

4.10: Socratic Seminar: Classic Style

Student Objective

Students will develop a deeper understanding of complex ideas through rigorous and thoughtful dialogue.

Overview

Socratic Seminar: Classic Style is a structured, collaborative dialogue, focusing on a common text or resource, which students have analyzed and toward which they have prepared questions to spur the discussion. This strategy provides a format for students to practice skills in critical thinking, reading, and inquiry, as they participate in the inquiry-based dialogue.

Materials/Set-Up

- Handouts:
 - 4.10a: Dialogue vs. Debate for Socratic Seminar
 - 4.10b: The Role and Responsibilities of the Socratic Seminar Participant
 - 4.10c: Rules of Engagement for Socratic Seminar
 - 4.10d: Academic Language Scripts for Socratic Seminar
- Teacher Resources:
 - 4.10e: The Elements of Socratic Seminar
 - 4.10f: Text Selection for Socratic Seminar
 - 4.10g: Sample Class Arrangements for Socratic Seminar
 - 4.10h: Tips for Socratic Seminars
- In advance of the activity, complete the following:
 - Provide students with a text to read and prepare for prior to the Socratic Seminar.
 - Refer to Text Selection for Socratic Seminar for a list of potential sources of seminar texts.

The critical reading process is to plan, build vocabulary, pre-read, interact with the text, and extend beyond the text. Strategies to support these steps include tracking vocabulary, numbering the paragraphs, marking the text, and writing in the margins.

Example: “Before we read this text, let’s number the paragraphs. Now, I’d like you to read only the title, first paragraph, and last paragraph, and then write a one-paragraph prediction about what this text covers.”

Instructional Steps

1. Discuss the purpose and format of the Socratic Seminar activity with students (see Teacher Resources noted in Materials/Set-Up, above).
2. Utilizing Sample Class Arrangements for Socratic Seminar, choose the class arrangement or seminar variation that you will use and review the arrangement with students.
3. Using Dialogue vs. Debate for Socratic Seminar, guide students to an understanding of the difference between these two discourse styles.
4. Review the “Before the Seminar” section of The Role and Responsibilities of the Socratic Seminar Participant.
5. Instruct students to read or study the subject or prompt, incorporating the appropriate **critical reading process strategies**, such as marking the text, pausing to connect ideas, writing in the margins, taking Cornell notes, or analyzing visuals.

6. Remind students to complete the following:
 - Understand the purpose for reading, following the reading prompt, if provided.
 - Preview the text or subject, thinking about any teacher- or student-provided background information, to determine the structure of the text and identify possible biases.
7. Have students generate at least two open-ended, higher level questions—[Costa’s Levels 2 or 3](#)—that will help them probe deeper into the meaning of the text and the author’s intention.
8. Remind students of the four essential elements of Socratic Seminar, which are described in [Elements of Socratic Seminar](#).
9. Review the “During the Seminar” section of [The Role and Responsibilities of the Socratic Seminar Participant](#) and the [Rules of Engagement for Socratic Seminar](#). Include your directions on what to do when the dialogue moves into debate.
10. Review the [Rubric for Socratic Seminar](#) (which follows in the [Socratic Seminar: Debriefing](#) activity) or another assessment tool of your choice, so students know how their participation will ultimately be assessed.
11. Instruct students to review the [Academic Language Scripts for Socratic Seminar](#) handout and have it available to use during the seminar.
12. Ask students to arrange their chairs into a circle. They should be able to see everyone without having to lean forward or backward. Students should also have all of their necessary materials for participating in the Seminar—marked text, questions, pen and paper for taking notes—with them.
13. Determine the opening question for the dialogue using one of the methods below:
 - The Seminar leader, who can also be seated in the circle, poses an opening question relating to the text in order to initiate the dialogue.
 - Each student in the circle reads one of his/her questions. After listening carefully, the Seminar leader or the students can select one as the starting question to open the conversation.
14. Begin the dialogue with participants responding to the opening question. The dialogue continues as group members ask clarifying questions or offer responses. Consistently require students to build upon the comments and analysis of others.
15. Continue the Socratic Seminar in this manner until all of the questions have been explored or time has drawn to a close.
16. Consider conducting a **Whip-Around** so that each student can provide a closing thought or rhetorical question that summarizes their thinking.
17. The final step of the Socratic Seminar is to debrief and reflect upon the process. Refer to [Socratic Seminar: Debriefing](#) for more information on this step.

