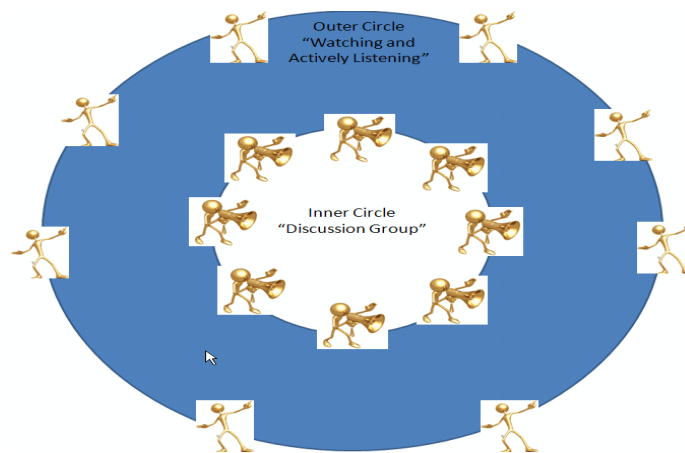


SOCRATIC SEMINAR



The goal of a Socratic seminar is for students to help one another understand the ideas, issues, and values reflected in a specific text. Students are responsible for facilitating a discussion around ideas in the text rather than asserting opinions. Through a process of listening, making meaning, and finding common ground students work toward shared understanding rather than trying to prove a particular argument. A Socratic seminar is not used for the purpose of debate, persuasion, or personal reflection, as the focus is on developing shared meaning of a text.

Steps for the Strategy

1. Selecting an appropriate text

Socratic seminars are based on close textual analysis so it is important to select a text that provides ample avenues for interpretation and discussion. If you choose a simple text where the meaning of it is fairly straightforward, there won't be much for students to discuss. Also, the text should not be too long to read closely in the allotted amount of time. Often teachers select a text ranging from one paragraph to one page.

2. Students prepare for the seminar

Before beginning the seminar, it is essential that students have time to prepare ideas. Students should annotate the text before the start of the class discussion. (If students do not know how to annotate a text, you should model this for them.) Often teachers assign a discussion leader who generates a few open-ended questions that can be used to begin the seminar.

3. Contracting

Socratic seminars have rules that may not apply to other forms of discussion, so before beginning the seminar, it is important that everyone is aware of the norms. Below are typical rules used to structure a Socratic seminar. Of course, you can adapt these to fit the needs of your students:

- Talk to each other, not just to the discussion leader or teacher.
- Refer to evidence from the text to support your ideas. Ask questions if you do not understand what someone has said, or you can paraphrase what another student has said

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for clarification. (“I think you said this, is that right?”) You do not need to raise your hands to speak, but please pay attention to your “airtime” – how much you have spoken in relation to other students.

- Don’t interrupt
- Don’t put down the ideas of another student. Without judging the student who you may disagree with, state your alternate interpretation or ask a follow-up question to help probe or clarify an idea.

Common statements or questions used during a Socratic seminar include:

- Where does that idea come from in the text?
- What does this word or phrase mean?
- Can you say that in another way?
- Is this what you mean to say...
- What do you think the author is trying to say?
- What else could that mean?
- Who was the audience for this text? How does that shape our interpretation of these words?
- Who was the author of this text? What do we know about him/her? How does that shape our understanding of these words?

Before beginning the seminar it is also important to remind students that the purpose of the seminar **is not** to debate or prove a point, but to more deeply understand what the author was trying to express in the text. Also, if you have never done a Socratic seminar with your students before, you might spend a few moments brainstorming the qualities that would make for a great seminar.

Criteria you might use to evaluate a Socratic seminar include:

- engagement (everyone listening and sharing)
- respect (no interruptions or put-downs)
- meaning-making (students understand the text more deeply at the end of the seminar) and use of evidence (comments always refer back to the text)

4. The Socratic seminar

A Socratic seminar often begins with the discussion leader, a student or the teacher, asking an open-ended question. A typical Socratic seminar opening prompt is: What do you think this text means? Silence is fine. It may take a few minutes for students to warm-up. Sometimes teachers organize a Socratic seminar like a fishbowl, with some students participating in the discussion and the rest of the class having specific jobs as observers. Socratic seminars should be given at least fifteen minutes and can often last thirty minutes or more. As students become more familiar with Socratic seminars, they are able to discuss a text for longer periods of time without any teacher-intervention.

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5. Reflection and to evaluate

After the Socratic seminar, give students the opportunity to evaluate the seminar in general and their own performance specifically. This can be an in-class or a homework assignment. You can create evaluation forms to help with this step. Students can also reflect on their comfort level during the seminar and high points of engagement and disengagement. Reflecting on the seminar process helps students improve their ability to participate in future discussions. Here are some questions you might discuss or write about when reflecting on the seminar:

- At any point did the seminar revert into a debate/discussion rather than dialogue? If so, how did the group handle this?
- What evidence did you see of people actively listening and building on others' ideas?
- How has your understanding of this text been affected by the ideas explored in this seminar?
- What would you like to do differently as a participant the next time you are in a seminar?

Dialogue versus Debate

Crucial to successful Socratic Seminars is an understanding of the difference between dialogue and debate. Both the leader and the participants must be able to make this distinction. More importantly, students must understand why we value the dialogue that we seek through Socratic Seminars. The purpose of the seminar is to expand our ideas and deepen our thinking, not to come to a particular conclusion or any conclusion at all.

Use the table below to lead a discussion of the difference between these two concepts.

Dialogue is...	Debate is...
collaborative	oppositional
about understanding	about proving others wrong
listening for deeper meaning	listening for flaws
re-evaluating assumptions	defending assumptions
keeping an open mind	close-minded
about temporarily suspending beliefs	about defending beliefs
searching for strength or validity in all ideas	searching for weaknesses in ideas
about respecting all participants	about belittling or demeaning others
exploring different possibilities	having one right answer
open-ended	demands a conclusion