Socratic Seminar Preparation Guide

            A Socratic seminar is one where we examine a text for a deeper understanding of the ideas rather than “right” answers. It requires knowledge of the text and using the text to support your thoughts. The questions are mostly open-ended—they invite discussion. When working as a member of a Socratic seminar, the goal is not to prove other people are wrong but to understand the ideas from more than one point of view. It asks you to be open-minded enough to change your mind rather than to prove you are right.

            As we practiced in our listening skills unit, we look each other in the eye when listening and speaking, we use each other’s first names, and we acknowledge what others said before adding our opinions. You need to assume that everyone has a part of the answer and listen to each person carefully.

            You will probably notice many of the questions and skills in the Socratic seminar are similar to those we use in literature circles. Think of the Socratic seminar as a whole-class version of the literature circle with everyone playing all of the roles. Remember that in both the literature circles and the Socratic seminar the focus is on analysis, or breaking the text down into parts and examining how the parts work together.

BEFORE THE SEMINAR

            The seminar requires you to prepare in advance. This is not the time to “wing it.” To prepare for a Socratic seminar, you need to:

·        Read the text completely, using sticky notes if it’s a textbook or annotating the text to highlight the most important or key passages.

·        Look over the text to consider the prepatory questions that you have been given. Mark places in the text or take notes on your ideas about those questions.

·        Create a list of “big ideas” or themes you think the book discusses. Remember that a theme is not a topic, but an attitude about a topic (not “friendship,” but “friends will always be there for you,” or “family is more dependable than friends,” or “your earliest friends are the best”).

·        Create a list of key characteristics of the main characters in the book. Use the 8 elements of character to guide your thinking (background, personality, physical description, relationships, words and actions, conflict, motivation, change).

·        Create questions for the discussion. Develop at least three questions, with no more than one from each of the following categories [all example questions are based on the novel The Secret Life of Bees by Sue Monk Kidd]:

o       Closed-end question (these usually have a “correct” answer and help to clarify what happened in the text literally).

§         Example: Why does Lily run away from home?

o       Open-ended question: an insightful question that requires thinking, referring back to the text for proof or support, and a discussion of the possibilities.

§         Example: Who is the queen bee in this story?

o       World connection question: a question that draws a connection between the text and the larger world.

§         Example: How do rituals such as May’s wailing wall help us deal with grief and suffering?

o       Universal theme or “big idea” question: a question that talks about the “big ideas” of the book outside of the book.

§         Example: Why is it important for women bond together? How has the role of women’s groups changed in the past 50 years?

o       Literary analysis question: a question that deals with the choices the author made in writing the book—this usually focuses on style choices.

§         Example: Why do you think the author chose to begin each chapter with a quotation about bees? How do those quotations relate to the chapter? How do they influence how the reader sees the chapter?

DURING THE SEMINAR:

* It is okay to “pass” when asked to contribute as long as you don’t pass each time you are called upon.
* If you are not prepared, do not participate. Please do seatwork (to be assigned) quietly. The seminar is not effective if participants are making things up—it’s not a bull session.
* Ask for clarification if you are confused by something someone says or by a question.
* Stick to the point we are discussing. Make a note of other ideas that come to you and we will come back to it later.
* We don’t raise hands; take turns speaking. Watch the speaker and if you are unsure, ask if the person is finished before beginning to speak. Make sure everyone has an opportunity to speak before you add your opinion again on the same topic.
* Listen carefully and look at the person speaking.
* Speak loudly enough that the entire group can hear you.
* Talk to all the seminar participants, not just the teacher or leader.
* Discuss the ideas of the text rather than opinions—don’t get sidetracked on whether people do or don’t agree; instead, focus on why there is disagreement.
* Sleeping, putting your head down or resting on your desk, distracting others, or doing other work/reading other material will earn you a zero for the seminar.

When I evaluate your participation, I consider whether you:

·        Spoke loudly and clearly

·        Cited reasons and evidence for your ideas

·        Used the text to find support

·        Listened to others respectfully

·        Stayed on topic

·        Spoke to each other and not just to the teacher

·        Paraphrased the text accurately

·        Asked for help or clarification

·        Supported others in the group

·        Avoided hostile exchanges

·        Questioned others in a civil manner

·        Came prepared

·        Acknowledged the ideas of others when speaking (Examples: “I agree with Ben, and I also thought that….”; “I am not sure if I agree with Lisa’s reasons because the book also says…”; “I would like to add to what Tanisha and Jose said….”)

Rubric for participation in Socratic Seminars and Literature Circles:

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| Level of Participant | Criteria for that level |
| A- level | ·          Offers solid analysis, without prompting, and moves discussion forward·          Demonstrates deep knowledge of text and the question·          Comes with a marked or annotated text and notes·          Shows, through comments, that he or she is actively listening to other participants·          Offers clarification or follow up comments to extend the conversation·          Refers back to the text often in making comments or answering questions |
| B-level | ·          Offers solid analysis without prompting·          Demonstrates a good knowledge of the text and the question·          Comes with a mark or annotated text and notes·          Shows, through comments, that she or he is actively listening to others·          Refers back to the text occasionally when making comments or answering questions |
| C-level | ·          Offers some analysis, but needs prompting from the teacher or leader of the seminar·          Demonstrates a general knowledge of the text and the question but does not know a lot of specifics·          Few notes and an unmarked or unannotated text·          Actively listens to others, but does not offer clarification or follow up comments·          Relies on his or her opinion and not on the text to drive comments |
| Developing or Emerging level | ·          Offers little commentary on the text·          Comes to the seminar without much preparation: few or no notes, little understanding of the text, and an unmarked or unannotated text·          Does not demonstrate active listening to and offers little or no commentary on what others have said |