# AVID Socratic Seminar

Socrates, a Classical Greek philosopher, was convinced that the surest way to attain reliable knowledge was through the practice of disciplined conversation. He called this method *dialectic*, meaning the art or practice of examining opinions or ideas logically, often by the method of question and answer, so as to determine their validity.

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. 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. This process encourages divergent thinking rather than convergent.

Students are given opportunities to "examine" a common piece of text, whether it is in the form of a novel, poem, art print, or piece of music. After "reading" the common text "like a love letter", several questions are posed -- primarily open-ended, world connection, universal theme, and literary analysis questions. Such questions allow students to think critically, analyze multiple meanings in text, and express ideas with clarity and confidence. After all, a certain degree of emotional safety is felt by participants when they understand that this format is based on dialogue and not discussion/debate.

Dialogue is exploratory and involves the suspension of biases and prejudices. Discussion/debate is a transfer of information designed to win an argument and bring closure. Americans are great at discussion/debate. We do not dialogue well. However, once teachers and students learn to dialogue, they find that the ability to ask meaningful questions that stimulate thoughtful interchanges of ideas is more important than "the answer."

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 each other names. This simple act of socialization reinforces appropriate behaviors and promotes team building. Dialogue and Debate

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| **Dialogue** | **Debate and/or Discussion** |
| Dialogue is collaborative; multiple sides work toward a shared understanding. | Debate is competitive and/or 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 affirms a participant’s point of view. |
| Dialogue creates an open-mined attitude; an openness to being wrong and an openness to change. | Debate defends assumptions as truths. |
| In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, expecting that other people's reflections will help improve it rather thanthreaten 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 of one's beliefs. | Debate, calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs. |
| In dialogue, one searches for strengths inall positions. | In debate, one searches for weaknesses inthe other positions. |
| 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 havepieces of answers and that cooperation can lead to workable solutions. | Debate assumes a single right answer that somebody already has. |
| Dialogue remains open-ended. | Debate demands a conclusion. |
| Dialogue is mutual inquiry; collective knowledge. | Discussion is individual opinions; individual knowledge. |

# DURING SOCRATIC SEMINAR

## Socratic Seminar Rules

* Discuss, do not debate.
* Be courteous, NO PUTDOWNS.
* Goal is the pursuit of deeper understanding.
* Respect different thoughts and ideas.

## Socratic Seminar Tips

**Your Goal is to Understand…**

* the ideas,
* issues,
* concepts,
* and values reflected in the text.

## Protocol:

* Refer to the text when needed during the discussion. This is not a test of memory.
* Do not stay confused; as for clarification of both ideas and definitions.
* Discuss ideas, rather than other’s opinions.
* It’s OK to pass when your turn comes; participate at another time instead.
* Do not participate if you are not prepared.
* Stick to the point currently under discussion; write down inspirational ideas so you can bring them up at a more appropriate time in the conversation.
* Listen carefully, especially when you are waiting to speak, as they may be moving on to another point.
* Speak up so that all participants can hear you; don’t speak while others are.
* Remember that this is a conversation between students, not between student and teacher.

Name: Date: Period:

# AFTER SOCRATIC SEMINAR

# Socratic Seminar Debrief

1. How did you feel about the seminar?
2. Reflect on your own experience.
3. If you changed your opinion during the discussion, what changed it?
4. Using your own knowledge on this topic or issue, create a question to start a seminar.
5. What was the best part of the seminar? The worst part?
6. What was your overall opinion of the Socratic Seminar?

Name: Date: Period:

## Socratic Seminar Reflective Writing

1. What is one thing you liked that you said?
2. What is one point someone else said that you agree with?
3. What was the most interesting question?
4. What was the most interesting idea to come from a participant?
5. What was the best thing that you observed?
6. What was the most troubling thing that you observed?
7. What do you think should be done differently in the next seminar?
8. As a Socratic Seminar participant, what area of the process will you work on for next time?
9. What new questions arose as a result of the discussion and debrief?