

Socratic Seminar Format Overview  
(4<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade)  
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The seminar form is a very successful discussion technique for poetry and poetry comparisons. The format is also infinitely variable for use at different grade levels and with different numbers of students. Interestingly, it is one of the few discussion activities to which both honors and struggling students respond with equal enthusiasm. As students become comfortable with the format, they need less structure and can cover more material in greater depth. While this overview focuses on the use of the format for poetry, Socratic Seminars work equally well with short prose pieces, visual art, and abstract discussion topics. Following the format explanation is a list of suggested Frost poems and pairings to try with your students.

### LEARNING GOALS

- Develop students' understanding and application of close reading analysis and questioning techniques
- Challenge students to increase depth of analysis through focused discussion
- Support students' abilities to make connections from specific to broad ideas
- Increase students' awareness of individual participation and group dynamics
- Foster students' productive group discussion techniques, active listening skills, and respectful communication
- Foster a positive, safe, and comfortable classroom community

### BASIC FORMAT DIRECTIONS FOR POETRY DISCUSSIONS

A Socratic Seminar is, in basic form, a timed discussion that splits the class into two groups. The groups sit in concentric circles, holding their notes on the poem and facing the center of the room. The inner circle has 10 minutes to discuss the poem (or the first poem if two are used) while the outer circle observes. When the 10 minutes are up, the outer circle reports their observations to the inner circle, and then the two circles switch. The process is repeated with a new discussion of the first poem or with a discussion of the second poem to be compared.

The purpose of the discussion is to reach a deeper understanding of the style and meaning of the poem through close reading techniques. Therefore, when students are preparing for the discussion, their job is to ponder the text, think of questions to ask each other about confusing parts, and carefully consider their reactions to the poem.

Preparation necessary before holding seminar:

For the teacher:

- Select a short poem or two poems that share some common theme (suggestions for Frost poems and pairings follow these directions)
- Copy the chosen text onto center of a page (large enough for easy reading), leaving room for margin notes on all sides.
- Buy or borrow an egg timer or stop watch for timing the seminars.
- Distribute the copied text to each student at least one day before seminar.
- Ask a student to read passage aloud to class.
- Explain note-taking procedure (detailed under student responsibilities).

For the student: (can be made into a hand-out for students):

Assignment to prepare for discussion:

- Read over both pieces of text several times
- Take notes in the margins of each poem for at least 20 minutes each
- Consider both the style elements and the meaning of the text
- Come to class with notes ready

When taking notes, consider the following areas:

- Write down questions you have about confusing parts
- Write down your reactions to the meaning of the text
- Make connections with other parts of the reading, especially examples
- Make comments on individual sentences and words that are particularly effective in making the meaning clear or adding to your understanding
- Note specific methods the author uses to get the point across
- Look up any vocabulary you do not know in the dictionary and write down the definitions
- Ponder text (includes taking notes) for at least 20 minutes.
- Take notes in margins that “take apart” the text as much as possible--consider questions, connections with other readings, comments on individual sentences and words, sentence structure, vocabulary, etc. (See article for possible handout for students).
- Come to class with notes ready.

Socratic Seminar class process:

Teacher responsibilities:

- Divide students into two equal groups (can be random or chosen for balance of “talkers”).
- Ask students to move chairs into two concentric circles with all students facing center—each student in inner circle for the first round should bring his/her notes sheet and nothing else into circle; each student in outer circle should bring his/her notes sheet and another sheet for taking notes on the inner circle discussion.
- Explain to students that each group will be given 10 minutes to discuss the poem while the other group observes.
- Pass out observation cards to second group if applicable (or see notes and variations). Again, these can be distributed at random or chosen for students who are good matches with the instructions.
- Ask a student to read the passage aloud before the discussion begins.
- Possibly pose an opening question for discussion for each group (see notes and variations below).
- Possibly participate as discussion leader to model the discussion for the first time. (I find, however, that the students take more risks in the discussion if the teacher is only observing.)
- Set the egg timer and/or call time when 10 minutes have elapsed; guide the observing group to report comments to inner group when time is up.
- Ask students to switch groups and begin second session.

Inner circle responsibilities:

- Begin with a comment or question (teacher can pose a first question, a leader can be chosen ahead, or conversation can start organically—see notes and variations).
- Discuss passage in an open conversation, allowing the discussion to evolve and move forward with new questions and comments.

Outer circle responsibilities:

- Observe discussion with focus of observation card, or listen and be ready to add a question or comment at the end of the 10 minutes (see notes and variations).

Possible observation card questions (also see attached packet for variations):

I have found through trial and error that these questions work well to foster discussion about group dynamic and positive discussion/analysis techniques. Again, depending on the point of the lesson, you can use them or not. Some people find the meta-analysis of the discussion itself very interesting—I think it might be helpful for aspiring teachers to be more aware of how discussions actually work. I set up the cards with a title at the top and then the prompts underneath, distributing one to each outer circle student at random before each round of discussion.

