



The Argument-Based Socratic Seminar Overview and Format

Named for Socrates (469 – 399 B.C.E.), one of the founders of Western philosophy, the Socratic Seminar is a formalized classroom discussion activity that emphasizes reflective thinking about big questions and the use of evidence to support responses. According to Elfie Israel, in *Inquiry and the Literary Text* (NCTE, 2002):

The Socratic seminar is a formal discussion, based on a text, in which the leader asks open-ended questions. Within the context of the discussion, students listen closely to the comments of others, thinking critically for themselves, and articulate their own thoughts and their responses to the thoughts of others. They learn to work cooperatively and to question intelligently and civilly.

Some curriculum writers draw a sharp distinction in the context of the Socratic Seminar between ‘inquiry’ or ‘discussion’ and ‘debate,’ stating that the former is to be encouraged over the latter. ReadWriteThink, for example, says that Socratic Seminars ‘prize inquiry over information, discussion over debate.’ But we don’t embrace this dichotomy. Instead the Argument-Based Socratic Seminar brings together inquiry and argument into one project – as these modes are brought together throughout most of academic work at the college and pre-college levels. Though not everything students say in this Socratic Seminar format has to be expressed as an argument, students do get credit for supporting their views with aligned and sufficient evidence, and for engaging with other students’ views. Inquiry leads to argumentation which leads to further inquiry, in a virtuous academic cycle.

Socratic Seminars are effective in part because they are highly student-centered. Ours is too. Students build arguments and propose questions in preparation for the seminar. And during the seminar itself the teacher should take a restrained, minimal moderator role, in addition to tracking and assessing student participation.

Points are accrued in the Argument-Based Socratic Seminar for performing well on the two core standards for rigorous academic argument: the use of evidence and the engagement with other views. Bonus points can be earned for using particular response templates, and points can be deducted if a student fails to participate sufficiently in a round, or if a student participates



unconstructively (distracts others, demonstrates a lack of academic focus, or uses *ad hominem* attacks). Each student earns individual points during the seminar that can be used as an assessment of their performance, but each team also accumulates a point total, which means that students are given both an individual and a team grade and ranking, relative to the seminar rubric designed for this activity.

Method and Procedure

1. Divide the class into teams of 4 students. Identify a captain for each team. Generally we recommend that the instructor assigns teams, and does so using heterogeneous grouping, but you may choose to let students select their own teams, or assign them by grouping ability levels together.
2. The number of teams has to be a multiple of the number of positions that can be taken in response to the debatable issue (see #3 below). So, if the debatable issue in the Socratic Seminar is binary – e.g., ‘Does Abraham Lincoln deserve the epithet “The Great Emancipator?”’ which is asking students to take an overall position either in the affirmative or negative – then there needs to be an even number of teams. If the debatable issue is multi-sided – e.g., ‘Which form of energy (potential, kinetic, or mechanical) had the most influence over series of investigations involving gravity and mass?’ – then there needs to be a number of teams that is a multiple of the number of sides that can be taken (in this physics example, that number is three). This rule is necessary to ensure balance in the seminar rounds, and comes before keeping the number of students in each group equal or keeping the number of students at four.
3. Establish and introduce the debatable issue that will provide the comprehensive frame for the Socratic Seminar. Debatable issues can be binary, multi-sided, or even open-ended.
4. Designate the overall position that each team will take in the Socratic Seminar. This can be done either by canvassing the teams for their preferences – either informally or through an on-line or on-paper poll – or by assigning positions arbitrarily. Generally, Argument-Centered Education is not reluctant to assign positions in structured argumentation activities, since students should learn to make arguments even for positions they don’t agree with, and often on academic questions students do not have well developed or strongly-felt positions yet, anyway.
5. An alternative mode is not to assign positions at all, and let each team come to its own position through the course of their preparatory reading and discussion. In fact, in this variation it isn’t essential to require that teams come up with a single overall position; it is possible to allow individuals on each team to determine their own independent position and defend it, even if that means that members of the same team contradict or refute each other.
6. Assign a set of readings. That set can be as small as a single article, essay, scientific investigation, or story, or it can be a reading list or articles, a series of scientific reports, or a full



novel or play. Vocabulary and conceptual content should be defined and previewed, as this is of course necessary for students to fully comprehend and digest the readings.

7. Distribute argument builders and counter-argument builders and require that each team produce at least three distinct arguments to support their overall position, and two counter-arguments each of two arguments that the other teams are likely to or may make during the seminar. We at Argument-Centered Education like to encourage teachers to collect, assess, and provide feedback on argument builders and counter-argument builders. They entail much of the substance of the argument preparation, of course, and enactments are almost never better than these formative documents. Captains should be responsible for coordinating the argument-building process for their teams, and they should also submit the completed forms, assuming you collect them.

