



Socratic Seminars: Making Meaningful Dialogue



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The **Common Core State Standards** for speaking and listening state that in order for students to be ready for college and career, they must have “ample opportunities to take part in a variety of rich, structured conversations,” and “listen attentively to others so that they are able to build on others’ meritorious ideas while expressing their own clearly and persuasively.” Socratic Seminars embody these expectations of the **Common Core** and are a meaningful way to engage students from upper elementary grades through twelfth grade.

Named after the philosopher Socrates, the Socratic Seminar is a structured dialogue between students about important ideas or moral and ethical issues found in a text or across multiple texts. Not only do they ignite critical thinking, but Socratic Seminars facilitate the construction of new knowledge through connections to prior knowledge, the asking and answering of questions, the need for evidence to substantiate claims, and the ability to look at an issue from multiple perspectives. What distinguishes a Socratic Seminar from other class discussions is that once students are well prepared to generate and ask probing questions, the teacher completely steps aside and assumes the role of an observer. The goal of a Socratic Seminar is not to debate, but rather to have a dialogue that enables the participants to construct meaning of the concepts presented in the text.

Prior to their engagement in the Socratic Seminar, students prepare for the discussion by reading and annotating a text the teacher has selected. To begin the seminar, eight to twelve students seated in chairs form an inner circle in the room. In large classes, the other students form an outer circle with each student sitting behind one of their classmates who is in the inner circle. The conversation

begins with the leader posing an opening question. Other students in the inner circle reflect on the question then formulate a response.

While the students seated in the inner circle are having a dialogue about the text or other source material by asking and answering questions and responding to the thinking of others, the students seated in the outer circle are silent and observing, taking notes and reflecting on the dialogue. Once the dialogue has ended, students sitting in the outer circle provide feedback to those students in the inside circle. Then, for the second half of the seminar, or on the next day, the two circles switch roles. At the end of each seminar, students reflect in writing about the new knowledge they gained during the seminar, as well as their own performance.

An essential step in preparing students to take part in effective Socratic Seminars is the establishment of ground rules. Without them, student conversations fall flat. Suggested ground rules for a Socratic Seminar include:

- Students come to the seminar prepared.
- Students in the inner circle are active participants during the discussion.
- Students make eye contact when commenting or questioning, and direct their remarks to each other, rather than the leader or the teacher.
- Students in the inner circle frequently revisit the text, citing page numbers, specific quotes, or relevant excerpts.
- Students do not raise their hands to speak, but rather listen for a time when they can step into the conversation.
- Students do not interrupt one another.
- Students respectfully disagree with ideas, not the person who shared those ideas.
- Students in the outer circle remain silent until the seminar has ended.



The Key Elements of a Socratic Seminar

- The text
- The questions
- The leader
- The participants
- The seminar reflections

Wisdom begins in wonder.

- Socrates

Benefits of a Socratic Seminar

There are many benefits to empowering students to engage in the rich discussions that take place during a Socratic Seminar. For instance, during the Socratic Seminar, students:

- Actively listen and respond to their peers
- Learn to be respectful of the ideas, values, and perspectives of others
- Maintain ownership of the learning
- Learn responsibility and accountability as they prepare for each seminar
- Become more metacognitive readers who clarify confusion, pose thoughtful questions, draw important conclusions, and find deeper meaning in texts
- Strengthen their interpersonal skills and the ability to communicate effectively with others
- Provide and receive feedback
- Reflect on their performance during the seminar

One of a teacher's greatest responsibilities is to choose the text or texts that will anchor the students' conversation. The selected text should inspire thought-provoking conversation, while also being at the appropriate intellectual and social developmental level for students. Teachers will know when a quality text has been chosen, because the students will leave the seminars with more questions than they had at the beginning. Important to note is that in addition to printed texts such as essays, articles, short stories, and poems, teachers may also choose non-print texts. Some examples of non-print texts are artifacts, primary source documents, and photographs, maps, works of art, or examples of student work in mathematics.

When choosing texts, consideration should be given to the complexity of the text. Well-selected texts require the students to read closely and to re-read in their efforts to recognize the theme and identify significant ideas and issues. During and

after reading, these texts leave the students with unanswered questions. These texts are rigorous and promote critical thinking, but not so challenging that they are inaccessible to the students.

