

Socratic Seminar Facilitation Guide

Overview:	Outcomes:
This lesson guide provides teachers with directions for preparing, conducting, and debriefing a Socratic Seminar, which is a discussion activity built around deep analysis of a text. It begins by introducing the activity and norms for discussion, then provides time for students to prepare for discussion. When students are ready, they will participate in the Socratic Seminar structure. Finally, students will close out the lesson with a debrief about the knowledge, skills, and attitudes developed during the lesson. Please note that this lesson does not include the Socratic Seminar text or content, it is a guiding document for the discussion strategy only.	As a result of this lesson, students will be able to: • Closely analyze a rich text, • Discuss the text with their peers, • Use text evidence to support their opinions, and • Reflect on participation in the discussion.



45+ minutes

1. Introduction to Socratic Seminar (5 minutes)
2. Norms for Discussion (5 minutes)
3. Preparation (15 minutes or more)
4. Socratic Seminar (15 minutes or more)
5. Summary and Debrief (5 minutes or more)

Instructional Materials and Preparation Notes

- Copy general Socratic Seminar handouts for all students:
 - [Handout 1—Socratic Seminar Preparation](#) (handout will be most effective if teacher pre-fills the text and questions prior to distribution to students)
 - [Handout 2—Outer Circle Note Catcher](#) (for use with “Fishbowl” modification)
 - [Handout 3—Socratic Seminar Reflection](#)
- Copy topic-specific Socratic Seminar handouts for all students, including:
 - Socratic Seminar text(s)
 - Additional preparation resources

See the [Street Law Resource Library](#) to find Socratic Seminar resource sets for grades 4–12.

Instructor Notes

- This lesson provides teachers with a guide to how to facilitate a Socratic Seminar. It does *not* include the topic resources that are necessary for the lesson, nor does it include content-specific suggestions for preparing students to participate in a Socratic Seminar.
- Street Law has created topic resources to pair with this lesson. See the [Street Law Resource Library](#) to find Socratic Seminar resource sets for grades 4–12.
- Once the topic resources have been selected, teachers should update **Handout 1** with the appropriate Socratic Seminar text(s) and questions.
- While this lesson could be completed in 45 minutes, it is likely to take longer. Street Law's topic resources aid teachers in timing adjustments related to specific resources.
- Learn more about grade-level modifications for [elementary](#), middle, and high school.

Introduction to Socratic Seminars (5 minutes)

✓ **Instructor Note:** If you have previously used Socratic Seminars in your classroom, you may wish to skip this step. If you are using a paired Street Law topic resource set, consider using the optional **Hook handout** to start your lesson instead.

- 1) Ask students to either write down a response or turn to a partner and discuss a response to this question: "How does discussion help us learn?"
- 2) After 1–2 minutes, ask a couple of students to share their responses. (*Answers will vary but may include: discussion helps us to organize our thinking, discussion helps us hear and understand other perspectives, etc.*)
- 3) Explain to students that today they will participate in a discussion called a Socratic Seminar. The primary purpose of a Socratic Seminar is to collaboratively make meaning of a text.

Norms for Discussion (5 minutes)

- 4) Share that just like other class discussions, a Socratic Seminar will have discussion norms that the class should attempt to follow. Review your class discussion norms with students. Explain that there are some norms that are specific to (or important to emphasize in) a Socratic Seminar. These norms include:
 - Do not raise your hand to speak. Instead, treat this as a discussion you might have with a small group of your peers. Watch for cues, speak when there's a lull in the discussion, and apologize to someone if you interrupt by accident.
 - Practice good conversation skills. This includes looking at one another, referring to one another by name, following discussion threads to their end before bringing up a new topic, listening carefully, and more.

- Refer to the text. The primary purpose of a Socratic Seminar is to collaboratively make meaning of a text. To do that, the text should be front and center. Where possible refer to the text. If a peer does not refer to the text, but you are able to draw a connection, then bring that up in conversation.

