The idea of the Socratic Seminar is *discussion* and *dialogue—*not debate. It is a heightened, disciplined form of conversation. One of the key aspects of this type of conversation is *listening* closely and carefully to what your fellow participants say. Another key aspect is contributing thoughtful and thought-provoking comments. A third component is providing specific reasons and citing ample textual support for your views. Overall, the goal is to examine ideas and opinions logically, through the method of question and answer, in order to determine their validity. The conversation is allowed to branch out in different directions—after all, very often a good question will give rise to more questions. However *the seminar should stay rooted in the text under examination*. The spirit of the seminar is exploratory rather than argumentative: the point is not to find the “right” answer or “win” your point, but rather to delve deeply into complex topics that speak to the human condition. Every person in the room who is not speaking is expected to listen respectfully. You may ask for clarification, add to a comment made by another person, and voice an opposing viewpoint, but you *may never* criticize anyone’s opinions/beliefs, interrupt when someone is speaking, or respond in a contemptuous/derogatory manner.

**Student Preparation**

* Read and annotate the assigned sections of text.
* Formulate and bring 3-5 discussion questions based upon the assigned reading. These will be turned in at the end of class. You should have *at least one of each* of the following types of questions:
1. **Literal/Opening Questions**: general questions that directs discussion into the text; an introductory or explanatory question related to a topic that is easy to locate in the text
2. **Analysis/Core Questions**: specific content, theme, or main idea questions; a TOK-like inquiry to examine central positions of the text; a request to interpret or explore a passage in the text; “how…?” and “why…?” questions; examination of interesting diction or phrases; a compare/contrast prompt for character, motivations, tones, etc.
3. **Evaluative/Closing Questions**: questions that establish the relevance of the text; a comparison or application of the text to real life; a connection to previous texts
* If there are discussion questions assigned beforehand, be sure to answer those *in complete sentences* before coming to class. You will more than likely be submitting them for a grade.

**Student Responsibilities during Discussion**

**Inner Circle:**

* Engage in discussion, actively participating in but not dominating the conversation. No side conversations.
* As you participate, make good use of the text, at times calling attention to specific passages relevant to the issue at hand. When working with such a passage, cite the page number and allow time for others in the class to locate it. Then, read it aloud.
* Listen to each other carefully; look the speaker in the eye (eyes, shoulders, knees, toes!).
* Use each other’s names and refer to the thread of the conversation whenever possible: “What Amanda said about Shakespeare’s uses of rhyming...”
* Paraphrase what the speaker before you has said. Support or refute the prior speaker’s ideas.
* Stick to the text. Your point or opinion only matters if you can support your ideas.
* Discuss ideas; do not attack people. It is the dialectic/debate that makes us all more informed. Changing your mind or adding to your understanding means that your mind was open.
* Wrap up discussion with your evaluative questions. This is the last chance to speak.
* One seat is purposely left empty as a “Hot Seat” (more below) in the Inner Circle. As soon as a student takes this seat, s/he automatically becomes the next speaker.
* Suggestions to help facilitate discussion:
* Decide ahead of time how the discussion will proceed: choose to speak in sequence around the circle, decide to appoint a discussion leader, let each speaker choose the next participant, etc.
* Get students to talk to each other. Ask for a response to the most recent comments (“Anyone have a response to Clara's opinion?”), or ask a specific student to respond (“Clara, do you agree with Ralph?”).
* Get students to defend or explain their opinions. (“Mark, why do you say that? What's your evidence or reasoning?”)
* Encourage an exploration of differing points of view. When you hear conflicting views, point them out and get the holders of those views to discuss their differences. Perhaps ask a third person to sum up the two positions.
* Keep the class on the subject. If you are even halfway familiar with the material, you know when the discussion is no longer connected to it. Just say so, or consult your list of questions.
* Point to a particular passage in the text relevant to a comment made by one person, or to a discussion among several. This might be a passage that challenges, or sums up and confirms, the views being expressed.
* Don't fill every silence with your own voice. Any discussion will lapse occasionally. It is not your job to avoid all silence. Some quiet periods are productive. Students who are not so quick to speak will frequently get the chance they need when others are quiet.