Whip-Around is a strategy used to activate prior knowledge and quickly process information. With students in small groups of four or five, present a question or discussion prompt. Going around the group sequentially, each student then comments on the question or discussion prompt.

Example: “In your groups, do a Whip-Around about the importance of making positive introductions and first impressions. You will have three minutes, and each student needs to contribute at least one response.”

Extension

- To increase rigor:
 - Base the Seminar on a more complex text.
 - Use multiple text sources related to the content. Then, have students analyze how the authors shape their presentations of key information by emphasizing different evidence or advancing different interpretations of facts.
 - At natural breaks in the dialogue, direct students to connect the themes of the Socratic Seminar with deeper content ideas, cross-curricular areas, or personal experience.
 - Provide students with more autonomy for structuring and leading the Socratic Seminar.
 - Use student leaders to moderate smaller groups of Socratic Seminars, and then run several simultaneous Seminars, either on one text or on several differing texts, that have a common theme or subject.
- To increase scaffolding:
 - Read the text aloud together and lead the class through the marking the text or writing in the margins critical reading process strategies prior to the Seminar.
 - Reiterate, model, and encourage specific skills necessary for conducting effective dialogue.
 - Provide students with copies of Seminar handouts to read as homework assignments: Rules of Engagement for Socratic Seminar, The Role and Responsibilities of the Socratic Seminar Participant, and Academic Language Scripts for Socratic Seminar.
 - Select shorter texts or quotes in which students can closely observe key words or lines. Comparing and contrasting two shorter paragraphs works well.
 - Develop teacher questions to use as models, and then develop questions together as a class.
 - Conduct mini-Seminars, where small groups practice the skills for conducting effective dialogue. Consider having one student observe and take notes on each group's performance and help debrief when finished.
 - When time is limited for a Seminar, use the Whip-Around brainstorming strategy to allow all students to respond to a prompt.

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- To integrate technology:
 - When using a text that is topical, have students post facets of their Seminar discussion in the comments section of news websites using a teacher-created identity.
 - Create a “backchannel chat” for the outside circle, using Today’sMeet or a similar website. With the backchannel, outer-circle participants can comment upon the Seminar proceedings while one member of the inner circle monitors the chat and gives voice to their questions at appropriate times.
 - Using Skype or Google Hangouts, run a collaborative, multi-site Socratic Seminar with inter-city, state, or national “flight crews,” made up of pilots and co-pilots.
 - Capture the Seminar on video and post on a limited-access YouTube or Vimeo account to serve as a source of critical review for the class as a whole, absent students, or younger grades.
 - Have select students, acting as observers, use a class Twitter account to post tweets of the discussion. After the Seminar concludes, debrief how well the tweets capture the essence of the discussion.
 - Set up a videoconference Socratic Seminar with another class, from another school if possible.
 - Extend the discussion to a web-based medium, such as a blog or discussion forum, and continue the dialogue with deeper insights and links to a wider array of online sources.



Dialogue vs. Debate for Socratic Seminar

The best Socratic Seminars are those in which something new and unexpected is discovered. This happens when the Socratic Seminar is approached as a collective search for information or exploration of ideas through dialogue, rather than a defense of opinions through debate.

Dialogue	Debate
Dialogue is collaborative, with multiple sides working toward a shared understanding.	Debate is oppositional, with two opposing sides trying 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 broadens, and possibly changes, a participant's point of view.	Debate affirms a participant's point of view.
Dialogue thrives on an open-minded attitude and openness to being wrong and to changing.	Debate fosters a close-minded attitude and a determination to be right and defends assumptions as truth.
In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, expecting that other people's reflections will help improve it, rather than threaten it.	In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenges to show that it is right.
Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.	Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.
In dialogue, one searches for strengths in all positions.	In debate, one searches for weaknesses in opposing positions.
Dialogue respects all of the other participants and seeks not to alienate or offend.	Debate rebuts contrary positions and may belittle or deprecate other participants.
Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of answers and that cooperation can lead to workable solutions.	Debate assumes that someone already has a single right answer.
Dialogue remains open-ended.	Debate demands a conclusion and a winner.

