

6 Socratic Seminar

1. To start the Socratic Seminar, students are seated in a circle to participate in the dialogue. The seminar leader, who is also seated in the circle, poses an opening question relating to the text to initiate the dialogue. A good option when starting out is to have each student read one of his/her questions around the circle with the leader listening carefully and choosing one question with which to open the dialogue. This makes it possible for every student to speak as a “warm up” before the actual dialogue; speaking once makes it easier to speak a second time. **Note:** The seminar leader can be the teacher initially, but eventually students should take the role of leader.
2. Participants begin by responding to the question. They examine the reading to support their responses, citing specific passages from the text. Participants paraphrase other speakers for clarification and ask additional questions to continue deeper and deeper exploration of the text and one another’s thinking. They should also clarify or restate their viewpoints and defend statements made, continuing to use examples from the text. The opening question is only a starting point; it should be a catalyst that moves participants to probe for a deeper understanding of the text and to ask additional questions.
Note: Students do not typically raise their hands and wait to be “called on” in a Socratic Seminar. The goal is to be able to participate in an “organic” conversation that models what happens in authentic academic discourse rather than answering a set of questions. This requires students to listen carefully, read each other’s body language, identify when to put their ideas forward, and to then lean into the circle or momentarily raise a hand to get the group’s attention in order to speak. This is challenging for students initially; it is part of the learning and growth associated with Socratic Seminar.
3. During the seminar, the leader’s role is to remind students of the dialogue guidelines, to direct them back to the text, to listen carefully and to offer guiding questions as needed, to offer his/her own personal ideas about the text, and to insure a few dominant voices don’t take over the seminar. The goal is to support students in maintaining their own dialogue.
4. During the seminar, the teacher can act as the leader, when needed, or s/he can be a participant and co-learner exploring the text with students. The teacher can also be an outside observer, monitoring the discussion as a whole, coaching students with short written messages, and collecting teaching notes for future instruction about the content and/or the seminar process.
5. At the end of the seminar, give students a writing prompt that will allow them to summarize the main ideas of the text they developed throughout the conversation. If students take Cornell notes during the seminar, the summary can be written at the bottom of their notes.
6. Have students participate in a reflection about the seminar process. The reflection could be a quickwrite about new thoughts, ideas, or questions about the text, a seminar evaluation, a personal reflection on their own participation, etc.
7. After students complete their summaries and reflections in writing, facilitate a whole class discussion/debrief about the activity based on the students’ writing.