

Socratic Seminar

"The unexamined life is not worth living." (Socrates)

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.

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 another's ideas before responding, either in support of or in 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.

Grade	Characteristics
A	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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 he or 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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.
F	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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.

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.

A successful Socratic seminar requires dialogue, not debate.

Dialogue includes:

- 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

Guidelines for Participants in a Socratic Seminar

1. You are responsible for the success of the seminar; be prepared to actively participate.
2. 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.
3. Do not stay confused; ask for clarification.
4. Stick to the point currently under discussion; make notes about ideas you want to come back to.
5. Don't raise hands; take turns speaking.
6. Listen carefully.
7. Speak up so that all can hear you.
8. Talk to each other, not just to the leader or teacher.
9. Discuss ideas rather than each other's opinions.
10. It's acceptable to "pass" when asked to contribute.

Adams, Cindy. *Socratic Seminars*. 29 December 2007 <www.studyguide.org>.

"Socratic Seminar." *Journey to Excellence*. North American Division Office of Education. 29 December 2007 <<http://www.journeytoexcellence.org/practice/instruction/theories/miscideas/socratic/>>.