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.

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:

1)      Talk to each other, not just to the discussion leader or teacher.

2)      Refer to evidence from the text to support your ideas.

3)      Ask questions if you do not understand what someone has said, or you can paraphrase what

another student has said for clarification. (“I think you said this, is that right?”)

4)      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 to assure everyone has an opportunity to

speak.

5)      Don’t interrupt.

6)      Don’t put down the ideas of another student. Without judging the student whom you may

disagree with, state your alternate interpretation or ask a follow-up question to help probe or

clarify an idea.

**Dialogue vs. Debate**

It is important for participants to understand the purpose of the seminar is to engage is a ***discussion***, not a debate. Effective dialogue is based on suspending our own judgment and exploring other viewpoints more broadly and deeply without becoming defensive.

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| **Dialogue** | **Debate** |
| Dialogue is collaborative: multiple sides work toward shared understanding. | Debate is oppositional: two opposing sides try to prove each other wrong. |
| In dialogue, one listens to understand, to make meaning, and to find common ground. | In debate, one listens to find flaws, to spot differences, and to counter arguments. |
| Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant’s point of view. | Debate defends assumptions as truth. |
| Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude: an openness to being wrong and an openness to change. | Debate creates a close-minded attitude, a determination to be right. |
| In dialogue, one submits one’s best thinking, expecting that other people’s reflections will help improve it rather than threaten it. | In debate, one submits one’s best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right. |
| Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one’s beliefs. | Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one’s beliefs. |
| In dialogue, one searches for strengths in all positions. | In debate, one searches for weaknesses in the other position. |
| Dialogue respects all the other participants and seeks not to alienate or offend. | Debate rebuts contrary positions and may belittle or deprecate other participants. |
| Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of answers and that cooperation can lead to a greater understanding. | Debate assumes a single right answer that somebody already has. |
| Dialogue remains open-ended. | Debate demands a conclusion. |

**What makes a good Socratic seminar question?**

Good Socratic questions are always open-ended, thought-provoking, and clear.

Student in a Socratic seminar

**Open-ended:**Questions are designed to elicit multiple perspectives. Numerous answers can be correct as long as the students stay on topic.

**Thought-provoking:**To start, questions should spark numerous responses. Then, they should challenge students to evaluate and synthesize their ideas.

**Clear:**Participants should be able to understand right away what the facilitator is asking. This means phrasing questions carefully to keep them short and simple, even when the topic is complex.

### **OPENING QUESTIONS: WHAT IS THE TEXT ABOUT?**

The goal of opening questions is to engage all of the participants in identifying the main ideas in a text.

**Examples:**

* What word or phrase is most important?
* Which character is meant to be the hero or protagonist?
* What is the most surprising statement in the text?
* What is the most striking image or metaphor?
* What would be another good title for this piece?

### **CORE QUESTIONS: WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT IDEAS IN THE TEXT?**

The goal of core questions is to have the participants analyze the seminar text and develop their ideas about it.

**Examples:**

* Why is the argument structured in this way?
* What evidence does the author use to back up his or her point of view?
* What do the authors mean when they say \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_?
* What is the relationship between \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ ?

### **CLOSING QUESTIONS: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO YOU?**

The goal of closing questions is for participants to consider the ideas and values from the text, in real-world applications.

**Examples:**

* What additional points should be included in this text?
* In your opinion, is it morally right to take the action described in this text?
* Based on this story, do you think people’s actions are determined by fate or by choice?
* Which character are you most like? When have you behaved like the other character?

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| **Assignment:**   1. Annotate your text thoroughly 2. Write a total of five **open-ended** questions and answer each in a thoroughly written paragraph. Above, there are three different types of questions, so you should have:    1. One “Opening” question    2. Three “Core” questions    3. One “Closing” question 3. Your work must be typed using MLA format. (**It must be printed before you come to class**). |