The Socratic Seminar

A “Test” of your ability to READ carefully, LISTEN closely, work COOPERATIVELY, THINK deeply, and SPEAK precisely.
What does *Socratic* mean?

Socratic comes from the name Socrates. Socrates (ca. 470-399 B.C.) was a Classical Greek philosopher who developed a Theory of Knowledge.

What was Socrates' Theory of Knowledge?

Socrates was convinced that the surest way to attain reliable knowledge was through the practice of disciplined conversation. He called this method *dialectic*.

What does *dialectic* mean?

di-a-lec-tic (noun) means the art or practice of examining opinions or ideas logically, often by the method of question and answer, so as to determine their validity.

How did Socrates use the dialectic?

He would begin with a discussion of the obvious aspects of any problem. Socrates believed that through the process of dialogue, where all parties to the conversation were forced to clarify their ideas, the final outcome of the conversation would be a clear statement of what was meant. The technique appears simple but it is intensely rigorous. Socrates would feign ignorance about a subject and try to draw out from the other person his fullest possible knowledge about it. His assumption was that by progressively correcting incomplete or inaccurate notions, one could coax the truth out of anyone. The basis for this assumption was an individual's capacity for recognizing lurking contradictions. If the human mind was incapable of knowing something, Socrates wanted to demonstrate that, too. Some dialogues, therefore, end inconclusively.
What is a Socratic Seminar?

A Socratic Seminar is a method to try to understand information by creating a dialectic in class in regards to a specific text. In a Socratic Seminar, participants seek deeper understanding of complex ideas in the text through rigorously thoughtful dialogue, rather than by memorizing bits of information.

The Text: Socratic Seminar texts are chosen for their richness in ideas, issues, and values and their ability to stimulate extended, thoughtful dialogue. A seminar text can be drawn from readings in literature, history, science, math, health, and philosophy or from works of art or music. A good text raises important questions in the participants' minds, questions for which there are no right or wrong answers. At the end of a successful Socratic Seminar participants often leave with more questions than they brought with them.

The Question: A Socratic Seminar opens with a question either posed by the leader or solicited from participants as they acquire more experience in seminars. An opening question has no right answer; instead it reflects a genuine curiosity on the part of the questioner. A good opening question leads participants back to the text as they speculate, evaluate, define, and clarify the issues involved. Responses to the opening question generate new questions from the leader and participants, leading to new responses. In this way, the line of inquiry in a Socratic Seminar evolves on the spot rather than being pre-determined by the leader.
The Participants: In a Socratic Seminar, participants carry the burden of responsibility for the quality of the seminar. Good seminars occur when participants study the text closely in advance, listen actively, share their ideas and questions in response to the ideas and questions of others, and search for evidence in the text to support their ideas. Eventually, when participants realize that the purpose is not to look for right answers but to encourage them to think out loud and to exchange ideas openly, they discover the excitement of exploring important issues through shared inquiry. This excitement creates willing participants, eager to examine ideas in a rigorous, thoughtful manner.
## Dialogue versus Debate

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Dialogue</strong></th>
<th><strong>Debate</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>is collaborative; multiple sides work toward shared understanding</td>
<td>is oppositional; two opposing sides try to prove each other wrong</td>
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<tr>
<td>one listens to understand, to make meaning, and to find common ground</td>
<td>one listens to find flaws, to spot differences, and to counter argument</td>
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<tr>
<td>enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view</td>
<td>affirms a participant's point of view</td>
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<tr>
<td>reveals assumptions for re-evaluation</td>
<td>defends assumptions as truth</td>
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<tr>
<td>creates an open-minded attitude, an openness to being wrong and an openness to change</td>
<td>creates a closed-minded attitude, a determination to be right</td>
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<tr>
<td>• one submits one's best thinking, expecting that other peoples' reflections will help improve it rather than threaten it</td>
<td>• one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right</td>
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<tr>
<td>• calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs</td>
<td>• calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs</td>
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<td>• one searches for strengths in all positions</td>
<td>• one searches for weaknesses in the other position</td>
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<tr>
<td>• respects all the other participants and seeks not to alienate or offend</td>
<td>• rebuts contrary positions and may belittle or deprecate other participants</td>
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<tr>
<td>• assumes that many people have pieces of answers and that cooperation can lead to workable solutions</td>
<td>• assumes a single right answer that someone already possesses</td>
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<tr>
<td>• remains open-ended</td>
<td>• demands a conclusion.</td>
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Guidelines for Socratic Seminars
Participants

Refer to the text when you need to during the discussion. A seminar is not a test of memory. You are not "learning a subject" - you are aiming at understanding ideas, issues and values.

It's okay to "pass" when asked to contribute but remember you need to contribute to earn a grade.

Do not participate if you are not prepared. A seminar should not be a bull**** session.

Do not stay confused; ask for clarification.

Stick to the point; make notes about ideas you want to come back to.

Don't raise hands; take turns.

Speak up, so that all can hear you.

Listen carefully.

Talk to each other, not just to the teacher.

You are responsible for the seminar, even if you don't know it or admit it.

Discuss ideas rather than each other's opinions.
Techniques of Questioning

Questions can take place on a variety of different levels, some easy and close-ended and others more multi-faceted and open-ended. Knowing when to ask the “right” questions can greatly aid in group discussions and study. The following material aims to help students ask the right questions at the right time.

