

# Socratic Seminars in English Class

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- Grades: 9–12

## Overview

Students participate in Socratic Seminars as a new way of discussing and sharing ideas about a text.

## Objective

### Students will:

1. Respond verbally to open-ended questions
2. Exhibit and hone active listening skills

## Materials

1. Text-based open-ended questions
2. Slips of paper

## Set Up and Prepare

1. Form two concentric circles with the desks in your room (one circle inside the other).

## Directions

**Step 1:** Explain that Socratic Seminars are question-driven discussions, named after the great philosopher, Socrates, who used questions to teach his students. In these discussions people don't talk over one another; they listen to each other's comments respectfully; they don't attack anyone's opinions and they agree to disagree.

**Step 2:** Split students into two groups. Group A should sit in the inner circle and Group B should sit in the outer circle.

**Step 3:** Assign each person in Group B to a person in Group A. The Group B students should sit across from their partners in Group A so that they can keep track of their partners' comments and responses. At the end of the seminar the Group B students will give their partners feedback and constructive criticism about their participation in the discussion.

**Step 4:** Pass out at least three strips of paper to each Group A person, and instruct them to write their names on each slip. When a student wants to make a comment, he or she must drop a slip of

paper on the floor inside the circle. In order to get full credit for this activity, each person must use all of his or her slips.

**Step 5:** Explain that you are a silent facilitator: students should not look to you for justification or a change of direction for the discussion. They are responsible for answering each of the questions, and they may not move on to a new question if the one at hand hasn't been thoroughly addressed.

**Step 6:** Pass out a list of open-ended questions that refer to the text. Explain that only the people in Group A are allowed to speak during the discussion. Everyone in Group B must remain silent during the discussion.

**Step 7:** Give the students a specific amount of time for the discussion and let them begin.

**Step 8:** When the discussion is over, have the Group B people give constructive feedback to their Group A partners. Afterwards you may give overall feedback to the whole group.

**Step 9:** The next time you have a seminar, put the Group B people into the inner circle.

## **Assignments**

1. Read assigned text(s).
2. Answer open-ended questions.
3. Engage in meaningful discussion.
4. Give peer feedback and constructive criticism.

## **Evaluation**

- Were you able to identify those who read the assigned text(s) and those who didn't?
- Were you pleased with the thoroughness and depth of the discussion?
- Were you pleased with the constructive comments that the students gave to each other?

## **Assess Students**

- Did students use all of their slips?
- Did they answer your questions thoroughly?
- Did they look to you less and less for guidance during the discussion?