

# Strategies for Socratic Questioning

While the best Socratic seminar questions may seem simple, they are also highly strategic — designed to engage students with a text, challenge them toward increasingly complex thinking, and inspire them to explore big ideas.

## What makes a good Socratic seminar question?

Good Socratic questions are always open-ended, thought-provoking, and clear.



Student in a Socratic seminar

**Open-ended:** Questions are designed to elicit multiple perspectives. Numerous answers can be correct as long as the students stay on topic.

**Thought-provoking:** To start, questions should spark numerous responses. Then, they should challenge students to evaluate and synthesize their ideas.

**Clear:** Participants should be able to understand right away what the facilitator is asking. This means phrasing questions carefully to keep them short and simple, even when the topic is complex.

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## Questioning strategies for Socratic seminars

Facilitators should plan their questioning strategy ahead of time, preparing questions to engage students in dialogue. A lesson plan should include opening questions, core questions, and closing questions.



Seminar topic: M.C.'s Escher's *Convex and Concave*

Opening questions and closing questions ask the students for their personal perspective. These questions are known as *maieutic*, from the Greek word for midwifery, because they encourage students to give birth to their own ideas.

During the core of the dialogue, questions are more analytical than personal, requiring careful observation of the text and attention to logic.

Teachers should also be ready to ask students follow-up questions, and they should allow students to shape the dialogue by asking questions of each other.

### OPENING QUESTIONS: WHAT IS THE TEXT ABOUT?

The goal of opening questions is to engage all of the participants in identifying the main ideas in a text.

#### Examples:

- *What word or phrase is most important?*
- *Which character is meant to be the hero or protagonist?*

- *What is the most surprising statement in the text?*
- *What is the most striking image or metaphor?*
- *What would be another good title for this piece?*

A round robin format is a good way to get all of the participants involved at the the beginning. Students can go around in a circle to give their answers or try “hoppin robin,” by jumping in when they choose, as long as everyone responds. Opening questions should be designed for short answers.

## CORE QUESTIONS: WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT IDEAS IN THE TEXT?

The goal of core questions is to have the participants analyze the seminar text and develop their ideas about it.

### Examples:

- *Why is the argument structured in this way?*
- *What evidence does the author use to back up his or her point of view?*
- *What do the authors mean when they say \_\_\_\_\_?*
- *How would the original audience have interpreted this statement?*
- *What is the relationship between \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ ?*

During the seminar, facilitators ask increasingly demanding questions. They may ask students to support their ideas with evidence from the text; to respond to another student’s point of view; to identify the assumptions behind their thinking; or to re-evaluate their ideas, considering other perspectives or evidence.

## CLOSING QUESTIONS: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO YOU?

The goal of closing questions is for participants to consider the ideas and values from the text, in real-world applications.

### Examples:

- *What additional points should be included in this text?*
- *How would our daily lives be different without this concept or idea?*
- *In your opinion, is it morally right to take the action described in this text?*
- *Based on this story, do you think people’s actions are determined by fate or by choice?*
- *Which character are you most like? When have you behaved like the other character?*

Closing questions can form the basis for follow-up writing assignments or exercises, allowing students to develop the ideas they explore through the seminar.

## Resources for Socratic seminar teachers

### **Learn more**

Our website offers an introduction to teaching Socratic seminars in elementary, middle and high school.

### **Find lesson plans**

Our seminar lesson plans integrate Socratic dialogue with today's Common Core curriculum goals. You can search for lesson plans for your grade level, for English and Language Arts, Math, Science, or Social Studies classes.

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