

## AP English Language & Composition Socratic Seminar

Socratic seminars are named for their embodiment of Socrates' belief in the power of asking questions. They are scholarly discussions of an essential question in which student opinions are shared, proven, refuted, and refined through dialogue with other students. They prize inquiry over information and dialogue over debate.

**For our first Socratic seminar, we will address this question:**  
*To what extent do our schools serve the goals of a true education?*

Our common texts for the seminar are the following: (all found in *LC*)

“I Know Why the Caged Bird Cannot Read” p. 89

“Superman and Me” p. 110

“Best in Class” p. 113

“School” p. 130

“The History Teacher” p. 143

### **Expectations for Socratic Seminar Students will...**

- Cite evidence from the text, ask questions, speak, listen, make connections, and add insight or new knowledge to discuss their point of view in regards to the opening question.
- Make relevant comments during the seminar which show response to the previous speaker's ideas. This helps to deepen the understanding of the texts and ideas generated in the seminar. Comments will show that the student has read the texts, understood them, and is making connections between the texts and ideas generated by the participants in the seminar.
- Take the initiative in participating; students should not have to be prompted.
- Ask questions to clarify and deepen the discussion of ideas.

### **The teacher will...**

- Take notes for evaluative purposes but provide no verbal or nonverbal feedback that either affirms or challenges what students say. The teacher may ask follow up questions; however, teacher questions are used sparingly and deliberately.

### **Assessment – How will this be graded?**

Students will self-assess by reflecting on their participation in the Socratic seminar and setting goals for future seminars. All students start with a grade of 100%. You subtract points if you are not following the necessary guidelines:

- ✓ **Speaking at least once during the conversation.**
- ✓ **Using the texts to find support.**
- ✓ **Citing outside evidence to support your argument.**
- ✓ **Sticking with the subject (not going off on a tangent.)**
- ✓ **Using academic language.**
- ✓ **Listening to others respectfully (not dominating the conversation.)**
- ✓ **Speaking with a clear voice.**

### **How do I disagree during a seminar?**

One goal of Socratic seminars is to understand the ideas and thoughts of others through asking questions and listening to answers. This means that seminar participants must practice how to agree and disagree. Participants must be able to disagree without being *disagreeable*. ☺

In order to do so, the participants can use the following suggested ways of responding as a way of framing their thoughts before they speak. Speaking and responding in calm, collaborative manner is essential to good discussion and dialogue.

1. I agree with \_\_\_\_\_ because, but I want to add another reason why I think \_\_\_\_\_...
2. I disagree with \_\_\_\_\_ because . . .
3. I'm not sure why \_\_\_\_\_ said . . . Can you reword your comments to help me understand?
4. I understand your point, \_\_\_\_\_, but I want to add/disagree/give another side . . .
5. This is what I think you are saying. . . Is that correct?

### **How is a Socratic seminar different from a debate?**

Dialogue is collaborative. Multiple sides work towards shared understanding

Debate is appositional. Two opposing sides try to prove each other wrong.

In dialogue, one listens to understand, to make meaning, and to find common ground.

In debate, one listens to find flaws, to spot differences, and to counter arguments.

Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's view.

Debate affirms a participant's point of view.

Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude, openness to being wrong and an openness to change.

Debate creates a close-minded attitude, a determination to be right.

In dialogue, one searches for the strengths in all positions.

In debate, one searches for the weaknesses in the other positions.

Dialogue respects all the other participants and seeks not to alienate or offend.

Debate rebuts contrary positions and may belittle or deprecate other participants.

Dialogue remains open-ended.

Debate demands a conclusion.

### **How to Prepare for the Socratic Seminar**

1. Read and annotate: "I Know Why the Caged Bird Cannot Read" in *LC* (pgs. 89-99)  
Answer the following in your notebook or on loose leaf (leave space underneath to add details)  
Questions on Rhetoric and Style: #1, #2, #4, #9
2. Review your annotations and comments/responses to the other essays.
3. Write a page (or more) reflecting on the question – *To what extent do our schools serve the goals of a true education?*