The Role and Responsibilities of the Socratic Seminar Participant

Before the Seminar

- Read the text or consider the artifact/prompt carefully.
- Use highlighters to mark crucial portions of the text.
- Make notes in the margins.
- Look for places where the author is stating his or her views, arguing for them, or raising questions.
- Write Level 2 or 3 questions (Costa's Levels of Thinking).
- Make connections between parts of the text by using your margin notes.
- Think about what you have read and how you understand it.
- Make connections between the ideas in the text and what you know from your life experiences.

During the Seminar

- Be prepared to participate; the quality of the seminar is diminished when participants speak without preparation, or do not participate at all.
- When appropriate, refer to the text; a seminar is not a test of memory.
- Ask for clarification when you are confused.
- Take turns speaking instead of raising hands.
- Listen carefully and actively to other participants.
- Speak clearly so all can hear you.
- Address other participants, not the seminar leader.
- Discuss the ideas of the text, not each other's opinions.
- Show respect for differing ideas, thoughts, and values.
- Give evidence and examples to support your responses.
- Help fellow participants clarify questions and responses.
- Keep your mind open to new ideas and possibilities.

After the Seminar

- Reflect on your participation as an individual and the group as a whole.
- Discuss with your group parts of the seminar you think went well and which skills you and your fellow participants still need to improve.
- Use writing to think about both the process and the content of the seminar.
- Be prepared to help set goals for improvement in the next seminar.

Custer, H., Donohue, J., Hale, L., Hall, C., Hiatt, E., Kroesch, G., Krohn, B., Malik, S., Muhammad, F., Quijano, V., Shapiro, D., & Valdez, S. (2011). *AVID postsecondary strategies for success: A guide for faculty and student affairs professionals*. San Diego, CA: AVID Press.

Rules of Engagement for Socratic Seminar

- Be prepared to participate and ask good questions. The quality of the Socratic Seminar is diminished when participants speak without preparation.
- Show respect for differing ideas, thoughts, and values—no put-downs or sarcasm.
- Allow each speaker enough time to begin and finish his or her thoughts—don't interrupt.
- Involve others in the discussion, and ask them to elaborate on their responses.
- Build on what others say—ask questions to probe deeper, clarify, paraphrase, add to, and synthesize a variety of different views in your own summary.
- Use your best active listening skills—nod, make eye contact, lean forward, provide feedback, and listen carefully to others.
- Participate openly and keep your mind open to new ideas and possibilities.
- Refer to the text often, and give evidence and examples to support your response. Discuss the ideas of the text, not each other's opinions or personal experiences.
- Take notes about important points that you want to remember or new questions that you want to ask.

Boldway, S., Carter, M., Compton, R., Gutierrez, S., Mullen, M., & Valdez, S. (2012). *The write path English language arts: Exploring texts with strategic reading*. San Diego, CA: AVID Press.

Academic Language Scripts for Socratic Seminar

Clarifying

- Could you repeat that?
- Could you give us an example of that?
- I have a question about that: ...?
- Could you please explain what _____ means?
- Would you mind repeating that?
- I'm not sure I understood that. Could you please give us another example?
- Would you mind going over the instructions for us again?
- So, do you mean...?
- What did you mean when you said...?
- Are you sure that...?
- I think what _____ is trying to say is....
- Let me see if I understand you. Do you mean _____ or _____?
- Thank you for your comment. Can you cite for us where in the text you found your information?

Probing for Higher Level Thinking

- What examples do you have of...?
- Where in the text can we find...?
- I understand..., but I wonder about....
- How does this idea connect to...?
- If _____ is true, then...?
- What would happen if _____?
- Do you agree or disagree with his/her statement? Why?
- What is another way to look at it?
- How are ____ and ____ similar?
- Why is ____ important?