A LEVEL ONE QUESTION
REQUIRES A PERSON TO:

1) define
   What’s the definition of “lunar eclipse?” (define)
2) describe
3) identify
   How can we express the equation $2x (4-5y) +3y = 26$ in three different ways? (list)
4) list
   5) name
   6) observe
   7) recite
   8) scan
   What does the chart show? (scan)

A LEVEL TWO QUESTION
REQUIRES A PERSON TO:

1) analyze
   In Native Son, how does Bigger Thomas’ violence against his gang members reveal a deeply rooted fear of people? (analyze)
2) compare
3) contrast
   In “The Bet” how do the lawyer and the banker differ in their attitude toward capital punishment? (contrast)
4) group
5) infer
   How does the term “manifest destiny” capture the essence of western expansion in the US? (synthesize)
6) sequence
   If the moon is full Aug. 17, July 18, and June 19, when will it be full in April? (infer)
A LEVEL THREE QUESTION
REQUIRES A PERSON TO:

1) apply a principle  Using the principle of the “communicative
   property.”
2) evaluate        How can we find out the number of apple trees
3) hypothesize     in an orchard having 15 rows, 5 trees each?
4) imagine          (apply)
5) judge
6) predict         Which of the characters in Great Expectations
                    suffered the most? (judge)
7) speculate       In Catcher in the Rye, how might Phoebe, years
                     Later, describe Holden to her children?
                    (speculate)

TIPS FOR USING THIS QUESTIONING TECHNIQUE:

- Level One Questions are often necessary to establish the group’s basic
  understanding of facts or situations.
- Questioning should not remain in Level One, but should advance to both
  Level Two and Level Three
The Three-Story Intellect
High-Level Thinking Skills

Key Words:
Evaluate
Predict
Judge
Assess
Idealize
Forecast

- What judgment could be made about.....?
- What would you predict if.....?
- How would you prioritize.....?
- Why was ____ better than ____?
- How could you prove or disprove____?
- What evidence supports ____?

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- Define Observe
Principles of Socratic Questioning

Socratic Questions

→ Raise Basic Issues

→ Probe Beneath the Surface of Things

→ Pursue Problematic Areas of Thought

→ Help to Discover the Structure of Their Own Thoughts

→ Help Develop Sensitivity to Clarity, Accuracy, and Relevance

→ Help Arrive at Judgment Through Their Own Reasoning

→ Help Note Claims, Evidence, Conclusions, Questions-at-Issue, Assumptions, Implications, Consequences, Concepts, Interpretations, Points of View – the elements of thought
Pre-Seminar Question-Writing:

Before you come to a Socratic Seminar class, please read the assigned text (novel section, poem, essay, article, etc.) and write at least ________ questions.

Categories for Potential Questions

- Facts and Conditions (What happened to ____?)
- Clarification (What was meant when ____?)
- Cause and Effect (Why did ____ do ____?)
- Multiple Causes (What else might have caused ____?)
- Empathy and Transfer (What would you do in ____’s place when ____?)
- Alternatives (What could have been done to change ____? or What else could ____ have done when ____?)
- Principles, Values, Attitudes, Transfer (How did you feel when ____? or What can be learned from ____?)

World Connection Question:

Write a question connecting the text to the real world.
  
  Example: If you were given only 24 hours to pack your most precious belongings in a backpack and to get ready to leave your home town, what might you pack? (after reading the first 30 pages of NIGHT).

Close Ended Question:

Write a question about the text that will help everyone in the class come to an agreement about events or characters in the text. This question usually has a "correct" answer.
  
  Example: What happened to Hester Prynne’s husband that she was left alone in Boston without family? (after the first 4 chapters of THE SCARLET LETTER).

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?
• 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?

THE POWER OF THE QUESTION

SKILLED QUESTIONING CAN:

• STIMULATE, ASSESS, GUIDE THINKING

• MOTIVATE STUDENTS

• FOCUS THEIR ATTENTION

• ELICIT DEEPER PROCESSING OF INFORMATION

• HOW WELL ARE THEY MASTERING CONTENT?

• THE NATURE OF THE QUESTION DETERMINES THE NATURE OF THE RESPONSE

• KEEPS STUDENTS ON TASK

• ASSESS STUDENTS’ COMPREHENSION LEVEL
Principles of Socratic Questioning

LISTENING AND SPEAKING IN A SEMINAR

One goal of seminars is to understand the ideas and thoughts of others through asking questions and listening to answers. This means that seminar participants must practice how to agree and disagree. Participants must be able to disagree without being disagreeable. In order to do so, the participants can use the following suggested ways of responding as a way of framing their thoughts before they speak. Speaking and responding in a calm, collaborative manner is essential to good discussion and dialogue.

I agree with __________ because, but I want to add another reason why I think __________ is true. (Give another reason.) ______________
________________________________________________________________________

I disagree with __________ because ______________
________________________________________________________________________

I'm not sure why __________ said ______________. Can you reword your comments to help me understand?

I understand your point, __________, but I want to add/disagree/give another side: ______________
________________________________________________________________________

This is what I think you are saying.
________________________________________________________________________

___________ Is that correct?
ACTIVE LEARNER LANGUAGE STRATEGIES

INTERRUPTING
Excuse me, but…(e.g., I don’t quite understand/I have a point to make).
Sorry for interrupting, but…(e.g., I don’t understand/I missed that definition).
May I interrupt for a moment?

ASKING FOR CLARIFICATION
I have a question about that.
Could you repeat that?
In other words, are you saying that…?
Could you please explain what ______ means?
So, do you mean…?
Would you mind repeating that definition?
Could you please say more about that?
Could you give me an example of that?
I’m not sure I understood that word/term/concept. Could you please give us another example?
Would you mind going over the instructions for us again?
What is the difference between ______ and ______?