

Rules for Socratic Seminars

Background: 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, meaning there should be a variety of answers, rather than one pat-answer. Deeper levels of thought and discussion are encouraged.

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/debate.

A dialogue is respectful, despite opinions that may differ than you. Americans are great at debate, but a dialogue never is intended to shoot down anyone else's opinions. You are to be *open* to others ideas, even if you disagree, and, before you verbally disagree, provide a positive thought and some credit for the person with whom you disagree.

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 other names. This simple act of socialization reinforces appropriate behaviors and promotes team building.

Guidelines:

1. Questions must be created prior to the seminar (supplied by teacher for first seminar). They must all be open-ended questions, and can be such questions as those related to the story as it relates to the world/culture, questions concerning themes, questions relating to values in our own personal lives, and questions related to better understanding and analyzing the text (characters, symbols, etc.).
2. The class should be split into two. Half of the class will make up an inner circle (those involved with dialogue), and half of the class will make up an outer circle (those on the outside observing, taking notes, and writing questions to pose inside of the inner circle). The two groups will switch assignments half way through the seminar.
3. Someone on the outside circle should draw a map tracing where the dialogue is going. He or she is exempt from taking notes on the outside side of the circle.
4. When discussing, the next person to talk should paraphrase/summarize what the previous person has just said.
5. All claims/ideas must be supported with evidence from the text and/or life. Try to remain as close to on topic with the story as possible. Avoid tangents.

6. A leader is to be elected within the group who is responsible for keeping the discussion going at all times, prompting others if necessary. He or she is still responsible for adding to the discussion, not simply posing questions.
7. A grade is determined by a general “average” of points received for discussion. I will keep my Gradebook open and provide each response with 1, 2, or 3 points. 1 shows a shallow level of thought (but goes beyond such phrases as “I agree” or “uhuh”), 2 shows a general depth of thought, usually a couple sentences long, and 3 shows an advanced level of thought, generally 3 or more “sentences” of thought long. I will add up the average (minus those who chose not to talk) and divide by all speakers, and this will determine the amount of points is the amount you need to receive 100%. Thus, the opportunity for a few extra credit points is readily available here.

Rules:

1. Refer to the text as 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. As you refer to the text, you are first entitled to use electronic versions (such as your iPad) as well as class notes. However, if you misuse electronics, you, as an individual, will lose all points for the seminar, and will be asked to work on an alternate, hard copy assignment answering Socratic Seminar questions in 3+ sentences per *bullet*, grasping the same depth of knowledge as those in the seminar, and will do so for homework, making up 80% of your seminar points.
3. Do not participate if you are not prepared and are not willing to contribute critical thought to the discussion. Distracting/ rude/ off topic/ inappropriate comments detract from your points.
4. If you are confused, ask for clarification.
5. Stick to the point currently under discussion; make notes about ideas you want to come back to.
6. Don’t raise hands; take turns speaking. But do not interrupt others speaking. *Wait two seconds before speaking.*
7. Listen carefully so that you respond to what others are saying. Remain on topic!
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 each other’s opinions.
11. If you carry side conversations, in the circle or outside of the circle, you lose 2 points each time you verbalize or non-verbally communicate with others.
12. You are responsible for the seminar, even if you don’t know it or admit it.