

A Socratic seminar is a formal classroom discussion in which students explore open-ended questions about a familiar text. The seminar is an opportunity for students to express their own ideas, listen carefully to classmates, and respond thoughtfully to others. A successful Socratic seminar is one in which students demonstrate critical thinking and support their ideas with specific, appropriate, and carefully reasoned evidence from the text.

Socratic seminars are student-centered: teachers should aim to speak as little as possible during the seminar, if at all. This provides an opportunity for teachers to observe what their students are able to do without specific prompting or scaffolding, and can be a valuable source of information about students' analytical as well as speaking and listening skills.

There are a number of ways to structure a Socratic seminar, but they all include the following features:

- Framed around open-ended questions
- Require that all students participate as both speakers and listeners
- Focus on a specific text or texts that students have read previously
- Require that students support thinking with text-based evidence
- Expect that students have done pre-work in order to authentically and productively participate in the seminar
- Expect students to use academic language
- Expect all students to remain respectful and engaged, whether or not they are speaking
- Include an element of reflection after the seminar

Types of Socratic Seminars

Format	Description
Table Group Discussions	Students engage in Socratic seminars in smaller groups (4-6 students), with all groups discussing each question. These work best if teachers have designed groups to balance student abilities. This allows all students to engage with each question, and may be an easier format for students who are uncomfortable speaking in front of a larger group. This format can be challenging for teachers, as it is only possible to listen to one discussion at a time. Additionally, students will likely not get the range of ideas that they would encounter in a larger group discussion.

Fishbowl	<p>"Fishbowl" is perhaps the most common format for Socratic seminar, in which half or a third of the class discusses a question in the center of the room while the remainder of the class sits outside of the discussion circle and observes. Then, the students in the center and the students on the outside of the circle rotate so that each group of students engages in discussion and observation.</p> <p>This format allows for the entire class to hear their classmates' ideas, and gives teachers the opportunity to observe all discussion that occurs during the seminar. This seminar structure is most effective if students in the outer circle are given a specific task – often to observe an assigned member of the inner circle and track that person's arguments and general participation in order to give feedback. Otherwise it can be challenging to keep students in the outer circle engaged.</p>
Whole Class	<p>The entire class engages in a Socratic seminar as one group. This format allows all students to engage in the discussion and any questions that are raised. The teacher is able to hear the entire seminar. This can be challenging for students who are less likely to speak up in class, and may feel unwieldy from a management standpoint.</p>

Sample Sentence Starters:

- I agree with what you said about _____ and I'd like to add _____.
- I agree with what you said about _____, but I disagree with _____ because _____.
- I disagree with the idea that _____ because _____.
- Can you clarify/elaborate on that idea by giving evidence from the text?
- I understand what you said about _____, but I'm confused by _____.
- Something I'm feeling confused about is _____.

Sample Ground Rules/Expectations

Behavioral Expectations

- Don't interrupt others
- Speak respectfully, even if you disagree
- Make room in the conversation for other students who have not yet spoken
- Speak loudly enough so that you can be heard (but don't yell!)
- Stay engaged in the seminar even if you are not speaking
- Be supportive of your classmates

Academic Expectations

- Come prepared to the seminar
- Listen carefully and respond to classmates' ideas
- Keep an open mind, and be willing to change your opinion
- Support all of your ideas with evidence from the text
- Ask questions
- Use sentence starters
- Use academic language

Sample Logistics

Before Seminar

- Students are given a homework assignment to gather evidence that will be essential to their participation (teachers can either give students the questions beforehand, or assign students to gather evidence that they can draw from in the seminar, but keep questions "blind" until the day of)
- Teacher decides students groups, creating heterogeneous arrangements.
- Teacher prepares a PowerPoint that lists the groups and questions

During Seminar

- Teacher establishes ground rules, or has students develop rules
- Teacher poses question, sets timer, and steps back
- Teacher tracks student participation and quality of assertions/evidence

After Seminar

- Students complete self-reflection and whole-class reflection. This can also be done between each question – "What did we do well in that cycle? What should we keep in mind for next cycle?"
- Teacher gathers student notes and reflections

