

Elements of Socratic Seminars

Socrates believed that enabling students to think for themselves was more important than filling their heads with right answers. In a Socratic Seminar, participants seek deeper understanding of complex ideas through rigorously thoughtful dialog, rather than by memorizing bits of information or meeting arbitrary demands for coverage.

A Socratic Seminar fosters active learning as participants explore and evaluate the ideas, issues, and values in a particular text. A good Seminar consists of four interdependent elements:

The Text: Seminar texts are chosen for their richness in ideas, issues, and values and their ability to stimulate extended, thoughtful dialog. A text can be taken from readings in literature, history, science, math, health, and philosophy or from works of art or music. A good text raises important questions in participants' minds, questions for which there are no right or wrong answers.

The Question: A Seminar opens with questions either posed by the leader or solicited from the participants as they acquire more experience in seminars. An opening question has no right or wrong answer, instead it leads the participants back to the text as they speculate, evaluate, define, and clarify the issues involved. Responses to the opening question generates new questions, in this way, the line of inquiry evolves on the spot rather than being pre-determined by the leader.

The Leader: The Seminar leader chooses the text, creates the question that leads to thoughtful exploration of the ideas in the text, keeps the discussion focused on the text, asks follow up questions, helps involve reluctant participants, while restraining more vocal peers. The leader must be patient enough to allow participants' understandings to evolve and be willing to allow participants to explore non-traditional insights and unexpected interpretations. Before each new seminar, the leader offers coaching and practice in specific habits of mind that improve reading, thinking, and discussing.

The Participants: In Seminar, participants share the responsibility for the quality of the seminar. Good Seminars occur when participants study the text closely prior to the discussion, listen actively, share their ideas and questions in response to ideas and questions of others, and search for evidence in the text to support their ideas. The goal of the participants is to come to a better understanding of the text than when they first started. The idea is that each participant holds a piece to the puzzle. Only through questioning and dialog can they see the bigger picture. Participants acquire good seminar behavior through participating in seminars regularly and reflecting on them afterwards. Eventually, the participants realize the leader is not looking for a right answer, but is encouraging them to think out loud and to exchange ideas openly.

GUIDELINES FOR SOCRATIC SEMINAR PARTICIPANTS

1. Refer to the text when needed during the discussion. A seminar is not a test of memory. You are not “learning a subject;” your goal is to understand the ideas, issues, and values reflected in the text.
 2. It’s okay to “pass” when asked to contribute
 3. Do not participate if you are not prepared. A seminar should not be a bull session
 4. Do not stay confused; ask for clarification
 5. Stick to the point currently under discussion; make notes about ideas that you want to come back to.
 6. Don’t raise hands; take turns speaking.
 7. Listen carefully.
 8. Speak up so that all can hear you.
 9. Talk to each other, not just to the leader or to the teacher.
 10. Discuss ideas rather than each other’s opinions
 11. You are responsible for the seminar, even if you don’t know it or admit it.
-

DIALOGUE AND 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 out for temporarily suspending one’s beliefs.
Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one’s belief.
- **In Dialogue**, one searches for strengths in all positions
In Debate, one searches for weakness in the other position
- **Dialogue** respects all of the other participants and seeks not to alienate or offend
Debate rebuts contrary positions and may belittle or depreciate 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

Socratic Seminar Grading Rubric

A=Exemplary

- Demonstrates patience with other's opinions
- Moves the conversation forward
- Speaks to all participants
- Thinks before answering
- Refers directly to the text
- Makes connections to other speakers
- Considers all opinions
- Writes down thoughts and questions
- Builds on other's comments
- Asks for clarification when needed
- Identifies key words/ phrases/ details in the text

B=Commanding

- Comments often
- Responds to questions
- Refers to the text
- Offers interesting ideas
- Pays attention
- A few questions
- Takes notes

C= Competent

- Emphasizes only own ideas
- Ideas not always connected
- Refers to text
- Loses track of conversation
- Judges other's ideas
- A few questions
- Takes some notes

D=Developing

- Leans towards debate, not dialogue
- Disruptive, argumentative
- Mumbles or is silent
- Repeats same ideas
- Little or no notes taken
- No questions asked

F= Emerging

- is not participating
- is lost and/or overwhelmed with the seminar

