

How to Lead a Socratic Seminar

This article about the Socratic Seminar includes the following handouts:

- The handout “The Socratic Seminar” (Document #: TX001015) provides the students with an overview of this process.
- The handout “Socratic Seminar Symbol Codes” (Document #: TX001014) is a method for evaluating the students during the discussion.
- The handout “Student Evaluation for the Socratic Seminar” (Document #: TX001013) is a form used by the students in the outer circle as they observe the discussion by the students in the inner circle.

The guide for teachers suggests using the Socratic Seminar several times during *The Bible* course. The Socratic Seminar provides a forum for discussing issues from the units but also teaches the students the important skill of respectful debate.

This approach differs from a teacher-centered approach to Socratic dialogue. The more common approach puts the teacher in the role of Socrates, the Greek philosopher who guided his students toward understanding through his ability to ask the right questions. After you teach the students how to use the Socratic Seminar suggested here and then provide the topics for conversation, the students will engage in conversation about the topic by themselves with much the same energy and quest for truth as did Socrates.

Advance Preparation

Before the class period of the Socratic Seminar, prepare the students to research and reflect on the topics to be discussed.

1. Divide the class into two groups that will be their discussion groups during the learning experience.
2. Provide the two groups with an analytical question and time for preparation. Each group should have a different question, but the questions can be thematically connected. In unit 1, the questions are these:
 - What is the Bible? What role does it play in our lives?
 - What are the literal and spiritual senses of the biblical text?
3. Once the groups and questions have been assigned, allow a period of time for individual preparation in class or as a homework assignment. The students should draw from the reading assignments and in-class notes to support their answers.

The seminar will require the students to articulate their answers to their group’s question, to defend their answers with support from their reading and class notes, and to ask other students to explain their answers and positions.

4. For the first Socratic Seminar, make copies of the handouts “The Socratic Seminar” (Document #: TX001015) and “Student Evaluation for the Socratic Seminar” (Document #: TX001013), one of each for each student. The students should keep the Socratic Seminar directions in a folder or notebook for future seminars. The handout “Socratic Seminar Symbol Codes” (Document #: TX001014) offers a particular system for grading the Socratic seminar. Feel free to adapt or use your grading system.



On the Day of the Seminar

1. Arrange the desks into two circles, one within the other. The center circle should contain one more desk than students. This desk will be called “the hot seat” (see “The Hot Seat” below for explanation).
2. Assign one group to sit in the inner circle first.
3. Distribute both handouts to the students. Using the handout “The Socratic Seminar” (Document #: TX001015), review the Socratic Seminar process with the students and the expectations for their participation.
4. Ask for a volunteer in the inner circle to state the question or topic and begin conversation. Allow 20 minutes for the first group’s discussion. (You can expand the time allowed in subsequent seminars.) With 2 minutes left, announce “final remarks,” allowing for the students to make final points.
5. After the 20 minutes is up, ask the students in the outer circle to complete their observation handout. Ask the observing students to share general thoughts about the discussion (without naming names), including some positive observations and some suggested areas for improvement.
6. Invite the second group to take a seat in the inner circle. Call for a volunteer to state the question or topic and repeat the process.

Assessing Student Performance

The students will be graded for their participation and observation skills in the seminar.

While in the outer circle, each student will be assigned a partner in the inner circle to observe during the seminar, using the handout “Student Evaluation for the Socratic Seminar” (Document #: TX001013). This evaluation will be collected and used toward the observer’s grade at the end of the seminar. Later it can be used to help the speaker from the inner circle critique his or her own performance toward improving in the next seminar.

During the seminar you should remain physically separate from the conversation. It is best to sit off to the side and to take notes quietly on the class performance. You should not interject unless a student has been disrespectful toward another. The students in the inner circle are charged with the responsibilities of directing the conversation, participating respectfully, and helping one another present their perspectives.

The Hot Seat

The hot seat is the empty desk in the inner circle. During the seminar the students from the outer circle only may choose to sit in this desk at any time during the discussion. They must wait there until they are invited to speak by a classmate in the inner circle. When the student in the hot seat is called on, she or he may speak, doing one of the following (or something similar):

- clarifying a statement made in the seminar
- asking for support for a statement made in the seminar
- respectfully correcting an incorrect statement made in the seminar
- drawing attention to a point that has not yet been addressed



- helping to redirect the seminar back to the original topic

Students in the hot seat are to keep their remarks brief and respectful. Their participation (positive or negative) contributes toward their grade in the seminar.

Follow Up

Seminars may be followed by a reflection paper or by a class discussion to review the major topics presented. The Socratic Seminar is a way to assess individually and collectively how well the students understand the main concepts you have been exploring with them. If you detect some misunderstanding, you may want to pursue this with the students and correct it before continuing on.

