

How to Create and Use Socratic Seminars

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Definition of Socratic Seminars

A Socratic Seminar is a scholarly discussion of an essential question in which student opinions are shared, proven, refuted, and refined through dialogue with other students. In classes of more than fifteen students, the fishbowl format for Socratic seminars should be used. In this format, the teacher or seminar leader facilitates the discussion. Only half the class, seated in an inner circle, participates in the discussion at one time. The other half of the class, seated in an outer circle, consists of the students who act as observers and coaches. Every student's participation is graded.

Purpose of Socratic Seminars

In a Socratic Seminar, participants seek to answer an essential question and gain deeper understanding of laws, ideas, issues, values, and/or principles presented in a text or texts through rigorous and thoughtful dialogue

Advantages of Socratic Seminars

- Provides opportunities for critical readings of texts
- Teaches respect for diverse ideas, people, and practices
- Enhances students' knowledge and research base
- Creates a community of inquiry
- Develops critical thinking, problem solving, speaking, and listening skills
- Clarifies one's ideas, ethics and values
- Maximizes student participation
- Encourages divergent thinking

Steps for Socratic Seminars

Preparation:

- Prior to the discussion, the teacher will select an appropriate text. The text must be complex and rich in ideas that promote thinking and discussion. Readings in literature, history, science, math, health, and philosophy or works of art or music may be used.
- All students will read the text prior to the discussion.
- The teacher will develop the essential or opening question for the discussion. An effective opening question arises from genuine curiosity on the part of the teacher and/or the participants, has no single “right” answer, is framed to generate dialogue leading to greater understanding of the ideas in the text, and can best be answered by reference to the text.
- The teacher may share all possible discussion questions with students before the seminar or the teacher may share only one question before the seminar starts, depending on the length of the text, complexity of the discussion question(s) and ideas presented in the text, and the time allotted for the discussion.
- Prior to the discussion, the teacher must provide adequate time for all students to record the essential question, develop their answer, and identify support for the answer.

Pre-Conference:

- Prior to the seminar, the teacher will determine which students will be inner circle participants and will assign each participant a coach from the outer circle. The teacher should consider students’ thinking, listening, speaking, and reading skills when pairing students.
- Just before the seminar each participant and his or her coach will meet for a pre-conference to discuss the participant's goals for the discussion. The teacher may allow a few minutes of informal discussion between participants and their coaches in order to build some confidence in the participant’s ideas before the seminar.

Seminar:

- Students sit in one of two circles (inner circle for participants, outer circle for coaches).
- Teacher poses the essential or opening question.
- The teacher may need to ask follow up questions to lead the participants to greater understanding of the text.
- Students respond to the question orally or in writing.
- Teacher facilitates the seminar discussion by guiding students to a deeper and clarified consideration of the ideas of the text, a respect for varying points of view, and adherence to and respect for the seminar process.
- Students cite evidence from the text, ask questions, speak, listen, make connections, and add insight or new knowledge to discuss their point of view in regards to the opening question.

- Teacher takes notes for evaluative purposes but provides no verbal or nonverbal feedback that either affirms or challenges what the students say. The teacher may ask follow-up questions; however, teacher questions are used sparingly and deliberately.
- When satisfied that the opening question has been thoroughly explored, the teacher asks one or more additional questions to examine central points of the text.
- Students may pose new questions when the discussion is exhausted. New questions posed must relate to students' ideas and contributions in response to the initial essential question.
- Once the text has been explored thoroughly the teacher may ask a closing question, which is derived from the text but which seeks to have students apply the topic to their own lives or the world.
- The teacher will thank students for their participation and summarize the main ideas and concepts examined during the discussion.

Post-Conference:

- After the discussion, the coaches provide feedback to the participants to acknowledge their strengths and identify their weaknesses in a post-conference.
- The teacher will grade each coach based on his or her written and oral feedback to the participant.

Rules and Roles for Socratic Seminars

The Participants:

- May only participate in the discussion if they have read the selection
- Must support their opinions with evidence from the text
- May speak at any time during the seminar with respect for the other participants
- May whisper with their coaches if the teacher allows it
- May refer to other works the class has read if the teacher allows it
- May write notes to themselves during the discussion if the teacher allows it
- May ask relevant questions of other participants

The Coaches:

- Must evaluate the participant's performance during the seminar
- Must provide oral and written feedback to the participant after the seminar
- May not speak to their participants during the seminar unless the teacher allows it
- May not speak to other participants or coaches at any time

The Teacher/Leader:

- Must provide adequate "think time" for students to respond appropriately
- Can only ask questions; cannot state his or her opinions or interpretations
- Must require participants to support their opinions with evidence from the text
- Must encourage participants to agree and disagree for substantial reasons
- May record the number and quality of participant responses
- Must determine when to conclude the seminar

Management Tips for Socratic Seminars

- Allow no more than 30 minutes for the first seminar; after students have become familiar with the seminar format, 45-50 minutes may be allotted for discussion, particularly when examining more complex texts
- Select students for inner and outer circles carefully to prevent off-task behaviors
- Share rules, expectations, and grading practices with students prior to the seminar.
- Distribute an equal number of tokens or “talking chips” to all participants; require participants to use all their tokens or chips prior to the end of the discussion
- Stop discussion to interject commentary, commend participants, or end negative behavior during the first seminar; as students become familiar with the seminar format, the teacher should not need to provide any feedback
- Eliminate the outer circle when using Socratic Seminars in classes of fifteen students or less

Options for Assessing and Evaluating Student Work in Socratic Seminars

Student participation and understanding may be assessed and evaluated using the following methods:

- Rubric to assess student conduct, speaking, reasoning, listening, and/or preparation
- Checklist of positive and negative behaviors
- Student self-evaluation
- Peer evaluation

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