**Outer Circle:**

* You are silent, and yet “talking back” by taking notes. If you absolutely must say something, you can take the **Hot Seat** in the inner circle. Stay there only as long as your topic of interest is on the table. As soon as the topic changes, vacate the Hot Seat to let someone else use it if they so desire.
* Take brief notes of points and examples that deepen your understanding; opinions that differ from your own; and arguments that you find helpful, convincing, or worth trying to refute. These notes may be useful when you want to contribute to discussion, when you formulate study questions for subsequent classes, or when you participate in discussion. Do not, however, allow note-taking to cause you to lose the thread of the discussion.
* Suggested questions to answer in notes:
* When do you think the inner circle “sparked”? How did that happen?
* Track the person most directly in front of you. Did he/she contribute well (neither dominate nor duck discussion)? Explain.
* What was the single most important idea that was discussed? Why?
* What was the single most important idea that didn’t get discussed? Why?
* What could have made the discussion even more constructive?

**Grading**

Every Socratic Seminar will be graded in some fashion (whether by questions answered, questions written, and/or quality of participation), but not all Socratic Seminars will be major grades.

* **Formal Socratic Seminars** always use the inner-outer circle format, and will be announced far ahead of time. These will always be graded using the rubric attached.
* **Informal** **Socratic Seminars** will take place without the inner-outer circle structure, and instead be two separate, ongoing discussions monitored alternately by the teacher. These will operate more like class discussion, but are structured so that students may share and receive a wide variety of ideas—not just the teacher’s.

**Rubric**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **0** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| **Knowledge and Understanding of the Work Discussed*** *How much knowledge and understanding has the student shown of the work used in the discussion?*
 | The discussion does not reach a standard described by the higher descriptors. | There is little knowledge or understanding of the content of the work discussed. | There is some knowledge and superficial understanding of the content of the work discussed. | There is adequate knowledge and understanding of the content and some of the implications of the work discussed. | There is very good knowledge and understanding of the content and most of the implications of the work discussed. | There is excellent knowledge and understanding of the content and the implications of the work discussed. |
| **Response to the Discussion Questions*** *How effectively does the student respond to the discussion questions of other students?*
 | The discussion does not reach a standard described by the higher descriptors. | There is limited ability to respond meaningfully to the discussion questions. | Responses to the discussion questions are sometimes relevant. | Responses to the discussion questions are relevant and show some evidence of independent thought. | Well-informed responses to the discussion questions show a good degree of independent thought. | There are persuasive and independent responses to the discussion questions, referencing the ideas of others. |
| **Language*** *How clear, varied and accurate is the language?*
* *How well is the register and style suited to a Socratic Seminar? (“Register” refers, in this context, to the student’s use of elements such as vocabulary, tone, sentence structure and terminology appropriate to the discussion.)*
 | The discussion does not reach a standard described by the higher descriptors. | The language is rarely appropriate, with a very limited attempt to suit register and style to a Socratic Seminar. | The language is sometimes appropriate, with some attempt to suit register and style to a Socratic Seminar. | The language is mostly clear and appropriate, with some attention paid to register and style that is suited to a Socratic Seminar. | The language is clear and appropriate, with register and style consistently suited to a Socratic Seminar. | The language is very clear and entirely appropriate, with register and style consistently effective and suited to a Socratic Seminar. |
| **Discussion Skills*** *How focused and articulate is the student during discussion?*
* *How well does the student share discussion time with other students?*
 | The discussion does not reach a standard described by the higher descriptors. | There is little engagement or student dominates conversation and/or interrupts students regularly. | There is some engagement, but there may be inequitable use of air time. | There is adequate engagement and somewhat balanced use of discussion time. | There is good engagement, showing a mostly balanced use discussion time. | There is thoughtful engagement and charitable use of discussion time. |
| **Active Listening in Outer Circle*** *To what extent has the student participated in the Inner Circle discussion while sitting in the Outer Circle?*
 | The work does not reach a standard described by the higher descriptors. | Little notes taken and/or “hot seat” discussion is off-topic or distracting | Some notes taken and/or “hot seat” discussion is somewhat off-topic or distracting | Relevant notes taken and/or “hot seat” discussion matches above descriptors of a “3” discussion participation | High Quality notes taken and/or “hot seat” discussion matches above descriptors of a “4” discussion participation | Discerning notes taken and/or “hot seat” discussion matches above descriptors of a “5” discussion participation |