

The Elements of Socratic Seminars

A good seminar consists of four interdependent elements: (1) the text, (2) the questions, (3) the seminar leader, and (4) the participants. A closer look at each of these elements helps explain the unique character of a Socratic Seminar.

The Text

Socratic Seminar texts are chosen for their richness in ideas, issues, and values, and their ability to stimulate extended, thoughtful dialogue. A seminar text can be drawn from readings in literature, history, science, math, health, or philosophy or from works of art or music. A good text raises important questions in the participants' minds, questions for which there are no right or wrong answers. At the end of a successful Socratic Seminar participants often leave with more questions than they brought with them.

The Questions

A Socratic Seminar opens with a question either posed by the leader or solicited from participants as they acquire more experience in seminars. An opening question has no right answer; instead, it reflects a genuine curiosity on the part of the questioner. A good opening question leads participants back to the text as they speculate, evaluate, define, and clarify the issues involved. Responses to the opening question generate new questions from the leader and participants, leading to new responses. In this way, the line of inquiry in a Socratic Seminar evolves on the spot rather than being predetermined by the leader.

The Leader

In a Socratic Seminar, the leader plays a dual role as leader and participant. The seminar leader consciously demonstrates habits of mind that lead to a thoughtful exploration of the ideas in the text by keeping the discussion focused on the text, asking follow-up questions, helping participants clarify their positions when arguments become confused, and involving reluctant participants while restraining their more vocal peers.

As a seminar participant, the leader actively engages in the group's exploration of the text. To do this effectively, the leader must know the text well enough to anticipate varied interpretations and recognize important possibilities in each. The leader must also be patient enough to allow participants' understandings to evolve and be willing to help participants explore nontraditional insights and unexpected interpretations.

Assuming this dual role of leader and participant is easier if the opening question is one which truly interests the leader as well as the participants.

The Participants

In Socratic Seminar, participants share with the leader the responsibility for the quality of the seminar. Good seminars occur when participants study the text closely in advance, listen actively, share their ideas and questions in response to the ideas and questions of others, and search for evidence in the text to support their ideas.



Participants acquire good seminar behaviors through participating in seminars and reflecting on them afterward. After each seminar, the leader and participants discuss the experience and identify ways of improving the next seminar. Before each new seminar, the leader also offers coaching and practice in specific habits of mind that improve reading, thinking, and discussing. Eventually, when participants realize that the leader is not looking for the “right” answers but instead is encouraging them to think out loud and to openly exchange ideas, they discover the excitement of exploring important issues through shared inquiry. This excitement creates willing participants, eager to examine ideas in a rigorous, thoughtful manner.



The Role and Responsibilities of the Seminar Participant

Before the Seminar

- Read the text carefully and for understanding.
- Use highlighters to mark crucial text, and make notes in margins.
- Look for places where the author is stating his views, arguing for them, or raising questions.
- Make connections between parts of the text by using your marginal notes.
- Think about what you have read and how you understand it.
- Make connections between the ideas in the text and what you know in your life and the lives of the others.

During the Seminar

- Be prepared to participate; the quality of the seminar diminishes when participants speak without preparation.
- Refer to the text often and when needed; a seminar is not a test of memory.
- Ask good questions, and ask for clarification when confused.
- Take turns speaking instead of raising hands.
- Listen carefully and actively to your fellow participants.
- Speak so that all can hear you.
- Address your fellow participants, not just the leader.
- Discuss the ideas of the text, not each other's opinions.
- Show respect for differing ideas, thoughts, and values.
- Give evidence and examples to support your responses.
- Help fellow participants clarify questions and responses.
- Keep your mind open to new ideas and possibilities.

After the Seminar

- Be reflective about the process of the seminar.
- Discuss with your group parts of the seminar you think went well and which skills you and your fellow participants still need to improve.
- Use writing to think about both the process and the content of the seminar.
- Reflect on both yourself as an individual and the group as a whole.
- Be prepared to help set goals for improvement in the next seminar.

