

The Basics of Socratic Seminar

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.

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 participants' names. This simple act of socialization reinforces appropriate behaviors and promotes collaboration.

A successful Socratic seminar requires dialogue, not debate.

Dialogue	Debate
Dialogue is collaborative: multiple sides work toward shared understanding by exploring viewpoints broadly and deeply.	Debate is oppositional: two opposing sides try to prove each other wrong.
In dialogue, one listens to understand, to make meaning, and to find common ground.	In debate, one listens to find flaws, to spot differences, and to counter arguments.
Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.	Debate defends assumptions as truth.
Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude: an openness to being wrong, an openness to disconfirming evidence, an openness to change.	Debate creates a close-minded attitude, a determination to be right.
In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, expecting that other people's reflections will help improve it rather than threaten it.	In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.
Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs and judgments.	Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.
In dialogue, one searches for strengths in all positions and avoids defensiveness.	In debate, one searches for weaknesses in the other position.
Dialogue respects all the other participants and seeks not to alienate or offend.	Debate rebuts contrary positions and may belittle or deprecate other participants.
Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of answers and that cooperation can lead to a greater understanding.	Debate assumes a single right answer that somebody already has.
Dialogue remains open-ended.	Debate demands a conclusion.

Guidelines for Participants in a Socratic Seminar

1. You are responsible for the success of the seminar; be prepared to actively participate.
2. Refer to the text(s) during the discussion. You are not "learning a subject"; your goal is to understand the ideas, issues, and values reflected in the text.
3. Do not stay confused; ask for clarification.
4. Stick to the point currently under discussion; make notes about ideas you want to come back to.
5. Don't raise hands; take turns speaking.
6. Listen carefully.
7. Speak up so that all can hear you.
8. Talk to each other, not just to the leader or teacher.
9. Discuss ideas rather than each other's opinions.
10. It's acceptable to "pass" when asked to contribute.

Role of the Teacher in a Socratic Seminar

1. Choose open-ended questions that allow for varied viewpoints that can be supported through textual evidence.
2. Use strategies to create structure for conversation: cards, pennies, inner circle/outer circle.
3. Do not step in to rescue the dialogue. If conversation stops, wait—students will find the silence unbearable before you will.
4. Intervene to control specific situations: side conversations, students not participating, students debating, students monopolizing dialogue, students discussing personal or hypothetical scenarios rather than textual evidence.
5. End the seminar when it feels complete.
6. Initiate a critique at the end of the seminar. Ask students to comment on what went well, what did not, what could be improved next time.

Adams, Cindy. "Socratic Seminars." *StudyGuide.org* <www.studyguide.org/socratic_seminar.htm>.

"Socratic Seminar." *Journey to Excellence*. North American Division Office of Education. <<http://www.journeytoexcellence.org/practice/instruction/theories/miscideas/socratic/>>.

Socratic Seminar and the Common Core

CCGPS Speaking and Listening Comprehension and Collaboration

- ELACCSL1:** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- a. Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.
 - b. Work with peers to set rules for collegial discussions and decision-making (e.g., informal consensus, taking votes on key issues, presentation of alternate views), clear goals and deadlines, and individual roles as needed.
 - c. Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.
 - d. Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

ELACCSL2: Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

ELACCSL3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.