Socratic Seminar questions are open-ended, with no one correct answer, and are designed to elicit a variety of perspectives and responses. Seminars begin with an open-ended question that promotes students' thinking. Students do not need to be chosen to speak, but rather naturally enter the conversation when they have an insight, idea, response, or unanswered question to contribute.

The majority of questions in the Socratic Seminar are created and posed by students. In addition to learning how to construct thoughtful questions, students learn how to respond to the questions asked. When responding, students are expected to frequently revisit the text for evidence to support the ideas they are sharing.

THE WISDOM OF SOCRATES

THE ONLY TRUE WISDOM IS IN KNOWING YOU KNOW NOTHING.

EMPLOY YOUR TIME IN IMPROVING YOURSELF BY OTHER MEN'S WRITINGS, SO THAT YOU SHALL GAIN EASILY WHAT OTHERS HAVE LABORED HARD FOR.

EDUCATION IS THE KINDLING OF A FLAME, NOT THE FILLING OF A VESSEL.

I CANNOT TEACH ANYBODY ANYTHING, I CAN ONLY MAKE THEM THINK.

EDUCATING THE MIND WITHOUT EDUCATING THE HEART IS NO EDUCATION AT ALL.

NATURE HAS GIVEN US TWO EARS, TWO EYES, AND BUT ONE TONGUE - TO THE END THAT WE SHOULD HEAR AND SEE MORE THAN WE SPEAK.



Three Types of Questioning in Socratic Seminars

Opening questions:

- Crafted to generate discussion
- Relevant to the text
- Prepared ahead of time
- Answered by referring to the text
- Can be revisited throughout the unit

Guiding questions:

- Asked by the leader and as necessary by the teacher
- Occur throughout the seminar
- Help students deepen and elaborate on their responses
- Develop in response to student's contributions

Closing questions:

- Occur at the end of the seminar
- Help participants summarize their learning and make connections to their lives

Three types of questions, opening, guiding, and closing, are used during different stages of a Socratic Seminar. Opening questions are crafted to generate discussion. These questions, relevant to the text, are prepared ahead of time. They can best be answered by referring to the text, and can be revisited throughout the unit. Not only do opening questions rely on the text, but they also draw upon students' content knowledge and prior experiences. Guiding questions, asked by the leader and as necessary by the

teacher, occur throughout the seminar and help students to deepen and elaborate on their responses. These questions develop in the moment and in response to students' contributions to the discussion. In order to answer guiding questions, participants need to go deeper into the text and, in some cases, remain open to revising their thinking. Closing questions at the end of the seminar help participants summarize their new learning and make important connections to their lives.

Possible Opening Questions

Using Literature:

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee

What are the benefits and consequences of questioning or challenging social order?

Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare

How did Shakespeare use poetic conventions to engage his reader?

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald

How do Fitzgerald's descriptions of the setting influence your understanding of the character motivations and conflicts?

Lord of the Flies by William Golding

What is the author's idea of a hero?

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry by Mildred D. Taylor

What creates prejudice in our world?

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer by Mark Twain

What decision would you make if you were a witness to a crime?

The Giver by Lois Lowry

Is it ever justified to break a law?

Using news articles:

Should there be limits on scientific experiments?

Should big oil companies be allowed to drill?

Possible Guiding Questions

- What would be an example of _____?
- How can you support your opinion with evidence from the text?
- What were the main character's motivations?
- Why did the character react in the way she did?
- What would be different if the two main characters never met?
- How can you disprove _____'s response?

Possible Closing Questions

- What do you predict will happen in the future?
- How has your thinking about _____ changed?
- What connections do you see between this text and _____?



Key Differences Between Dialogue and Debate

In a dialogue, students:

- Students work together
- Have multiple perspectives
- Work toward shared understanding
- Listen to and respond to one another
- Are able to change another's point of view in some cases
- Grow their thinking

In a debate, students:

- Students oppose each other
- Try to win the argument
- Only listen to find weaknesses in an argument and offer counter arguments
- Have a sense of being right
- Focus on conflict rather than collaboration

A student is named as leader and has explicitly communicated responsibilities. The leader fulfills two roles: as the leader and as a participant. In these roles, the leader is required to know the text being discussed extremely well. The seminar begins with the leader posing an opening question that gives all participants an opportunity to share their thinking and ideas. It is the leader's responsibility to keep the discussion on topic and to ask guiding questions to help students get deeper into the text and revisit their own thinking. At the end of the seminar, the leader poses a closing question. Ultimately, the leader's questions are designed to help participants deepen their understanding.

