

The Socratic Seminar Prep Sheet

Three things have to be true before the circle forms: a text worth arguing about, a question with no answer, and students who have actually read it. Built for grades 6–12.

Most first seminars do not fail in the circle. They fail in the prep, in predictable ways. Fill this out the day before, not the period before.

1. The text

Short beats long. One or two pages every student can hold and mark up beats a chapter half of them skimmed.

Check	What you are looking for	✓
Genuine ambiguity	A primary source with a point of view, a court opinion, a poem, a paragraph where the authors hedge. One obvious reading means nothing to discuss.	
Every student can read it	If it is hard, read it aloud or gloss the four words that will stop people. Reading level must not decide who participates.	
Checked against your building	A text likely to pull a student into a personal disclosure in front of twenty-eight peers is a conversation with an administrator first.	

Text, author and length

One or two pages. Write where students will get it.

2. The opening question

One test: could a well-prepared student answer this in one sentence and be finished? If yes, it is a comprehension check, not a seminar question.

Warm-up (not a seminar question)	Seminar question
What does the author claim?	Is the author being honest about what they do not know?

My opening question

Now answer it yourself in one sentence. If you can, write a different one.

3. The reading

This is what quietly kills most first attempts. The Paideia model puts close reading *before* any discussion and writing *after* it. That three-part shape is the format, not an optional extra. Read it in class — sending the text home the night before decides in advance that the students who read at home get to participate.

Running It, and the Four Ways It Dies

Six moves in order, six norms students can actually hold, and the autopsy for when a seminar dies — which is almost always a design problem, not a student problem.

The six moves, in order

#	Move	Note
1	Read the text together, in class	Ten minutes of everyone on the same page is what makes the next twenty possible.
2	Everyone writes one question	Collected at the door. A student who arrives without one writes it while the furniture moves.
3	Move the furniture into a circle	Build it into the clock. Four minutes of scraping chairs starts you four minutes late.
4	Restate two norms by name	Two, not all six. Name the ones this group needs today.
5	Ask the question once, then stop	The hard one. Rephrasing teaches the room that if they wait, you will do the work.
6	Write afterward	Name whose comment changed or sharpened your position.

Six norms worth posting

Keep the list short enough that students can hold it, and hand enforcement to them by the third seminar.

Cite the page.	Silence is allowed.
Disagree with the claim, not the person.	Ask rather than announce.
Invite before you add.	You may change your mind out loud.

Count your own turns

More than four in a thirty-minute seminar and you are running a recitation with the chairs moved.

My turns (tally)	Students who spoke	Students who did not	Longest silence I allowed

The autopsy — four ways it goes wrong

What happened	The fix
The question had an answer. They found it in six minutes and sat there.	Write the question the night before and try to answer it yourself in one sentence. If you can, it is not the question.
The teacher kept talking. Everything routed through you.	Count your own turns. Refuse to evaluate — “good point” tells the room the goal is producing points you approve of.
Three students ran it — because they were the only ones who prepared.	Require a written question from everyone, collected at the door. An expectation, not a bar.
It happened once, in October, and again in March.	Shorter and more often. Fifteen minutes on a half-page every other week beats two forty-minute showpieces.