Worthwhile questions for observation cards:

- Opposite person  
Watch the person opposite you (meaning across the circle so that you can see his/her face). How many times does the person speak? Does the person listen well? How does the person behave physically during the discussion? Provide a few examples of the person's comments and behavior.
- Questions  
Who asks questions? Do people answer the questions? Which specific question is most interesting to the group?
- Discussion leaders (use this question if no one is assigned the role)  
Who seems to be leading the discussion? Is it more than one person? Does the leader keep other members engaged in the discussion? Does he or she keep attention focused on ideas in the text? Does he or she listen carefully to others? Describe the leader's behavior briefly.
- Gender dynamics  
Do you notice different discussion techniques between males and females? Who interrupts whom? How are interruptions received? Do the males and females listen differently?
- Discussion difficulties  
What parts of the discussion are awkward? Why? What are your suggestions for improving discussion techniques?
- Content  
Make a brief outline of the content of the conversation as it progresses.
- Balance of discussion  
Count the number of times each person speaks
- Good points  
What are the speakers doing well? Make a list of the positive discussion techniques they are using.
- Quiet people  
Are the quiet people listening? Do they give subtle signals that they wish to speak? Do the talkers ignore them or look at them?
- Focus  
How often does the group get off topic completely? (Count and record examples.) How often does the group find tangents to the discussion? (Tangents are ideas not directly related to the passage but still on topic.) When the group finds tangents, to what do they refer? (Count and record examples.)

- Reading strategies:  
What are specific ways the group members take apart and analyze the text? (This question asks you to think about how the group figures things out—do they look at individual words, sentences, images, and/or metaphors? Connect to previous readings? Discuss grammar and sentence structure?)
- Comment and question (can be prompt for entire outer circle if multiple passages are used—see notes and variations)  
Listen to the discussion and take notes as if you were part of it. When you would speak, write down comments and questions you would share. Then, share one comment and/or one question you would have posed to the group when observers present.

#### Wrap up

- Ask the class to sit again as entire group; depending on focus of the lesson, lead an ending discussion about reading strategies used, new questions raised, connections with previous readings made, etc.
- Can assign writing assignment asking students to explain their increased understanding of larger topic gained from discussion of passage, etc. Also see Cuckoo's Nest assignment in attached packet for more writing ideas.

#### NOTES and VARIATIONS (in no particular order):

- Don't be afraid of silence. Give students the opportunity to struggle through the discussion themselves without interruption. The struggle is part of the learning process for reticent students. If a seminar bombs, you can talk about why and then try it again with a new passage. (Such a situation only happened to me with one class out of the 20 or so; and with college students, I can't imagine that would happen).
- Use two passages/readings that are connected instead of one—inner group discusses one, and then outer group adds a comment/question. When the groups switch, the new inner group discusses the second passage.
- Assign a discussion leader for each group who must supply the opening question.
- Assign a seminar leader for each class who must choose the passage(s) to be discussed.
- For very complex writing, choose no more than 2-3 sentences for discussion. The students can be pushed to make much deeper analysis when given less text to analyze.
- Choose visual art for a discussion "passage," or compare a photograph or painting to a poem or passage.
- Add a dictionary to the center of the circle if the vocabulary of the reading is really difficult. Ideally, the students are supposed to look up words they don't know ahead, but we know reality, and interesting analysis arises from discussion of connotation and word choice—something that does not come naturally to non-writers, but to which many students respond with a little nudging.
- Pair a prepared passage with a second round of "speed" seminar—after the first discussion, give the students a new passage that they must discuss after a five minute period of contemplation in class.

- Grade participation by spot-checking notes (I have collected them occasionally in high school to check for effort/completeness so that the kids don't blow off preparing) and/or by watching participation of students in the discussion—use the same criteria used for your grading technique of general class participation.

“FISHBOWL” VARIATION (I have sustained for up to 1 hour, depending on amount of material and interest level of students):

Instead of students sitting in two static groups, they create a fluid discussion between circles. The outer circle members are allowed to “tap into” the inner circle to participate in the discussion, as long as they tap inner circle members who have already spoken. From there, the discussion becomes fluid and people move in and out of the circle. I usually use this format with discussion questions instead of a passage; the students prepare notes on the questions ahead, and then I set a general time limit for each question. That way, I can ask the inner and outer circle to switch after each couple of questions to catch people who haven't tapped in yet.

A FEW SUGGESTED ROBERT FROST POEMS AND PAIRINGS for SOCRATIC SEMINARS:

“Birches”

“Come In” (can be paired with “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”)

“Choose Something Like a Star” (can be paired with “Bright Star” by John Keats)

“The Death of the Hired Man” (works well after reading *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller)

“Desert Places”

“Design” (can be paired with “A Noiseless Patient Spider” by Walt Whitman)

“Fire and Ice”

“Mending Wall”

“Nothing Gold Can Stay” (can be paired with any number of “carpe diem” Elizabethan poets)

“Out, Out-“ (works well after reading *Macbeth*)

“The Pasture”

“Provide, Provide”

“Reluctance”

“The Road Not Taken” (can be paired with the 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph of *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau)

“Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening” (can be paired with “There are Roughly Zones”)

“There are Roughly Zones” (an interesting pairing with “pity this monster, manunkind” by E.E. Cummings, or can be paired with a discussion of global warming, too)

“To Earthward”

“The Tuft of Flowers”