The students participating in the seminar in small classes sit in one circle. In classes over twenty, students sit in either an inner circle or outer circle. Students in the inner circle share ideas and questions in response to comments from their peers. They connect their ideas to what was previously mentioned and listen actively at all times. Students in the outer circle remain silent during the discussion and focus on their role as an observer. They gather data to share with their peers on either the content of the seminar, or on the process skills necessary for effective seminars. When observing the content of the seminar, students in the outer circle may comment on important insights, ideas, themes or questions posed during the seminar. The process skills observed might include referencing the text, respectfully disagreeing with an idea, asking questions of peers, or taking turns.

Students in the outer circle are to note:

- What the participants were doing as others were speaking
- How many times each person in the inner circle spoke
- The ideas shared during the seminar. Were there several different ideas or was the dialogue focused on one or two ideas?
- Any participant who changed his opinion as a result of evidence presented in the seminar
- How many times a participant responded to or added on to the remarks of another participant?

At the end of each seminar, participants take time to write about the new knowledge they gained during the seminar, as well as their performance in the seminar. Post-seminar reflective questions might include:

- What did you do well during the seminar?
- What could you work on in order to be a stronger participant?
- How did your thinking grow or change as a result of your participation in the seminar?
- Did you go into the seminar with any unanswered questions or confusion? How was your thinking clarified?
- Describe the actions taken by the person you feel was the strongest participant in the discussion. How did they keep the conversation moving while engaging others' thinking?

In summary, the format of the Socratic Seminar leads students to exactly the kind of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and thinking that is required of them in the **Common Core**. The benefits are far reaching, and go a long way towards building critical thinking abilities and communication skills.

**There is only
one good,
knowledge, and
only one evil,
ignorance.**

- Socrates



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Resources and References

www.teachingchannel.org/videos/bring-socratic-seminars-to-the-classroom

During a Socratic Seminar, a 9th grade class discusses the meaning and purpose of poetic language.

www.avidregion6.org/documents/321201131134pm.pdf

This PDF from AVID Region VI provides information and templates on topics such as Socratic Seminar lesson outlines, dialogue versus debate, the role of the leader, the role of the participant, Socratic question development, and debriefing the seminar.

api.ning.com/files/co4SIF2nbJc8Gg84AwwqfZmBGn53Rgd3MeBet0dLVnmgfPQVvyjrRmQ23Q*3yDbHU06l*gQFiOTIlf2yj2t01pj*VY53vEfQH/SocraticTIEConference2012.pdf

This document addresses Socratic Seminars in conjunction with the **Common Core State Standards**, as presented by John Swanson, Technology and Innovation in Education (TIE).

[schools.bvsvd.org/p12/boulder/faculty/carroll2/Shared%20Documents/Advanced%20Freshman%20Language%20Arts/Socratic%20Seminar/Developing%20Opening%20guiding%20closing%20questions\[1\].pdf](http://schools.bvsvd.org/p12/boulder/faculty/carroll2/Shared%20Documents/Advanced%20Freshman%20Language%20Arts/Socratic%20Seminar/Developing%20Opening%20guiding%20closing%20questions[1].pdf)

This link provides a guide for developing opening, guiding, and closing questions for Socratic Seminars.

www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/socratic-seminars-30600.html

This strategy guide explains Socratic Seminars and offers practical methods for applying the approach in your classroom to help students investigate multiple perspectives in a text.

www.scholastic.com/teachers/top-teaching/2010/11/higher-order-comprehension-power-socratic-seminar

The author, Angela Bunyi, discusses effective planning and guidelines for participation in the Socratic Seminar.

www.studyguide.org/socratic_seminar.htm

This website provides support for students who are preparing questions to use in a Socratic Seminar.

www.nwabr.org/sites/default/files/SocSem.pdf

This document prepared by the National Padiea Center provides clear and extensive information as well as several exemplar handouts.

Tredway, Lynda. *Socratic Seminars: Engaging Students in Intellectual Discourse, Educational Leadership*. Volume 53. 1995.

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