

# Socratic Seminar

## Background of the Socratic Seminar

The Socratic method of teaching is based on Socrates' theory that it is more important to enable students to think for themselves than to merely fill their heads with right answers. Therefore, he regularly engaged his pupils in dialogues by responding to their questions with questions, instead of answers. This process encourages divergent thinking rather than convergent.

Students are given opportunities to examine a common piece of text, whether it is in the form of a novel, poem, art print, or piece of music. After reading the common text "like a love letter," open-ended questions are posed.

Open ended questions allow students to think critically, analyze multiple meanings in text, and express ideas with clarity and confidence. After all, a certain degree of emotional safety is felt by participants when they understand that this format is based on dialogue and not discussion or debate.

Dialogue is exploratory and involves the suspension of biases and prejudices. Discussion or debate is a transfer of information designed to win an argument and bring closure. Americans are great at discussion or debate. We do not dialogue well. However, once teachers and students learn to dialogue, they find that the ability to ask meaningful questions that stimulate thoughtful interchanges of ideas is more important than the answer.

Participants in a Socratic Seminar respond to one another with respect by carefully listening instead of interrupting. Students are encouraged to paraphrase essential elements of others ideas before responding, either in support or disagreement. Members of the dialogue look each other in the eyes and use each others' names. This simple act of socialization reinforces appropriate behaviors and promotes team building.

## How to earn points:

1 point - **O** For your opinion

2 points - **H** For hitchhiking on someone's answer

2 points - **R** Referencing the text

2 points - **N** For a new idea, or taking the conversation in a new direction

2 points - **D** For disagreeing or taking a different approach

3 points - **Q** For quoting the text

3 points - **W** Too awesome to categorize!

-1 point - **DN** For does not follow directions

# Guidelines for Participants in a Socratic Seminar

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 OK 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 you want to come back to.
6. If you have something to contribute, raise your hand. The current speaker will choose the next speaker when he or she is finished. Only one speaker at a time.
7. Listen carefully.
8. Speak up so that all can hear you.
9. Talk to each other, not just to the leader or teacher.
10. Discuss ideas rather than opinions.
11. You are responsible for the seminar, even if you don't know it or admit it.

# Expectations of Participants in a Socratic Seminar

When I am evaluating your Socratic Seminar participation, I ask the following questions about participants. Did they...

1. Speak loudly and clearly?
2. Cite reasons and evidence for their statements?
3. Use the text to find support?
4. Listen to others respectfully?
5. Stick with the subject?
6. Talk to each other, not just the leader?
7. Paraphrase accurately?
8. Ask for help to clear up confusion?
9. Support each other?
10. Avoid hostile exchanges?
11. Question others in a civil manner?
12. Seem prepared?

# Is this a debate? NO!

## What is the difference between 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 a 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 all other positions.
- 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.
- Dialogue is characterized by:
  - suspending judgment
  - examining our own work without defensiveness
  - exposing our reasoning and looking for limits to it
  - communicating our underlying assumptions
  - exploring viewpoints more broadly and deeply
  - being open to disconfirming data
  - approaching someone who sees a problem differently not as an adversary, but as a colleague in common pursuit of better solution

# Socratic Seminar: Participant Rubric

## A Level Participant

- Participant offers enough solid analysis, without prompting, to move the conversation forward
- Participant, through her comments, demonstrates a deep knowledge of the text and the question
- Participant has come to the seminar prepared, with notes and a marked/annotated text
- Participant, through her comments, shows that she is actively listening to other participants
- Participant offers clarification and/or follow-up that extends the conversation
- Participant's remarks often refer back to specific parts of the text

## B Level Participant

- Participant offers solid analysis without prompting
- Through comments, participant demonstrates a good knowledge of the text and the question
- Participant has come to the seminar prepared, with notes and a marked/annotated text
- Participant shows that he/she is actively listening to others and offers clarification and/or follow-up

## C Level Participant

- Participant offers some analysis, but needs prompting from the seminar leader
- Through comments, participant demonstrates a general knowledge of the text and question
- Participant is less prepared, with few notes and no marked/annotated text
- Participant is actively listening to others, but does not offer clarification and/or follow-up to others' comments
- Participant relies more upon his or her opinion, and less on the text to drive her comments

## D or F Level Participant

- Participant offers little commentary
- Participant comes to the seminar ill-prepared with little understanding of the text and question
- Participant does not listen to others, offers no commentary to further the discussion
- Participant distracts the group by interrupting other speakers or by offering off topic questions and comments
- Participant ignores the discussion and its participants

# Examples for Questions

## Open-ended question:

Write an insightful question about the text that will require proof and group discussion and "construction of logic" to discover or explore the answer to the question.

Example: Why did Gene hesitate to reveal the truth about the accident to Finny that first day in the infirmary? (After mid-point of *A Separate Peace*).

## Universal Theme/Core question:

Write a question dealing with a theme(s) of the text that will encourage group discussion about the universality of the text.

Example: After reading John Gardner's *Grendel*, can you pick out its existential elements? How do these elements apply to the overall meaning of the work?

## Literary Analysis question:

Write a question dealing with HOW an author chose to compose a literary piece. How did the author manipulate point of view, characterization, poetic form, archetypal hero patterns, for example?

Example: In *Mama Flora's Family*, why is it important that the story is told through flashback?