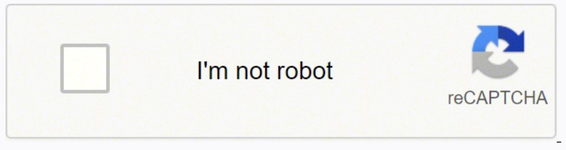

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How to make socratic seminar questions

Minds in Bloom is pleased to welcome Erin from Creative Teacher's Classroom to the blog today! Erin is sharing an excellent post that outlines five steps to running a successful Socratic seminar in your classroom. As a gifted intervention specialist, I began experimenting with Socratic seminars as a way to get my students deeper into the novel we were reading. However, I never felt like I was doing it correctly. Was I jumping in too much or not facilitating enough? Should my questions be harder? What if everyone agreed? After reading a book on Socratic seminars and diving into a bunch of different resources, I finally feel confident that I'm making the most of this strategy. Here are five steps that will help you have a successful Socratic Seminar. Step 1: Choose a Text The purpose of Socratic seminars is to use evidence to support interpretations of a text. If you give your students too large of a text, then they won't be able to read the entire thing closely enough to feel comfortable using it for support. Many resources will tell you not to use a novel for that very reason. That being said – I have used Socratic seminars as a culmination to a novel study and have found the results to be great. Even though we were using an entire novel, since we had already studied it as a class, the students were comfortable and knowledgeable about the text. Nervous about using a novel? Poetry is a great way to start out with a Socratic seminar. Poems offer enough variety in interpretation to have a meaningful discussion without having an overwhelming amount of text. Step 2: Let Students Prepare Socratic Seminars are based on critical thinking, and when students are put on the spot, they can't delve as deeply as they would like into a given topic. I recommend giving students, at the very least, 24 hours to prepare for a Socratic seminar. The first time I used one, I didn't tell the students what they would be discussing. Sure, they knew the discussion would be based on our novel, but I didn't want to give them any more information than that. The resulting seminar was a flop, as students spent more time flipping through the book searching for "that one part" than actually discussing. Looking back, I'm not sure what I was trying to prove. Was I trying to trick them? To play a "gotcha" game? In the end the best discussions are when students feel confident, and allowing them to prepare is key. Encourage them to annotate the text and stick Post-Its all through their novel. Remind them that the more evidence they have, the more in-depth their discussion will be. Step 3: Give Students Questions I like to give my students a handout with questions at least one day in advance. I used to give my students a litany of questions, and during the discussion I always made sure to focus on each question. However, I found that the students did not prepare as thoroughly as they could have if they'd been given fewer questions, and I was constantly cutting discussions short in order to hit all of the questions. Now, I give the students 4-6 questions. I usually assign 2-3 questions that are based closely on the text and that would be rather easy for the students to prove (ex. "Classify the characters in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe as good or evil.") The next 2-3 questions I use to focus on deeper, more philosophical questions (ex. "In The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, Edmund would be considered an antagonist. Agree or disagree.") When I start the discussion, I have the students begin by sharing their answers to one or all of the first questions. They often feel more confident sharing their answers to these questions, and by building their confidence, they are more willing to share their answers to the tougher questions when I introduce those later. Check out my Teachers Pay Teachers store for an example of some questions I used for a Socratic seminar on The Westing Game. Step 4: Set Up Inner and Outer Circles The basic format to a Socratic seminar is having students divided into two groups and sitting in two circles – an inner circle and an outer circle. The inner circle represents the speakers. These are the students who discuss the questions. The outer circle students are the recorders. These people silently record notes on the inner circle speakers. After a certain amount of time, both circles switch so that all students have had a chance being in each circle. I have found that it is helpful to follow this set-up because it lets more people participate. Students are more willing to jump into the discussion when they are part of the smaller, inner circle rather than the entire class. Also, having an outer circle recording observations helps speakers be more conscious of their participation. I find they try extra hard to not just participate but to participate in a meaningful way. After all, they love to hear positive feedback when the discussion is over and the outer circle gets to share their comments. Step 5: Don't Jump In Teachers love to explain things – it's why we're in this profession in the first place! When your students are discussing an issue, sometimes they miss an important detail or come to an illogical conclusion. Just let that happen. As hard as it may be to sit there and listen as they pass over an important symbol or fail to question another classmate's self-contradiction, you have to remember that you are merely a facilitator. Your role is to (1) introduce new questions when the discussion starts to lag and (2) let students know when to wrap up their discussion. Your role is NOT to add your own thoughts – this is a mainly student-led method. In the end, Socratic seminars take practice. Don't worry if the first time you use it, you feel like it didn't go as you imagined. It is a process for both you and your students. The more times you use one, the more confident students will feel with asking each other questions, using evidence to support their points, and disagreeing with each other. Over time you will see your students grow not just as academics but as critical thinkers, too. Erin Vanek is a gifted intervention specialist with 10 years of experience in the education world. She has done everything from tutoring