

## Socratic Seminars

October 2013

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### Standard Addressed

- SL.9-10.1. 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

*What is it?*

*The Socratic seminar is a formal discussion, based on a text, in which the leader asks open-ended questions. Within the context of the discussion, students listen closely to the comments of others, thinking critically for themselves, and articulating their own thoughts and their responses to the thoughts of others. They learn to work cooperatively and to question intelligently and civilly. (89) Israel, Elfie in James Holden and John S. Schmit, eds. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2002.*

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**STRATEGY IN PRACTICE**

**Choosing a text:** Socratic seminars work best with authentic texts that invite authentic inquiry—an ambiguous and appealing short story, a pair of contrasting primary documents in social studies, or an article on a controversial approach to an ongoing scientific problem.

**Preparing the students:** While students should read carefully and prepare well for every class session, it is usually best to tell students ahead of time when they will be expected to participate in a Socratic seminar. Because seminars ask students to keep focusing back on the text, you may distribute sticky notes for students to use to annotate the text as they read.

**Preparing the questions:** Though students may eventually be given responsibility for running the entire session, the teacher usually fills the role of discussion leader as students learn about seminars and questioning. Generate as many open-ended questions as possible, aiming for questions whose value lies in their exploration, not their answer. Elfie Israel recommends starting and ending with questions that relate more directly to students' lives so the entire conversation is rooted in the context of their real experiences.

**Common questions** used during a Socratic seminar include:

- Where does that idea come from in the text?
- What do you think this word or phrase means?
- Can you say that in another way?
- Is this what you mean to say...?
- What do you think the author is trying to say?
- What else could that mean?
- Who was the audience for this text? How does that shape our interpretation of these words?

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- Who was the author of this text? What do we know about him/her? How does that shape our understanding of these words?
- When was this written? Does that matter here?
- Why was this written?
- How does it connect to our own experiences?

**Establishing student expectations:** Because student inquiry and thinking are central to the philosophy of Socratic seminars, it is an authentic move to include students integrally in the establishment of norms for the seminar. Begin by asking students to differentiate between behaviors that characterize debate (persuasion, prepared rebuttals, clear sides) and those that characterize discussion (inquiry, responses that grow from the thoughts of others, communal spirit). Ask students to hold themselves accountable for the norms they agree upon.

**Establishing your role:** Though you may assume leadership through determining which open-ended questions students will explore (at first), the teacher should not see him or herself as a significant participant in the pursuit of those questions. You may find it useful to limit your intrusions to helpful reminders about procedures (e.g. “Maybe this is a good time to turn our attention back the text?” “Do we feel ready to explore a different aspect of the text?”). Resist the urge to correct or redirect, relying instead on other students to respectfully challenge their peers’ interpretations or offer alternative views.

**Assessing effectiveness:** Socratic seminars require assessment that respects the central nature of student- centered inquiry to their success. The most global measure of success is reflection, both on the part of the teacher and students, on the degree to which text-centered student talk dominated the time and work of the session. Reflective writing asking students to describe their participation and set their own goals for future seminars can be effective

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as well. Understand that, like the seminars themselves, the process of gaining capacity for inquiring into text is more important than “getting it right” at any particular point.

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Sample Rubric

**Socratic Seminar Scoring Guide**

**Advanced:** Student meets *all* of the *proficient* criteria plus *one or more* of the following:

- Actively incorporates** others into the discussion
- Challenges** ideas and conclusions in thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas
- Summarizes** points of agreement and disagreement
- Qualifies** or **justifies** own views and understanding
- Makes new connections** in light of the evidence and reasoning presented

**Proficient**

- Student comes to discussion **prepared (with completed preparation notes and text)**
- Uses **body language** and **eye contact** to indicate **active listening** for the **duration of the seminar**
- Both **poses** and **responds to questions**
- Participates by doing at least one of the following:
  - **Building** on the thoughts of others by using appropriate transition words and phrases
  - **Asking clarifying** questions
  - **Quoting** the text to support a point
  - Using language of **recognition** and **appreciation** to promote **collaborative, collegial discussions**

**Basic:** Student meets 2-3 of the *proficient* criteria

**Below Basic:** Student meets only 1 of the *proficient* criteria

**Far Below Basic:** Student meets none of the *proficient* criteria

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