PEER ASSESSMENT (for students on outside of circle during Fishbowl)

Name: _____

I am observing _____

Tally times spoken:

My scholar's assertion:

My scholar's evidence:

While others speak, this scholar is (check all that apply):

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Looking at the speaker | <input type="checkbox"/> Looking bored or unengaged |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Looking through his/her notes | <input type="checkbox"/> Acting in a way that is distracting or |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Taking notes | disrespectful to those speaking |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nodding/agreeing respectfully | |

Specific comments:

When speaking, this scholar:

- Clearly states his/her assertion
- Uses respectful, academic language
- Gives specific and relevant examples from the text
- Links evidence back to assertion
- References what other scholars have said

Specific comments:

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Name: _____

My assertion(s):**My strongest evidence:****While others speak,** I was (check all that apply):

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Looking at speaker | <input type="checkbox"/> Looking bored or unengaged |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Looking through his/her notes | <input type="checkbox"/> Acting in a way that is distracting or |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Taking notes | disrespectful to those speaking |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nodding/agreeing respectfully | |

Specific comments:

When speaking, I:

- Clearly stated my assertion
- Used academic language
- Gave specific and relevant examples from the text
- Linked evidence back to assertion
- Referenced what other scholars have said
- Spoke to others respectfully

Specific comments:

END OF SEMINAR REFLECTION

Name: _____

Self-Assessment – Please answer in one complete sentence for each question.

1. How prepared did you feel for this discussion? (circle one)

Very prepared

mostly prepared

a little prepared

not prepared

2. What could you have done better on your own to prepare for our discussion?

3. What do you think you did especially well during our discussion?

4. What is one thing you would like to do better next time?

Class Assessment – Please answer in one complete sentence for each question.

5. How prepared did you feel your class (overall) was for our discussion? (circle one)

Very prepared

mostly prepared

a little prepared

not prepared

6. What could we have done together as a class to prepare better for our discussion?

7. What is one thing you feel your class did well on in general?

8. What is one thing you think your class should work on for next time?

SAMPLE RUBRIC

Unscorable 0	F 65	C 78	B 88	A 98
I made no effort to elevate the discussion or to pay attention.	I made no effort to elevate the discussion, but I was paying attention for the entire seminar.	very effort to participate, but I did not have the chance to share a claim.	I was on point, almost all the time, in almost every way.	I was on point, all the time, in every way.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did not speak and did not attempt to speak • Unengaged, as revealed by body language, co-signs, notes, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did not speak and did not attempt to speak • Always actively engaged when not speaking, as revealed by my body language, co-signs, notes, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did not share a claim, but attempted to speak through raising a hand or asked a purposeful question. Other behavior during seminar was exemplary <p style="text-align: center;">OR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spoke at least once • Sometimes actively engaged when not speaking, as revealed by, co-signs, notes, etc. • Sometimes engaged others with a professional tone, but occasionally did not wait to raise hand or did not use academic language • Did not attempt to explain the significance of key words and phrases of quotes from the text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spoke at least once and made a relevant comment that advanced the conversation • Usually actively engaged when not speaking, as revealed through body language, co-signs, notes, etc. • Usually engaged others with a professional tone • Engaged the teacher with comments and questions rather than speaking directly to the class • Attempted to explain the significance of key words and phrases of quotes from the text, rather than stating "This shows..." • Sometimes made comments grounded in the language of the text, basing his/her point in abstract ideas or personal experience rather than what the text actually says. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spoke at least once and made a relevant comment that advanced the conversation • Always actively engaged when not speaking, as revealed by body language, co-signs, notes, etc. • Always engaged others with a professional tone (e.g., waited to raise hand, used academic language, disagreed respectfully) • Engaged the class, rather than the teacher, with comments, questions, making eye contact while speaking • Attempted, when appropriate, to explain the significance of key words and phrases of quotes from the text, rather than stating "This shows..." • Always made comments grounded in the language of the text, considering the CHOICES and MOVES made by the author.

*This rubric is adapted from the Socratic Seminar rubric created by [Achievement First](#).

TEACHER TRACKER