The Ten Steps of Socratic Seminars for Writing

(2 -3 days*)

Step 1: Read and Mark the Article

Students read and mark the article. Teachers may have students mark the text in whatever way works for them. For additional information on marking the text see Critical Reading Strategy 5 (p.58). Basic marking includes numbering paragraphs (or lines in a shorter text or poem), circling key terms, and underlining the author’s claims and other information relevant to the reading purpose.

Step 2: Quickwrite

Determine a focus question for the article. This should be a Level 3 question that requires students to connect with the text on a personal level by giving an opinion, relating it to their lives, or making a judgment. Students should write continuously on the question for the specified amount of time (2-4 minutes). Sometimes it is helpful to have students count their words after a quickwrite so that they can compare their progress over time. It also adds a little incentive for them to write more.

Step 3: Levels of Questions

Review the levels of thinking (Costa’s) with students. Have student generate several questions about the article at each level. Even though the Level 1 questions will not be used during the discussion, it is helpful for them to connect with the facts in the text and are also the easiest to come up with allowing them to have instant success.

Step 4: Discussion Norms

Since Socratic Seminar is different than most activities students will do in class, it is helpful to reinforce the class norms and to establish some new norms for the discussion. These should be written on chart paper and posted prominently in the room. If students act in a way that is inappropriate for the discussion, you can refer them to the agreed upon norms rather than using punitive discipline.

Step 5: Setup

There are two different structures for a Socratic Seminar that can be used. The most common is an inner and outer circle in which the outer circle does not participate in the discussion and instead records the behavior of one of the inner circle participants and takes notes on the discussion in general. The second structure has the outer circle participants paired directly with an inner circle participant who they will “debrief” with periodically throughout the discussion. The second structure is a good place to start with younger students or students who are new to Socratic Seminars as it requires more full participation from all participants and it can be less intimidating to talk with a partner than to address the entire group. In the first structure, some students may never speak even when in the inner circle. With either structure, it is a good idea to have one open chair in the inner circle called a “Hot Seat” where members of the outer circle can come to share their views on a particular part of the discussion.
Step 6: Discussion

Start with an opening question. For students who are more mature, one of the participants can pose the opening question. Students should respond to each other’s comments using the elements of discourse ex. “I agree with Keianna when she said that students should not use cell phones in class because…….” Or “Although I can see Keianna’s point about why students should not use cell phones in class, I disagree because…….” Sometimes it is helpful to give students sentence frames that they can use when they are first learning these strategies.

Step 7: The Last Word

Once the discussion has reached a natural stopping point (or when there are only a few minutes left in class), have each participant go around the circle and share their final thoughts. Outer circle participants can be included in this debrief as well and may appreciate the opportunity to sound off after having heard the entire discussion.

Step 8: Reflection

Socratic Seminar discussions should always be followed with a written reflection to allow students to reflect on their own thinking and to get any final thoughts down in writing. It is best if students do this reflective writing on the same paper as their Quickwrite so that they can see how their thinking may have changed from before the Seminar to after. Often, Socratic Seminars can be great introductory activities for major writing assignments or projects and these reflections can be referred to later.

Adding a Formal Writing Assignment

Step 9: Finding the Thesis

The next day (once they have some distance from it), have students re-read what they wrote, highlighting or underlining key words and phrases – basically, marking their own text. It might be helpful to have students pass their papers to a peer to read and mark to get a different perspective. Looking at the highlighted and underlined pieces of text, students should think about a thesis statement (position statement) that they could write an essay for. Again, it might be helpful to have a peer develop the thesis due to the “forest for the trees” factor. They should write their thesis (or theses) on their quickwrite paper.

Step 10: The Essay* - This step may require several writing oriented lessons prior to students actually writing the essay depending on your students' level of writing proficiency.

Review TBEAR paragraph structure. It might also be helpful to teach students about integrating quotes as this is a skill that many, especially middle school students, are unfamiliar with. There are many helpful powerpoint presentation available on the web – search for “integrating quotations ppt” on google.

Once students have a firm grasp of the basics of expository writing, they should write their first draft of the essay. For more specific information about different modes of writing, refer to the ML or HS AVID Writing Curriculum. In ML, refer to 6.2 (Writing to Inform) or 6.3 (Persuasive Writing). In HS, refer to 7 (Exploring Persuasive Writing).
T – Topic Sentence
Introduces what the paragraph will be about. Acts as a mini-thesis for each paragraph.

B – Background/Build-Up
Provides additional information about the topic of the paragraph. Provides context for the evidence.

E – Evidence
The facts or quotes from the text that support the topic sentence.

A – Analysis
The author’s original analysis or explanation of how the evidence supports the topic sentence.

R – Restatement of the topic sentence
The topic sentence reworded to include the new insight provided by the evidence or a transitional sentence into the next topic paragraph.

Sample 3-part essay using TBEAR for the Body Paragraph

America’s Favorite Cookie
There is nothing in this whole world like the smell of freshly baked cookies. It is so recognizable, in fact, that for most people it triggers a kind of Pavlov’s dog response and without even seeing the cookies first hand, they begin salivating. Although there are many good cookies, chocolate chip cookies are the most popular. (thesis) There are many reasons why this particular cookie has stolen the limelight, but the most important may come from its unique flavor combination.

Chocolate chip cookies combine three key ingredients: chocolate, salt, and sugar. (T) Each of these ingredients by itself has its own fan club in the form of chocaholics, potato chip junkies, and candy fanatics, but when you put them together you have a combination that appeals to all three groups. (B) In one taste study, scientists tested different flavor combinations to determine which ones were most pleasing to the majority of people. (E) It turned out that a combination of salt, sweet, and sour created the most pleasing flavor for most people. (E) Since pure chocolate is actually bitter and therefore acts as the sour component, chocolate chip cookies are the perfect mix of these 3 flavors. (A) If any of these flavors were missing, the chocolate chip cookie would likely lose its appeal. (R)

The smell of baking cookies continues to ignite the senses in kitchens across America. Nowadays, one doesn’t even have to do any work to produce this wonderful aroma as ready-made cookie dough is available in every grocery store, but there is still one type of cookie that pleases our palate above all the rest. The chocolate chip cookie with its perfect combination of salty, sour, and sweet continues to be America’s favorite cookie.