Guidelines for Socratic Seminar Facilitators

- Your task is not to make participants "cover" the topic but to help them use their minds well. You are a co-learner, not an authority on "right" answers.
- Don’t try long texts or long seminars at first, build gradually.
- Read the text in advance and take ample notes to have a deep understanding.
- Get the group focused on the opening question as quickly as possible.
- Allow for "think" time. Pauses are OK, students need time to think and process information and ideas.
- Model thoughtful behavior. Ask clarifying and probing questions.
- Don’t let sloppy thinking or gross misinterpretations go unexamined.
- It may be necessary to avoid making eye contact with participants when they are talking so they learn to talk to the group and not just the teacher.
- Strive for balance. Do not dominate the discussion or withdraw entirely.
- Never neglect the debriefing. The feedback is vital if the group is going to grow with each Socratic Seminar. Request specific non-judgmental comments to help improve future Socratic Seminars.
- Over time, use a variety of works: fiction, essays, poetry, quotations, artwork, etc.

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.
- 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.

Expectations of Participants in a Socratic Seminar

Did the Participants...

- Speak loudly and clearly?
- Cite reasons and evidence for their statements?
- Use the text to find support?
- Listen to others respectfully?
- Stick with the subject?
- Talk to each other, not just to the leader?
- Paraphrase accurately?
- Avoid inappropriate language (slang, technical terms, sloppy diction, etc.)?
- Ask for help to clear up confusion?
- Support each other?
- Avoid hostile exchanges?
- Question others in a civil manner?
- Seem prepared?
1. Use an article or a piece of literature that is controversial or can inspire discussion from multiple points of view.
2. Use an inner and outer circle. If you have a large class, you may have two circles going simultaneously.
3. Each inner circle participant is assigned an outer circle partner. That person is to observe his/her partner throughout the entire discussion.
4. In the inner circle, there is a discussion leader.
5. In the inner circle, there is a hot seat.

**Discussion Leader:** This is the person who begins and ends the discussion. Always allow the discussion leader to end the discussion in his/her own time. Usually this person will begin the seminar with a brief statement about the article. Choose a strong-willed and strong-voiced person to be the discussion leader. Also pick someone who is sympathetic and will validate other people’s opinions. For example, a discussion leader might have to “get on” a student for interrupting. If he interrupts repeatedly, he/she should be firm with him/her. Not every ninth grader has the ability to be firm without being hurtful. However, students can also be too strong with their voices and opinions, and they don’t appropriately handle the other students. You will figure it out through trial and error, discussion and de-brief. Not all students participate as the discussion leader...It is more appropriate to choose the students who enjoy the role and not force others into it against their will. For some students, it is scary enough just to participate in the circle itself. It is the discussion leader’s responsibility to bring the discussion back to the article and keep it on track. Students come prepared with questions, and the discussion leader allows students to ask their questions throughout the seminar. He/she must make sure that everyone speaks at some point in the discussion and that no one person dominates.

**Hot Seat:** This is an empty seat in the inner circle. Outer circle participants may “jump in” to make a point, but then “jump out.” They may not stay and debate the entire point. They comment, and then they leave! The discussion leader must acknowledge the hot seat as soon as it becomes pertinent to do so. Do not allow students to jump into the hot seat twice in a row. Another student must occupy the hot seat before an outer circle participant is allowed back in. You may want to limit the number of times they can “jump in,” because your gregarious students who are relegated to the outer circle sometimes will attempt to dominate the discussion. That is not their role in this!

**Student Tips:**

- Cite specific evidence or text in questions and responses.
- Take notes (outer circle).
- Extend questions
- Engage other members or inner circle.
- Avoid discounting questions, responses – explore possibilities.
- Disagree. Demonstrate.
- Extend responses of inner circle by phrasing questions based on those responses.
- Avoid statements of belief. Make assertions based on text and reasons.

**Sample questions that demonstrate constructive participation in Socratic Seminars.**

Here is my view and how I arrived at it. How does it sound to you?
Do you see gaps in my reasoning?
Do you have different data?
Do you have different conclusions?
How did you arrive at your view?
Are you taking into account something different from what I have considered?

**Preparation:** Students are to read the article for homework. They are to come up with five “higher level” questions about the article. They need to spend a lot of time on questioning strategies before attempting Socratic Seminar. In the AVID model, higher level questioning is a large part of the curriculum. Once the students are comfortable with questioning strategies and questioning vocabulary, have them come up with questions. For example, if they read an article from the *Austin American Statesman* titled “Perry Praises School Prayer,” they should come prepared with questions related to the article and to school prayer. Allow the school prayer questions too, and trust the discussion leader to help them return to the article. All students must come up with questions--- both inner and outer circles. It is suggested to determine your circles based on their questions, their personalities, and prior participation.

- Do not allow the outer circle to talk until the discussion is over. Then allow them to say one thing they wished they could have said, or to ask one of their questions that was not discussed.
- Have the partners conference when they’re done and provide feedback.
- Have the entire class do some sort of written reflection on the article and the discussion.