8. Prior to the Socratic Seminar distribute the Question Set Contributor. Teams should submit up to three general questions and up to three questions directed against another group. Drawing from these submissions, and your own ideas, you should create a list of questions for possible use at the Seminar of 5 – 10 general questions and 5 – 10 questions to be directed to specific teams. Often times the best questions that the teacher/moderator asks to prod and guide the discussion are generated from the discussion itself, but it is nevertheless useful to have a question set created in advance and ready to use.

9. Also prior to the Socratic Seminar you should distribute the response templates, and hand out to each team, by random chance from the full deck, 4 – 5 response template cards (made by printing the cards and adhering them to index cards). Explain that bonus points are earned (the number of points that are indicated on each card) when a team uses a response template that is on one of their cards. When such a template is properly and cogently employed during the seminar, the student should put the card on a table in the middle of the seminar space, face up, and the teacher/moderator should give that student the number of bonus points indicated. No student can use more than two of their team's response template cards during any round, and all used cards are returned back to the team after each round for possible use by the next team member.

10. Note that a variation here is not to use the response template cards, but still distribute the response templates to aid students in their argumentative responses to other students. In this variation, no bonus points are awarded for use of the response templates.

11. Now you are just about ready to start the Socratic Seminar. A circle of desk-chairs should be made in the center of the room, about 5 or 6. The number of desk-chairs in the circle should match the number of teams there are. On each desk-chair should be three tokens of some kind. A Gainesville, Georgia [high school video of a Socratic Seminar](#) shows the use of little dinosaur figures. In the center of the circle there should be a small table or another desk chair with a bowl in which students can drop one of their tokens or figures each time they have made a meaningful contribution to the seminar discussion.



12. Around the center circle should be a larger circle of desk chairs, for all of the students – i.e., team members – not participating as speakers in a seminar round. This is the common ‘fishbowl’ structure.
13. The Argument-Based Socratic Seminar Scoring Rubric should be distributed or posted. You should explain how it is that points are scored in this format. At the end of each round, each student participating in that round is given a score of up to 10 points on each of two standards: the use of evidence and engagement with other views. So this is a 20 point possible score. Bonus points are given for use of the response template cards (assuming you are using the cards).
14. Deductions are tallied too, if they apply. For every token (or dinosaur figurine) remaining on a student participant’s desk, 3 points are deducted from that student’s total score. So if a student only speaks once during the round, they will lose 6 points, since they will have 2 tokens (or dinosaurs) still on their desk and not in the bowl in the center of the circle. Note that anything meaningful that is clearly part of the discussion allows a student to put a token into the center-bowl. It does not have to attain any particular level of evidence use or engagement with others. The other source of point deductions is for inappropriate, distracting, highly unfocused, or rude comments during the seminar round. You have discretion to penalize a student up from a single point up to their full points earned for these infractions, depending on their severity.
15. Socratic Seminar Rounds should begin with each participating student stating one of the arguments that they built to defend their overall position, unless after several rounds all of these arguments have been delivered. After the opening arguments, students should respond to each other’s views – disagreeing, countering, analyzing, agreeing but with a difference, evaluating the strength of evidence, etc. If all of a team’s prepared arguments have been previously presented, the student on that team should begin by addressing prior argumentation.
16. Rounds last 6 – 10 minutes, depending on the size of the teams and the length of the class period. Every student should participate in one round during an Argument-Based Socratic Seminar.
17. Team members not participating in a round should be considering ideas and suggestions to send to their teammate in the round. This outside support or ‘coaching’ can be done electronically (texting via cell phone or tweeting, to name two examples) or by handwritten note.
18. Each team gets to call one time-out during the entire Socratic Seminar (not one time-out per round). During a time-out, each team should huddle to discuss how they can improve their performance against the arguments being made by the other teams.
19. Students can use the question set to prod discussion when it is lagging, as can the teacher/moderator.



20. Students can address any other student's views; they are not limited to responding to the students participating in their round. At the same time, students should not repeat arguments that have already been made. If they want to make the same argumentative claim as another student has made earlier in the seminar, they should be sure that they are introducing new evidence or reasoning. The seminar should be progressive, developing and building through the sequence of rounds. Students who repeat what has already been said, without adding anything new, cannot be given credit for those contributions when it is time to score them using the rubric.

21. You should be moderating the seminar when needed – in particular, by asking students to engage directly with another student's argument, to refute a counter-argument that was made against them, etc. You should be moving the rounds along, of course, ensuring that all students get a chance to directly participate. And you should be scoring each student's performance, based on the rubric.

22. Each student should get an individual score and then a team score as well. The team score should be the team total divided by the number of students on the team. The team score helps ensure that each individual feels a sense of accountability for the preparation and performance of the team as a whole.