

Steps for Socratic Seminars

Preparation:

- Prior to the discussion, the teacher will select an appropriate text. The text must be complex and rich in ideas that promote thinking and discussion. Readings in literature, history, science, math, health, and philosophy or works of art or music may be used.
- All students will read the text prior to the discussion.
- The teacher will develop the essential or opening question for the discussion. An effective opening question arises from genuine curiosity on the part of the teacher and/or the participants, has no single “right” answer, is framed to generate dialogue leading to greater understanding of the ideas in the text, and can best be answered by reference to the text.
- The teacher may share all possible discussion questions with students before the seminar or the teacher may share only one question before the seminar starts, depending on the length of the text, complexity of the discussion question(s) and ideas presented in the text, and the time allotted for the discussion.
- Prior to the discussion, the teacher must provide adequate time for all students to record the essential question, develop their answer, and identify support for the answer.

Pre-Conference:

- Prior to the seminar, the teacher will determine which students will be inner circle participants and will assign each participant a coach from the outer circle. The teacher should consider students’ thinking, listening, speaking, and reading skills when pairing students.
- Just before the seminar each participant and his or her coach will meet for a pre-conference to discuss the participant's goals for the discussion. The teacher may allow a few minutes of informal discussion between participants and their coaches in order to build some confidence in the participant’s ideas before the seminar.

Seminar:

- Students sit in one of two circles (inner circle for participants, outer circle for coaches).
- Teacher poses the essential or opening question.
- The teacher may need to ask follow up questions to lead the participants to greater understanding of the text.
- Students respond to the question orally or in writing.
- Teacher facilitates the seminar discussion by guiding students to a deeper and clarified consideration of the ideas of the text, a respect for varying points of view, and adherence to and respect for the seminar process.
- Students cite evidence from the text, ask questions, speak, listen, make connections, and add insight or new knowledge to discuss their point of view in regards to the opening question.
- Teacher takes notes for evaluative purposes but provides no verbal or nonverbal feedback that either affirms or challenges what the students say. The teacher may ask follow-up questions; however, teacher questions are used sparingly and deliberately.

- When satisfied that the opening question has been thoroughly explored, the teacher asks one or more additional questions to examine central points of the text.
- Students may pose new questions when the discussion is exhausted. New questions posed must relate to students' ideas and contributions in response to the initial essential question.
- Once the text has been explored thoroughly the teacher may ask a closing question, which is derived from the text but which seeks to have students apply the topic to their own lives or the world.
- The teacher will thank students for their participation and summarize the main ideas and concepts examined during the discussion.

Post-Conference:

- After the discussion, the coaches provide feedback to the participants to acknowledge their strengths and identify their weaknesses in a post-conference.
- The teacher will grade each coach based on his or her written and oral feedback to the participant.