**Planning for a Socratic Seminar**

**Pre Seminar Activities:**
1. Choose a text related to content or an issue to be discussed in the seminar. Good texts are ones that interest the students. Paragraphs and lines (or portions of a score or painting) need to be easily identified and referenced.
2. Design possible opening questions. Good opening questions:
   a. Arise from genuine interest or curiosity on the part of the teacher,
   b. Are open to interpretation (no right or wrong answer),
   c. Foster analysis and a greater understanding of the text,
   d. Are supportable by the text (answered by reference to the text),
   e. Are framed in such a way that they generate dialogue from the students.
3. Teach any background information necessary for a good understanding of the text. This prevents the need for the teacher to interrupt the discussion to clarify or provide additional information.

**Seminar Activities:**
4. Have approximately half the students put their desks in a circle so that they can see each other. Provide an empty desk for the “hot seat.”
5. Choose an *outer circle* to critique, trouble-shoot, record main and dropped ideas, journal on what they heard, etc. Students who didn’t do the necessary reading or randomly chose students make up the outer circle. These students may sit in the “hot seat” if they want to participate. Forms follow which outer circle students may use to keep track of responses and provide feedback for those in the inner circle.
6. Give students directions:
   a. Start by explaining the Socratic Seminar to the students. Explain that the conversation is theirs, and that your question is a starting point which they can move away from as they pose ideas and questions that are more interesting to them as long as the new ideas and questions can be discussed in terms of the text.
b. Tell students to direct their comments to other students and explain to them that you will not comment on what they say, since this will cause them to talk to you rather than to each other. It may help if you look down or avoid eye contact until the discussion takes off on its own.
c. Encourage students to think before they talk, try to comment, or add to what others have said. They should listen to others.

7. Toss out the opening question.
   a. Students have learned to be passive, and this activity can be risky for some students, so it may take time for some groups to catch on. The conversation is likely to have stops and starts, but it is crucial that the teacher not step in and try to rescue the conversation. If the conversation goes dead, wait. Students will find the silence unbearable before the teachers does. Your silence also indicates your level of commitment to the activity.
   b. If students ask you a question, throw it out to the group or ask the questioner what his/her opinion is. Answer factual questions only if there is no way around it.

8. Your role is to:
   a. Observe and make anecdotal notes for feedback and evaluation,
   b. Keep students from having side conversations,
   c. Ask students to cite support from the text if the conversation begins to wander,
   d. Keep conversations from becoming debate or debasement of others,
   e. Ask students to question their assumptions,
   f. Manipulate the amount of participation. If only a few students are speaking, you might say, “Everyone who has spoken so far, look at the clock, and don’t jump in for five minutes.” If one gender is dominating the conversation, ask for the other to speak for the next few minutes. If there are some students not participating at all, teach students how to engage those students in conversation (One teacher put all her reluctant speakers in the inner circle and all the outspoken ones in the outer circle during one seminar.).

Post-Seminar Activities:
9. End the seminar when it feels done. With an experienced group, you might ask the students, or a student might suggest it. If things go really well, a student may suggest another poem, text, or section to discuss which correlates well with the original text.
   a. Spend time processing and self-reflecting on the seminar.
      1. Go around the circle and ask each student about the experience. What was good about it? What was not so good? What could be improved for the next time?
      2. Let the outer circle discuss group dynamics, but be careful that they focus their comments on group rather than individual behaviors.
      3. Let the out circle share their observation sheets with their inner circle partner.

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 ____?)

College 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 Pyrnie'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?

Tips for keeping Seminars running smoothly
• To prepare, study text carefully. Focus on formulating provocative questions while studying. Select short passages or specific details for special attention.
• Choose an introductory question in advance that is broad, open-ended and provocative.
• At the start of each seminar, set the stage. Review the guidelines of the seminar. A few brief comments are in order, but remember, you're not there to deliver a lecture.
• Listen hard, so that you can follow every answer, if necessary, with another question.
• Stick with the subject at hand. Do not let the discussion wander or participants pontificate. Insist on standards of intellectual rigor. A good seminar is not a "bull session."
• Neither praise nor put down comments. Your role is to press participants to clarify or amplify their ideas. Remember your role is to be a facilitator and co-learner, not an authority on "correct" thinking.
• Allow for "pauses," silent moments during the seminar. As teachers this is difficult, but key to the success of the seminar. If participants are not talking, they are thinking and that is a good thing.
• Take notes during the seminar. At the end of the session, sum up what you heard. Then give the group time for clarification or additions.
• Take time for the group to de-brief the seminar. Use the feedback to guide future seminars.
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 ______?

Requesting Instructional Assistance

- Could you please help me?
- I am having trouble with this. Would you mind helping me?
- Will you please show me how to do this/write this/draw this/solve this?
- Could you please write that term/word on the board?
- Could you pronounce that word for me again?
- Can you please help me do this?
- Can I talk to you for a moment after class about the assignment?