

Interpretive, Literal, & Evaluative Questions

Interpretive Questions

The core of the Socratic Seminar is devoted to considering interpretive questions. These are questions that ask students to interpret the text. They should be genuine questions - ones that you are also interested in. No single right answer exists, but arguments can be made to support different positions. Students need to make their points using passages from the text to answer these questions. Sample interpretive questions might ask for the values evidenced by the author within the text, or might ask students to choose the most important word/sentence/paragraph and describe why it is the most important.

Literal Questions

Literal questions are used by some teachers at the very beginning of a seminar, to ensure comprehension of the text. These are questions that can be answered directly from the text. The answers are contained within the text and are stated clearly. Sample literal questions might ask for an important text detail, fact, or quote.

Evaluative Questions

Evaluative questions are sometimes used at the very end of a seminar, to allow students to share their own positions and opinions. Answers to evaluative questions rely on student's own experiences, not on the text itself. Students will not need to cite particular passages to answer these questions. Sample evaluative questions might ask for student opinions about the author's position, or how the ideas in the text relate to their own lives.

Variation: Fishbowl

If you have a large class, it may be helpful to divide the students into two groups and use a fishbowl format.

- One half of the class is in the 'center' facing each other and discussing the text, while the remainder is on the 'outside' observing and listening. Members of the outer circle can take notes or use an evaluation form to track the overall conversation or to focus on specific participants. The Rubric for Evaluating Classroom Discussions, as well as the Socratic Seminar Fishbowl Discussion Partner Evaluation could be used for this purpose.
- During the seminar, some teachers reserve an empty 'hotseat' for those in the outer circle who really want to jump in to make a contribution and then leave.
- At the end of the conversation, the outer circle can share their observations. The groups then switch to allow the outside group a chance to discuss.

Assessment

A rubric for evaluating a Socratic Seminar discussion is provided in the assessment section. This rubric may also prove useful to students who are evaluating other students or reflecting on their own participation.