middle-school students in Spanish to teaching AP English to seniors. No matter what she is teaching, she is always looking for creative ways to make her lessons meaningful to her students. Follow her blog, Creative Teacher's Classroom, for ideas on how to teach outside the box! Also, check out her store on Teachers Pay Teachers. This post was written by member Megan Grandmont. "I never thought about it that way before." "I agree with what Julia said, but I'd like to add . . . ." "Well, on page 57, the author states . . . ." These are the sounds of a Socratic seminar, a "formal discussion, based on a text, in which the leader asks open-ended questions," running as it should (Israel, cited in ReadWriteThink). At its best, the Socratic seminar discussion model challenges students to read closely, think and write critically, and articulate their thoughts clearly and respectfully. But how can we as teachers ensure that students will achieve this level of deep engagement with a text and each other? One of the biggest risks of the Socratic seminar lies in the same quality that also makes it such a meaningful assessment—it is student centered. This means that Socratic seminars depend on the performance of the students involved. At their worst, they may devolve into shouting matches or (perhaps worse) sixty minutes of awkward silence. Fortunately, there are concrete steps that we as teachers can take before, during, and after a Socratic seminar to cultivate effective student participation. Before the Seminar Prepare students with expectations for participation. Before our first Socratic seminar of the year, I distribute a handout called "Responsibilities of a Student in Socratic Seminar," from Teaching in the Block: Strategies for Engaging Active Learners. This handout offers students ideas about how to productively and appropriately participate in a seminar in multiple ways, including "making judgments that I can defend with specific textual evidence," "maintaining an open mind to a diversity of opinions," and "listening attentively and patiently as peers share their ideas." We read and discuss this list together, and I prompt students to consider what their own participation style during the seminar might look like. Provide students with seminar questions in advance. I always require students to formally write up their responses to our seminar questions. This step goes a long way toward guaranteeing that students have done some degree of thinking about each question before our discussion. Having a written response to refer to during the seminar is useful for all students, but especially for students who are introverted or have social anxiety; it serves as a built-in talking point. Offer a mix of required and optional seminar questions. Required questions are beneficial because everyone can speak to them during the seminar, while optional questions cater to students' individual interests and build some flexibility into the discussion. During the Seminar Open with a round robin. Opening with a round robin question—where we go around the circle and each student shares their response—means that I hear every student's voice at least once. Again, students who are introverts or who have social anxiety are never taken by surprise. This strategy works particularly well as a warm-up when the question connects to students' personal experiences or asks them to bring in a piece of outside media. For example, during a seminar on Frankenstein and the Prometheus myth: "Describe a time when you rebelled against authority (your parents, your babysitter, your boss, your coach, your teacher, etc.). Why did you do this? What happened as a result of your rebellion? What did you learn from this experience?" Get comfortable with the uncomfortable. So many of us are drawn to teaching English because it gives us the opportunity to talk with young people about things that matter. At times, especially in the current political climate, these conversations can be fraught and uncomfortable, and the Socratic seminar is not exempt from these tensions. But as educators, we should lean into that tension, in spite of the discomfort it may cause us. During a recent Socratic seminar on the American Dream in one of my junior classes, the conversation turned to white privilege. Regardless of strong and divergent opinions on the subject, by reminding ourselves of the expectations we had set up ahead of time (maintain an open mind; listen attentively), we successfully navigated this discussion and had a rich conversation that students won't soon forget. Facilitate, don't dominate. I describe my primary function during a Socratic seminar as that of a mirror—I try to reflect back or clarify what I hear students saying. At times, as is outlined in the ReadWriteThink Strategy Guide, I may move the conversation in a new direction as needed. But I rarely participate directly, except to answer the round robin question for the purpose of community building. After the Seminar Allow time for reflection. This step encourages students to practice metacognition, evaluating their own performance during the seminar. At the end of each seminar, I allot ten minutes for students to respond to five questions, originally developed by my colleagues Deb Szabo and Wendy Crofts: What did you find most interesting about today's seminar? What did you find most surprising? Did anything make you change your mind or think more deeply? What, how, and why/why not? What did you contribute to today's seminar? Be specific. What might you do differently at our next seminar? Be specific. Today's students are growing up in a world where having a meaningful, respectful discussion has never been more challenging, or more important. By following the strategies outlined above, we prepare them for dialogical success not only in our classrooms, but also in the world beyond them. Work Cited Israel, Elfie. "Examining Multiple Perspectives in Literature." In Inquiry and the Literary Text: Constructing Discussions n the English Classroom. James Holden and John S. Schmit, eds. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2002. Megan Grandmont teaches 10th-grade World Literature and Composition and 11th-grade American Literature and Composition at Newburyport High School in Newburyport, MA. Follow her on Twitter: @megangrandmont.

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