

## Socratic Seminar Guidelines

### OVERVIEW:

Socrates believed that enabling students to think for themselves was more important than filling their heads with “right answers.” In a Socratic Seminar, participants seek deeper understanding of complex ideas through rigorously thoughtful dialogue. A Socratic Seminar fosters active learning as participants explore and evaluate the ideas, issues, and values in a piece of text. The skills that students develop through participation in Socratic Seminar are crucial for success in a high school setting and beyond.

Successful Socratic Seminars are dependent upon groups of students developing skills together over time. It is imperative that you understand several concepts before our first Socratic Seminar. These include:

- The difference between dialogue and debate
- The four elements of Socratic Seminar
- The role of the seminar leader(s)
- The role and responsibilities of the participants
- The guidelines for seminar behavior

There are 3 stages in preparing for a Socratic Seminar:

- 1) Gathering Information: Actively reading the text
- 2) Processing Information: Completing Intro, Core, & Closing Questions
- 3) Applying Information: Participating in the Socratic Seminar

## TYPES OF QUESTIONS:

**OPENING QUESTIONS** – These questions get the seminar off to a start. They:

- ⇒ Stem from context
- ⇒ Direct participants into the text
- ⇒ Elicit more than one-word responses
- ⇒ Are generally concrete questions

**For example:**

- 1) What is the theme of the reading?
- 2) What significance is this to \_\_\_\_\_?
- 3) What are the assumptions of this text?
- 4) Is it better to be \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_?
- 5) In recent times, what well-known people are like \_\_\_\_\_?

**CORE QUESTIONS** – These questions should help participants examine deeper meanings in the text. They:

- ⇒ Are content-specific
- ⇒ May ask for the interpretation of specific line or passage; often “how” or “why” questions
- ⇒ Generally move the discussion into the abstract

**For example:**

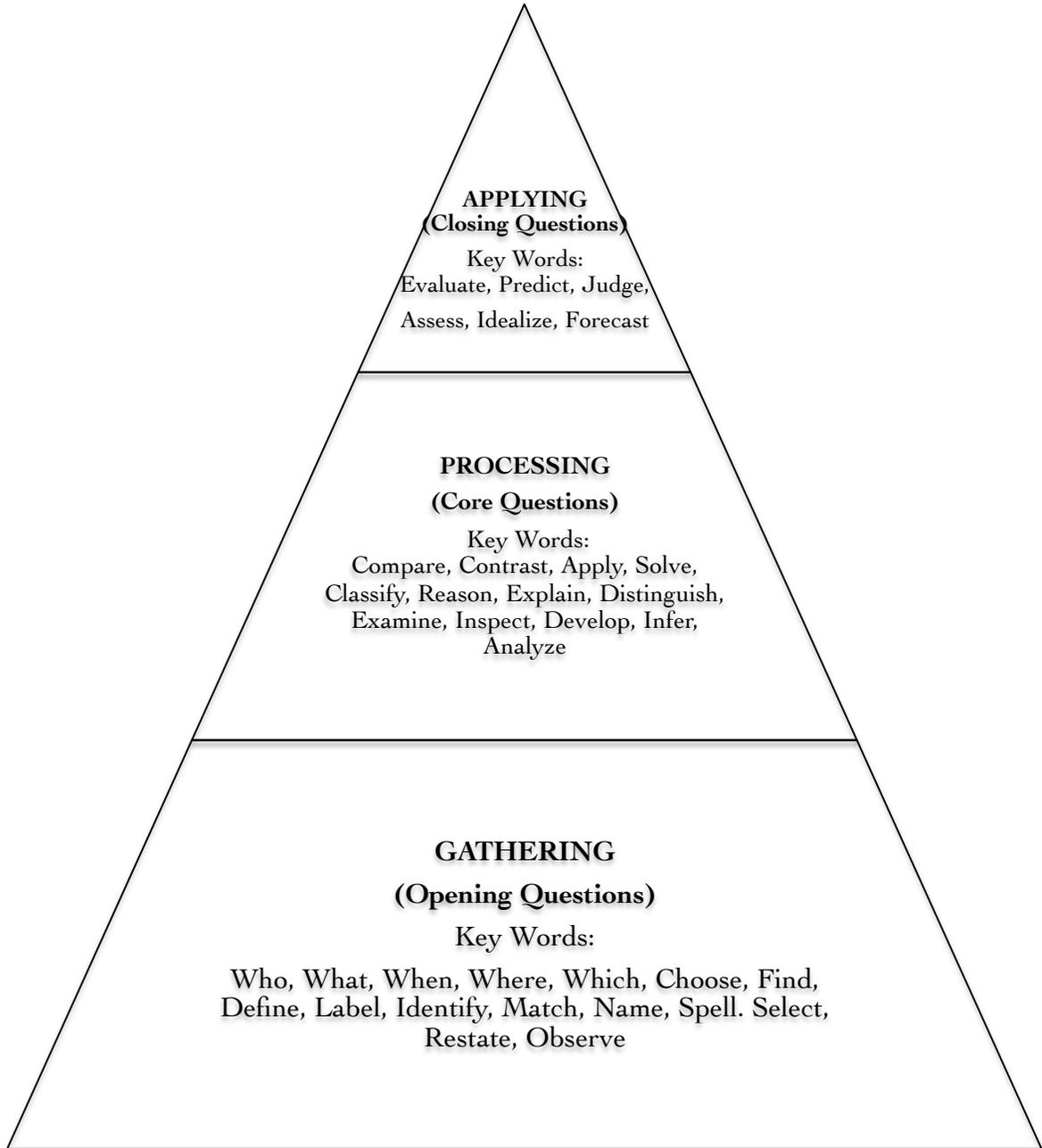
- 1) Why does the main character think \_\_\_\_\_?
- 2) How do you support that position from the text?
- 3) How does this idea connect to \_\_\_\_\_?
- 4) If \_\_\_\_\_ is true, then \_\_\_\_\_?
- 5) Can you define what you mean by \_\_\_\_\_?

