no questions. Use questions from all levels of thinking. Use open and close-ended questions. Open-ended questions promote critical thinking, while closed questions can focus attention. ✦ During the seminar, if misinformation is introduced, stop and ask for clarification of the facts. ✦ Allow for discussion of conflict or differences. Do not entertain answers for argument's sake alone. ✦ Insist that answers be clear or be rephrased until they are clear. ✦ Review seminar rules as necessary to redirect inappropriate behavior. ✦ If nothing new is being said, or if the responses are limited, stop the seminar and go on to something more productive. ✦ Depending on the text and topic, it may be interesting to conduct separate same-gender seminars. ✦ Be alert! Listen intently and anticipate digressions or changes in the direction of the seminar. Practice active listening.

What are the Benefits for Gifted Learners?

- ✦ Time to engage in in-depth discussion and problem solving
- ✦ Opportunity to apply critical thinking skills
- ✦ Build a strong, collaborative work culture among all students
- ✦ Enhanced knowledge and research skills
- ✦ Teaches respect for diverse ideas, people, and practices.

What is a good class size?

- ✦ Groups of 20-25 students work best. Do not work with groups larger than 30 students unless absolutely necessary. Large groups do not allow for enough interactions among students. Use “inner and outer circles” for larger groups or break the class into two seminar groups.

What is Inner and Outer Circle?

- ✦ This is a way of arranging the room for the seminar. This arrangement has two layers of seating with several chairs on the inner circle labeled as hot seats. Students seated within the inner circle are participants in seminar; however, those seated in the outer circle are observers.
- ✦ **When should I use inner and outer circle?:** When you have students qualify for the seminar, When you have an extra large class, When two classes are combined, When you want some students to concentrate on note-taking or listening skills.
- ✦ **How can students qualify for the seminar?:** To determine who has read the text have students prepare a pre-seminar task or “ticket” for entrance into the seminar. Students who are not prepared may be not participate in the seminar and must complete an alternate assignment.
- ✦ **What are hot seats?:** Hot seats allow students on the outer circle to participate as a member of the inner circle. When the student moves to the hot seat, he can be recognized to speak. Upon making his comment, he must vacate the hot seat and return to his outer circle chair and resume any duties he has been assigned as an outer circle member, leaving it open for another student.
- ✦ **Is it fair to exclude students?:** When hot seats are available students are not excluded. As long as students have opportunities to be part of both circles, the fairness is maintained. Two hot seats are recommended, each on opposite sides of the inner circle, for accessibility.
- ✦ **How do I manage the outer circle while leading the seminar?** Post a list outside the door to designate who is in inner and outer circles. Outer circle members have a clearly defined task. Outer circle members have rules and expectations enforced.
- ✦ **Possible Outer Circle Assignments:** Chart the times each participant speaks, Make a list of all the new ideas that arise during the discussion, What subject or question should have arisen but didn't?, What was the most significant issue that was raised?, How many times was the text quoted?, Summarize the key points of the seminar.
- ✦ **How often should I use inner and outer circles?:** Use it sparingly (no more than a few times a month). Don't have the same people repeatedly in the outer circle.

Seminar Rules for Students	Seminar Rules for Teachers
✦ Come prepared	✦ Listen actively
✦ Be courteous	✦ Don't judge (No positive/negative feedback)
✦ Stay focused	✦ Correct only on facts from the text
✦ Support opinions with textual proof as often as possible	✦ Ask clarifying and interpretive questions
✦ Listen carefully and thoughtfully	✦ Ask “Why?” and “Where in the text...?”
✦ Think before speaking	✦ Allow generous wait time

Assessment

- ✦ Assessment has three components: pre-seminar tasks, seminar, post-seminar tasks

Pre-Seminar Tasks

- ✦ Be prepared for an objective, factual test or quiz.
- ✦ Complete directed reading questions.
- ✦ Write a reflective sentence stating the focus of each chapter in a novel.
- ✦ Write a short essay on the main idea that should be discussed in the seminar.
- ✦ List at least (ten)major issues that should be raised in the seminar.
- ✦ Create a set of questions to be used during the seminar.
- ✦ Mark the text and/or prepare a note sheet
- ✦ Free write on the selection for 15 minutes prior to the seminar.
- ✦ Use graphic organizers to trace main ideas or character development.
- ✦ Use graphic organizers to compare and contrast the development of two characters.
- ✦ Use graphic organizers to track you opinion on key issues before the seminar and changes after the seminar.

Seminar Tasks

- ✦ Remind students of the responsibilities of an effective seminar participant.
- ✦ Not all students have the same degree of confidence or the same academic abilities, so knowing their individual traits is advantageous to the facilitator.
- ✦ Length and size of the seminar will determine the chances that a participant has to speak.
- ✦ Never assess a student solely on the number of times he speaks.
- ✦ **Observations:** Seminars offer students with particular learning challenges a “voice” that may be inaccessible in other learning environments. Alert students that you will not be providing feedback during the seminar, but are listening and taking notes on their comments and seminar capabilities.
- ✦ **Outer Circle Participants:** Grade the given task. Have them write a composition on one idea from the seminar. Ask an outer circle member to give an oral summation of the seminar (requires detailed listening and note-taking).
- ✦ **Quiet Students:** Non-verbal students should be encouraged to join in the seminar process. Watch for facial expressions and body language that might indicate a desire to speak during the seminar. Ask, “Pat, was there something you wanted to add?” Always allow students to submit written comments to enhance any oral scores received from the seminar, or complete an alternate assignment to satisfy grading requirements. Additional comments in writing allow the reserved student to reflect and process information at her own pace.

Post-Seminar Tasks

- ✦ Write a composition on a topic addressed in the seminar.
- ✦ Write a response essay that evaluates or clarifies points made or not made during the seminar.
- ✦ Follow up the seminar with a research project.
- ✦ Read another text that has similarities or differences. Write an essay exploring both.
- ✦ Write a rebuttal to the seminar text.
- ✦ Do a creative writing, art, or cartoon project.
- ✦ Respond in writing to a closing question or to another issue which was not discussed thoroughly.
- ✦ Participate in a “think, pair, share” activity.
- ✦ Be a participant in a panel discussion.
- ✦ Depending on the topic, write a letter that calls for action on a particular issue.
- ✦ Write a letter to a character, author, creator of the text, etc.
- ✦ **Absences:** Seminars are not simply class discussions. If a student is absent, an alternate assignment should be completed.

Resources: