

40 Socratic Seminar Questions

Eight questions in each of five categories, subject-general on purpose so you can drop your own text under them. Built for grades 6–12.

Every one of these is a shell — swap in your author, your document, your data set. Two things before you use them. The question is only as safe as the text you put under it, and choosing a text on a contested public issue is a decision that belongs to you and your school's policy. And the fourth group is asked **to the room**, never to a named student.

#	Opening questions — use one
1	What is the most important sentence in this text, and what does the rest of it do?
2	What is this author afraid of?
3	If you had to remove one paragraph without losing the argument, which one goes?
4	Who is this written for? How can you tell?
5	What does this text refuse to say?
6	Is the author describing the world or arguing about it?
7	What would have to be true for this to be right?
8	What question is this text an answer to?

#	Core questions — evidence and claims
9	Which claim here has the least support behind it?
10	Where does the author stop explaining and start assuming?
11	Are the two claims in the second and fourth paragraphs compatible?
12	What counts as evidence in this text, and who decided that?
13	Is the strongest objection to this argument in the text, or did the author leave it out?
14	Which detail would change your reading if it turned out to be wrong?
15	Does the author distinguish what they know from what they think?
16	If this were written by someone on the other side, which sentence would survive?

#	Core questions — language and choice
17	Why that word and not the obvious one?
18	What work is the title doing?
19	Where does the tone shift, and what happens right before it?
20	Who is given a name in this text, and who is not?
21	What is the effect of the thing the author repeats?
22	Is the ending earned by what came before it?
23	What would be lost if this were written plainly?
24	Which sentence do you think the author rewrote the most times?

Disagreement, Closing, and Six Stems for Students

The last sixteen questions, plus the six stems that teach students to ask each other questions instead of taking turns making statements.

#	Questions that surface disagreement
25	Who in this room read that line differently than you did?
26	What is the strongest version of the argument you disagree with?
27	Is this a disagreement about the text or about something outside it?
28	What would change your mind?
29	Can both readings be true at once?
30	What are we assuming that the text never says?
31	Which of us is using a word to mean two different things?
32	Is the disagreement about what happened or about whether it was right?

#	Closing and reflection questions
33	What did you come in believing that you are less sure of now?
34	Whose comment changed or sharpened your thinking, and what did they say?
35	What question do we still not have an answer to?
36	What would you need to read next to settle this?
37	Where does this argument show up outside of school?
38	If you had to explain this text to someone in one sentence, what would you leave out?
39	What did this conversation get wrong?
40	What is the question you wanted to ask and did not?

Six stems to post for students

Post six and refer to them by name. Do not post twenty; nobody reads twenty.

What in the text makes you say that?	Are you saying X, or Y?
Can you say more?	What would change your mind?
I read that line differently, because...	We have not heard from...

Teach "What in the text makes you say that?" first — it is not a challenge, and it forces the conversation back to the page every time it drifts. "Can you say more?" is how a quiet student participates without having to produce a position of their own.

Writing Your Own — the Ten-Minute Method

The forty questions are shells. This is how you turn a text nobody has written questions for into a seminar, in about ten minutes.

Turning your own text into questions — ten minutes

1	Mark every hedge — “arguably,” “some have suggested.” Each one is a place the author was not sure, and each one is a question.
2	Find two sentences that do not quite fit together. Not a contradiction — a tension. “Are these both true?” writes itself.
3	Note what is missing. Who is not quoted. Which objection is not answered.
4	Write your opening question from the whole text, and three core questions from the marks you made.
5	Answer your own opening question in one sentence. If you can, go back to step two.

Plan the next seminar

Text, author and length

One or two pages. Everyone can read it.

My opening question

Now answer it yourself in one sentence. If you can, it is a comprehension check — write another.

Three core questions from the marks I made

Questions that wreck a seminar: the one you already answered in class, the yes-or-no question with an obvious side, the question that requires a personal disclosure, and the question with a correct answer you will eventually supply. Students can smell the last one within four minutes, and once they have, the seminar becomes a guessing game about you.