**CLOSING QUESTIONS** – These questions should help the group bring the seminar to a close, though not necessarily a conclusion. They:

- ⇒ Establish relevance
- ⇒ Connect to the real world
- ⇒ Relate to the lives of the participants
- ⇒ Are generally abstract

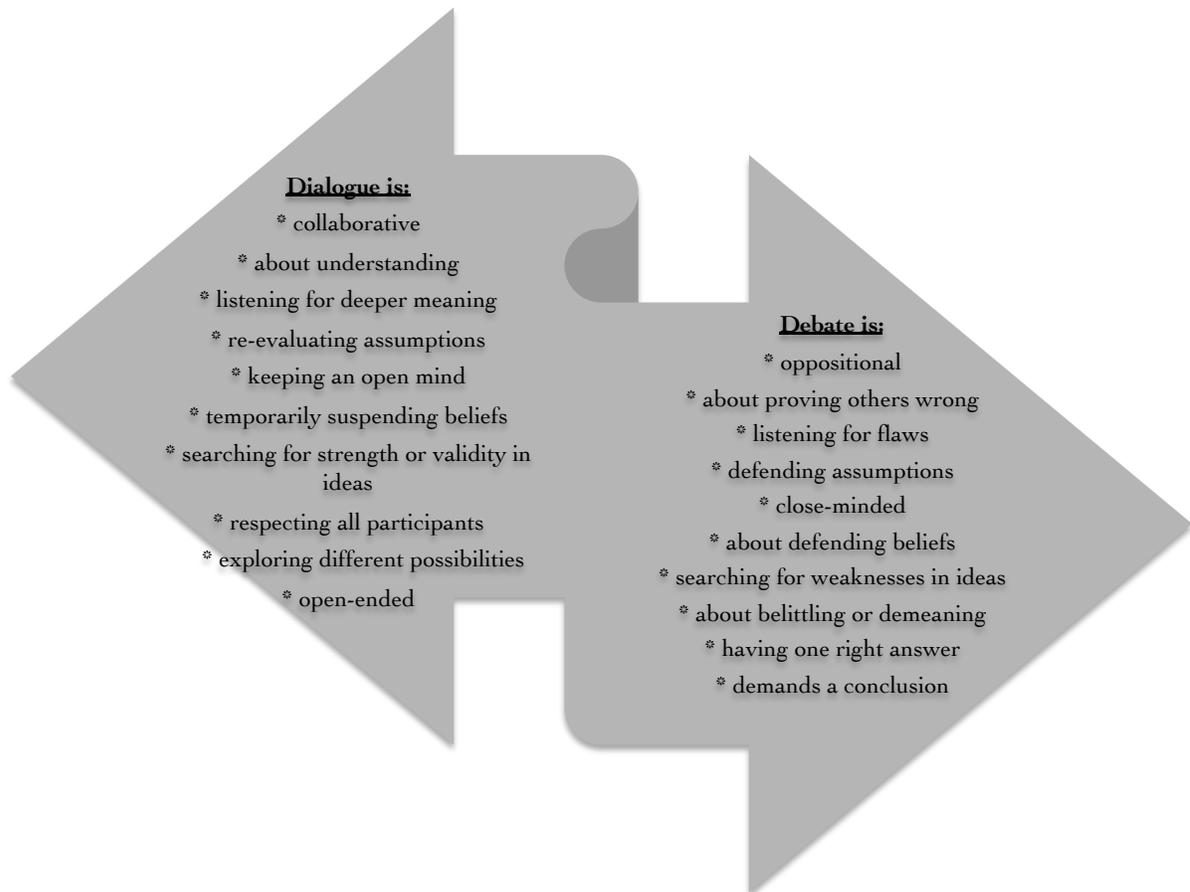
**For example:**

- 1) If you were writing this work, what would the ending be?
- 2) How does this idea connect to \_\_\_\_\_?
- 3) Explain the consequences of the ideas/events in the text.
- 4) Predict/justify future developments.



