

Socratic Seminar

Source: Facing History

Available at: <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/socratic-seminar>

Rationale

In a Socratic Seminar activity, students help one another understand the ideas, issues, and values reflected in a text through a group discussion format. Students are responsible for facilitating their group discussion around the ideas in the text; they shouldn't use the discussion to assert their opinions or prove an argument. Through this type of discussion, students practice how to listen to one another, make meaning, and find common ground while participating in a conversation.

Procedure

1. Select an Appropriate Text

The Socratic Seminar strategy is 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 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. An example of texts often used as the basis of Socratic Seminar activities include the preamble to the US Constitution, Dr. Martin Luther King's [Letter from Birmingham Jail](#), or the reading [No Time to Think](#) from our resource *Holocaust and Human Behavior*.

2. Give Students Time to Prepare

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. Teachers often assign a discussion leader who generates a few open-ended questions that can be used to begin the seminar.

3. Develop a Classroom Contract

These 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 activity. 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 for clarification ("I think you said this; is that right?").
- You do not need to raise your hand 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 you 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 activity 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.

If you have never done a Socratic Seminar activity with your students before, you might spend a few moments brainstorming the qualities that would make for a great seminar. These qualities or criteria can be explained on a rubric and used to evaluate the seminar at the end of the class period. Criteria you might use to evaluate a Socratic Seminar activity 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 activity often begins with the discussion leader, a student or the teacher, asking an open-ended question. A typical 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 activity like a Fishbowl activity, with some students participating in the discussion and the rest of the class having specific jobs as observers. At least 15 minutes should be allotted to the activity, and it can often last 30 minutes or more. As students become more familiar with the Socratic Seminar format, they will be able to discuss a text for longer periods of time without teacher intervention.

5. Reflect and Evaluate

After the Socratic Seminar activity, give students the opportunity to evaluate the process in general and their own performance specifically. Reflecting on the seminar process helps students improve their ability to participate in future discussions. Here are some questions you might discuss or have students write about when reflecting on the seminar:

- At any point, did the seminar revert to something other than a 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 parts of the discussion did you find most interesting? In what parts were you least engaged?
- What would you like to do differently as a participant the next time you are in a seminar?