✓ **Instructor Note:** If your class does not already have a set of discussion norms, consider spending 15–20 minutes creating norms as a group. Street Law's ["Social-Emotional Learning Resources for Deliberations"](#) has a mini-lesson on norms creation that can be used.

✓ **Instructor Note:** The above set of Socratic Seminar discussion norms may be challenging for some younger students or students with challenges speaking and listening. Refer to the grade-level modifications for suggestions on adjusting norms ([elementary available now](#); middle and high school COMING SOON).

Preparation (15+ minutes)

- 5) Introduce the topic, text, and Socratic Seminar questions to students.
- 6) Distribute **Handout 1—Socratic Seminar Preparation** and review how students should use it to prepare for their discussion.
- 7) As needed, provide additional context, invite clarifying questions, scaffolded reading strategies, and chunked assignments with regular checks for understanding throughout this preparation process.

✓ **Instructor Note:** If you are pairing this lesson with Street Law's topic resources, additional preparation materials specific to the topic are included in the resource set. See the [Street Law Resource Library](#) to find Socratic Seminar resource sets for grades 4–12.

Socratic Seminar (15+ minutes)

- 8) When ready, set up the classroom for the Socratic Seminar. There are a variety of set up options, including:
 - All students in the class sitting in one large circle
 - "Fishbowl" style, where there is an inner circle, in which students are participating in the Socratic Seminar facing inward and an outer circle that observes and takes notes. In this set up, students in the outer circle switch with students in the inner circle half-way through the discussion so that all students have a chance to participate in the discussion. If using this style, provide students with **Handout 2—Outer Circle Note Catcher**.
 - Mini-circles, where the class is split up into smaller groups, each group creates their own circle and conducts their own Socratic Seminar discussion

- 9) Review the discussion norms and the norms specific to the Socratic Seminar. Remind students that as the teacher, your goal is to remain relatively quiet. Explain that, if needed, you will interject with a question or a way to push the conversation forward, but that you will also allow for some quiet time as people process their thinking. Explain that while you hope students will be able to follow the norms for conversation, you are also there to help with adhering to norms, particularly if conflicts arise in conversation.

✓ **Instructor Note:** It is suggested that teachers not stop the discussion for minor factual errors but might need to if there is a misunderstanding essential to the question being discussed. Teachers may wish to keep notes and address minor factual errors after the discussion.

- 10) Conduct the Socratic Seminar. Suggested steps for conducting the seminar:
- Begin by sharing aloud one of the Socratic Seminar questions students considered during their preparation. Ask students to start their discussion by responding to the question you just shared.
 - Then, remind students that they do not need to raise their hands to speak, nor should they wait for your involvement in the conversation. Additionally, while the Socratic Seminar has specific guiding questions students prepared for, they are encouraged to ask their own related questions and follow related lines of thinking during the discussion.
 - Ask for a volunteer to start off the conversation.
 - As students discuss, you may wish to keep track of participation, strong contributions you wish to emphasize in the debrief, and so on.
 - If needed, interject to encourage students to move on to discussing a new question. The question may come from the list of questions students prepared for, or might be a newly created question based on their discussion thus far.

Summary and Debrief (5+ minutes)

- 11) Distribute **Handout 3 - Socratic Seminar Reflection**. Ask participants to take a few minutes to reflect on the seminar and their participation.

- 12) After students are finished with the reflection, ask:
- Share your response to the first question from **Handout 3** ("I used to think..., now I think...")
 - How can discussing a text help us better understand it?
 - If/when we do another Socratic Seminar, what would you change?

✓ **Instructor Note:** Adjust the above question if you wish the answer to be narrower. As it is written, students may respond with reflections on their individual performance, but may also make suggestions about how the Socratic Seminar was structured, the discussion norms, the content of the Seminar, and more.

- 13) Thank students for their participation and enthusiasm in the day's lesson.