## DIALOGUE VS. DEBATE:

Crucial to successful Socratic Seminars is an understanding of the difference between dialogue and debate. Both the leader and the participants must be able to make this distinction. More importantly, students must understand why we value the dialogue that we seek through Socratic Seminars. The purpose of the seminar is to expand our ideas and deepen our thinking, not to come to a particular conclusion or any conclusion at all. Use the table below to review the differences between these two concepts.



## **THE ELEMENTS OF SOCRATIC SEMINARS:**

A good seminar consists of four interdependent elements:

- 1) The text
- 2) The questions raised
- 3) The seminar leader(s)
- 4) The participants

### **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, and 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 QUESTION:**

A Socratic Seminar opens with a questions 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 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 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. 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 manner.

## THE ROLE & RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:

### 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

## GROUP GUIDELINES:

- **LISTEN** – *No one can speak while someone else is speaking.*
- **BUILD** – *Speakers must try to build on what others say, not debate their views.*
- **REFER TO THE TEXT** – *Speakers must refer directly to the sections of the text from which their ideas come rather than making general comments or observations.*

## STEM QUESTIONS THAT FACILITATE & SUSTAIN DIALOGUE:

### **Agree / Disagree**

- Has anyone else had a similar...?
- Who has a different...?

### **Clarification**

- I'm not sure I understand...?
- Tell me more about...
- Do you see gaps in my reasoning?
- Are you taking into account something different from what I've considered?

### **Support Questions**

- Can you give us an example of...?
- Where in the story...?
- What would be a good reason for...?
- What is some evidence for...?

### **Cause and Effect**

- Why do you think that happened?
- How could that have been prevented?
- Do you think that would happen that way again? Why?
- What are some reasons people...?

### **Compare / Contrast**

- How are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ alike? Different?
- What is that similar to?
- Can you think of why this feels different than...?
- How does this (poem, novel, incident, etc.) remind you of...?

### **Benefits / Burdens**

- What are some of the reasons this would (wouldn't) be a good idea?
- Would anyone like to speak to the opposing side?
- Those are some reasons this would work; what reasons might it not work?

### **Point-of-View / Perspective**

- How might he/she have felt...?
- What do you think he/she was thinking when...?
- He might not like that, but can you think of someone who would?
- \_\_\_\_\_ has expressed a different opinion. Are there others?
- Do you have a different interpretation?
- How did you arrive at your view?

### **Structure / Function**

- If that was the goal, what do you think about...?
- What were his/her choices of how to...?
- Why was he/she doing that? What do you think of that approach?
- What better choices could he/she have made?
- What rules would we need to make sure...?

### **Counterexample**

- Would that still happen if . . . ?
- What might have made the difference?

### SOCRATIC SEMINAR – Participant Rubric

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>A Level Participant</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participant offers enough solid analysis, without prompting, to move the conversation forward</li> <li>• Participant, through his/her comments, demonstrates a deep knowledge of the text and the questions</li> <li>• Participant has come to the seminar prepared, with notes and a marked/annotated text</li> <li>• Participant, through his/her comments, shows that he/she is actively listening to other participants</li> <li>• Participant offers clarification and/or follow-up that extends the conversation</li> <li>• Participant’s remarks often refer back to specific parts of the text</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>B Level Participant</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participant offers solid analysis without prompting</li> <li>• Through comments, participant demonstrates a good knowledge of the text and the questions</li> <li>• Participant has come to the seminar prepared, with notes and a marked/annotated text</li> <li>• Participant shows that he/she is actively listening to others and offers clarification and/or follow-up</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>C Level Participant</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participant offers some analysis, but needs prompting from the seminar leader</li> <li>• Through comments, participant demonstrates a general knowledge of the text and questions</li> <li>• Participant is less prepared, with few notes and no marked/annotated text</li> <li>• Participant is actively listening to others, but does not offer clarification and/or follow-up to others’ comments</li> <li>• Participant relies more upon his/her opinion, and less on the text to drive/support his/her comments</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>D or F Level Participant</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participant offers little commentary</li> <li>• Participant comes to the seminar ill-prepared with little understanding of the text and questions</li> <li>• Participant does not listen to others, offers no commentary to further the discussion</li> <li>• Participant distracts the group by interrupting other speakers or by offering off-topic questions and comments</li> <li>• Participant ignores the discussion and its participants</li> </ul>

