

# Dialogues in History



Using Socratic Discussions  
in Social Studies

# SOCRATIC DIALOGUES

*Because the meat of Socratic dialogues are the big questions of life, students, like their adult counterparts, are involved in making decisions about how to live their lives. They are encouraged to practice habits of mind and heart that further the individual and society. As a result, the school fulfills its primary purpose: preparing thoughtful citizens for active involvement in a democratic society.*

Effective seminars occur when participants study the text closely in advance, listen actively, share their ideas and questions in response to the ideas and questions of others, and search for evidence in the text to support their ideas.

An effective Socratic Seminar creates *dialogue* as opposed to debate. *Dialogue* creates "better conversation." As William Issacs states in ***Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together***, *dialogue* is a conversation in which people (students) think together in relationship. Thinking together implies that you no longer take your own position as final. You relax your grip on certainty and listen to the possibilities that result simply from being in a relationship with others---possibilities that might not otherwise have occurred."

# DIALOGUE AND DEBATE

The practice of Socratic Seminars teaches students to recognize the differences between *dialogue* and debate and to strive to increase the qualities of *dialogue* and reduce the qualities of debate in each Socratic Seminar. Some of the most significant differences between *dialogue* and debate are presented below.

Dialogue	Debate
is collaborative: multiple sides work toward shared understanding	is oppositional: two opposing sides try to prove each other wrong
one listens to understand, to make meaning, and to find common ground	one listens to find flaws, to spot differences, and to counter arguments
enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view	affirms a participant's point of view
reveals assumptions for examination and reevaluation	defends assumptions as truth
creates an open-minded attitude: an openness to being wrong and an openness to change	creates a close-minded attitude, a determination to be right
one submits one's best thinking, expecting that other people's reflections will help improve it rather than threaten it	one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right
calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs	calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs
one searches for strengths in all positions	one searches for weaknesses in the other position
respects all the other participants and seeks not to alienate or offend.	rebutts contrary positions and may belittle or deprecate other participants.
assumes that many people have pieces of answers and that cooperation can lead to a greater understanding	assumes a single right answer that somebody already has.
remains open-ended	demands a conclusion

# Discussions

## Reason for holding discussions:

### 1) **Understanding/clarification of content**

The main purpose for holding these discussions is for you to develop a better understanding of the topic. This is a time for you to get clarification on concepts/issues that you didn't understand.

### 2) **Differing perspectives on issues**

Understanding that there are often differing perspectives on issues is a helpful skill to have in life. There may be some issues that people will disagree on – this is perfectly fine. It is helpful however to understand the other person's perspective. *Keep an open mind at all times.*

### 3) **Persuasion**

Persuading people to your way of thinking is obviously a useful tool in life. You can use intellectual reasoning and a variety of persuasion techniques to attempt to sway people to your way of thinking. Remember however, that the main purpose for the discussion is to develop a better understanding of the topic.

### 4) **Problem-Solving**

Sometimes the overall discussion issue presents a problem for the students to solve. For example, a discussion on the Vietnam War might engage students in a discussion on whether or not the U.S. should have become involved in the political quagmire of Vietnam in the late 50's early 60's. Another issue might be "The Draft". What would you do if you were drafted in 1968? You will most likely arrive at multiple solutions.

\* Students should avoid "unloading of emotional feelings" in discussion. Students should not worry about winning the discussion.

## Discussion strategies:

### **Showing professionalism**

- Showing respect to other people in the discussion
- Disagreeing politely

### **Clarifying for other or getting clarification**

- Asking specific questions of clarification
- Adding information to a stated claim
- Defining terms, events, or facts

### **Sensitivity**

- Always listen and respond to the last person that spoke.
- If two or more individuals speak at the same time back off and let the person who has participated the least speak first.
- Always be polite.

## **Stating the Issue**

- Keeping the discussion focused on one topic/issue at a time.
- Pursue issues systematically.
- Use an agenda.

## **Continuity**

- Smooth flow is important.
- Jumping off topic too quickly destroys continuity. Make sure everyone has an opportunity to speak on the issue.
- Hammering a topic too long can disrupt continuity(flow).

## **Transitions**

- Use explicit (overt) transitions to move from one issue/topic to another.
- A good idea is to summarize the trend of the discussion and then introduce the new agenda item.

## **Relevance**

- If a person jumps into a new topic/issue when the agenda item has not been thoroughly discussed then you should question the relevance of what is being said.
- This might force the person to make a transition if it is called for.

## **Building Consensus**

### **Stipulation and Concession**

- Two ways to move discussion forward when two parties are arguing.
- Concession means one person gives in.
- Stipulation means that someone stipulates, or agrees to accept the other persons stand to move the discussion forward.

### **Agenda –**

- Always have an agenda
- Put Issue headings with bulleted questions underneath.
- Look for big picture issues, especially those that can create conflict of opinion or varying perspectives.

### **Summarizing the trend**

- Discussions can get jumbled and all over the place and students need to occasionally summarize what has been said about the issue.
- Sometimes this technique is used prior to making a transition

## **Roadblocks**

- Failure to listen and pursue issues systematically.
- Proof by repetition.
- Monopolizing.
- Personal Attack.
- Worrying about Winning

# Dialogue Starters

“I’d like to hear \_\_\_\_\_’s opinion.”

“So the big issue really is.....”

“Going off of \_\_\_\_\_’s idea, ...”

“I totally agree with.....”

“Is that relevant to our topic?”

“I’m not really clear about....”

“I agree with \_\_\_\_\_ about ...”

“I totally disagree with \_\_\_\_\_’s statement.”

“I’m going to have to disagree with you \_\_\_\_\_.”

“I think \_\_\_\_\_ was on the right track with he/she said ...”

“I would like to add to what \_\_\_\_\_ said.”

“\_\_\_\_\_ is on the right track, however ...”

“I would like to add another point to support what \_\_\_\_\_ said.”

“In addition to what \_\_\_\_\_ said, I feel that...”

“I would like to emphasize the idea that....”

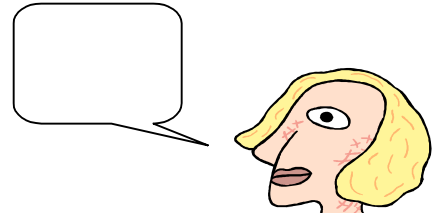
“It sounds like we all agree that \_\_\_\_\_ and we should move on to the next agenda issue.”

“What I just heard you say was....”

“Do you think...?”

“How.....?”

“I’m worried that I didn’t quite understand \_\_\_\_\_. Could someone explain it to me.”



“I’m curious as to how.....”

“The bigger issue here really is about \_\_\_\_\_.”

I think we’ve pretty well exhausted this topic/issue. Let’s move on.”

“It seems that we have two schools of thought and we’re not going to be able to come to consensus.”

“Could someone help me better understand...”

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Hour: \_\_\_\_\_

# Socratic Dialogue

Discussion Topic Question: \_\_\_\_\_

	<b>Advanced</b>	<b>Proficient</b>	<b>Basic/Minimal</b>
<b>Preparation</b>	<p>Thorough and explicit notes on all agenda items</p> <p>Several key excerpts identified</p> <p>Prepares several questions on unclear factual information</p>	<p>Notes taken on some agenda items</p> <p>A few key excerpts identified</p> <p>Has prepared a few questions on material or information that is unclear</p>	<p>Few notes taken on agenda. Minimal effort to prepare notes</p> <p>No excerpts prepared for discussion</p> <p>No questions prepared on unclear information</p>
<b>Discussion Content</b>	<p>Uses text evidence to support ideas</p> <p>Uses text information to bring clarity and understanding of the issue</p> <p>Makes connections between ideas</p> <p>Demonstrate a clear understanding of the stated issues</p>	<p>Inconsistent use of text evidence to support ideas or claims</p> <p>Uses some text information to bring clarity and understanding to issues, but at other times does not have supporting textual information</p> <p>Demonstrates some understanding of some of the stated issues</p>	<p>Rarely uses text to support position or to provide evidence</p> <p>Rarely uses text information to bring clarity to an issue</p> <p>Rarely understands the major issues</p>
<b>Discussion Skills</b>	<p>Always listens and pursues issues systematically.</p> <p>Always states issues and adds new information to already stated claims.</p> <p>Always uses one or more of the following discussion concepts: sensitivity, transition statements, questions relevance, summarizes the trends, asks insightful questions</p>	<p>Sometimes listens and pursues issues systematically.</p> <p>Occasionally states issues and adds new information to already stated claims.</p> <p>Sometimes uses one or more of the following discussion concepts: sensitivity, transition statements, questions relevance, summarizes the trends, asks insightful questions</p>	<p>Rarely listens and pursues issues systematically. Rarely states issues and adds new information to already stated claims. Rarely uses one or more of the following discussion concepts: sensitivity, transition statements, questions relevance, summarizes the trends, asks insightful questions</p>
<b>Comments:</b>			
<b>Overall Grade:</b>			

# Three Level Thinking

<b>Level 1 Content</b>	<b>You must think hard about the content or issue topic and what you want to add to the discussion, <b>BUT</b></b>
<b>Level 2 Listen to Others</b>	<b>You must also <u>listen</u> to what other students are saying so you are sensitive and so that you don't repeat others or cause the discussion to go off track or in circles, <b>But</b></b>
<b>Level 3 Discussion Process</b>	<b>You must also think about the discussion process at the same time. Thoughts like “should I make a transition, should I challenge relevance, should I summarize” are all going through your mind at the same time.</b>