Building on What Others Say

- I agree with what _____ said because....
- You bring up an interesting point, and I also think....
- That's an interesting idea. I wonder...? I think... Do you think...?
- I thought about that also and I'm wondering why...?
- I hadn't thought of that before. You make me wonder if...? Do you think...?
- _____ said that... I agree and also think....
- Based on the ideas from _____, _____ and _____, it seems like we all think that....

Valdez, S., Carter, M., & Rodgers, J. (2013). *The write path English language arts: Informing ourselves and others through writing and speaking*. San Diego, CA: AVID Press.

Academic Language Scripts for Socratic Seminar

Expressing an Opinion

- I think/believe/predict/imagine that... What do you think?
- In my opinion....
- It seems to me that....
- Not everyone will agree with me, but....

Interrupting

- Excuse me, but... (I don't understand.)
- Sorry for interrupting, but... (I missed what you said.)
- May I interrupt for a moment?
- May I add something here?

Disagreeing

- I don't really agree with you because....
- I see it another way. I think....
- My idea is slightly different from yours. I believe that... I think that....
- I have a different interpretation than you....

Inviting Others into the Dialogue

- Does anyone agree/disagree?
- What gaps do you see in my reasoning?
- What different conclusions do you have?
- ____ (name), what do you think?
- I wonder what ____ thinks?
- Who has another idea/question/interpretation?
- ____ (name), what did you understand about what ____ said?
- We haven't heard from many people in the group. Could someone new offer an idea or question?

Offering a Suggestion/Redirecting the Seminar

- We can't seem to find the connection to the text. Could you point out what and where that connection is?
- We all want to remember that our goal is a flow of questions and comments and ideas to be shared, rather than a debate to be won. How could your comment be rephrased to reflect our goal?
- Maybe you/we could....
- Here's something we/you might try:
- What if we... ?
- We seem to be having a debate instead of a dialogue, can we....
- Who has another perspective to offer that will help us re-focus the conversation?
- Let's look at page ____ and see what we think about....

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The Elements of Socratic Seminar

A productive, engaging Socratic Seminar consists of four interdependent elements: (1) the text, (2) the questions raised, (3) the Socratic Seminar leader, and (4) the participants. A closer look at each of these elements will help explain the unique characteristics of a Socratic Seminar.

The Text

Socratic Seminar texts are chosen for their richness in ideas, issues, and values, in addition to their ability to stimulate extended, thoughtful dialogue. A Socratic Seminar text can be drawn from readings in literature, history, science, math, health, or philosophy; the “text” may also be drawn from music, works of art, photography, video, or other media. A good text raises important questions in the participants’ minds—questions to which there are no right or wrong answers. At the end of a successful Socratic Seminar, participants can often leave with more questions than they brought.

The Questions

A Socratic Seminar opens with a question either posed by the leader or solicited from participants as they acquire more Seminar experience. A strong opening question has no right answer; instead, it reflects a genuine curiosity on the part of the questioner. A good opening question leads participants back to the text as they speculate, evaluate, define, and clarify the issues involved. Responses to the opening question often generate new questions from the leader and participants, inevitably inspiring more responses. In this way, the line of inquiry during a Socratic Seminar evolves on the spot, rather than being pre-determined by the leader.

The Leader

In a Socratic Seminar, the leader can play a dual role as facilitator and participant. The Seminar leader consciously demonstrates a thoughtful exploration of the ideas in the text by keeping the discussion focused on the text, asking follow-up questions, helping participants clarify their positions when the discussion becomes confused, and involving reluctant participants while restraining their more vocal peers.

As a Seminar participant, the leader actively engages in the group’s exploration of the text. To do this effectively, the leader must know the text well enough to anticipate various interpretations and recognize important possibilities in each. The leader must also exercise patience in allowing participants’ understandings to evolve as the discussion develops. The leader must also be willing to help participants explore non-traditional insights and unexpected interpretations.

Determining the Seminar leader is a scaffolded process. When students are new to Socratic Seminar, the teacher serves as the leader, marshaling students through the dialogue process. Explicitly modeling the responsibilities of the leader, the teacher then moves toward selecting a student who has demonstrated a familiarity with and understanding of what it means to lead a Seminar, as well as having demonstrated the applicable skills necessary to manage his or her peers. When the majority of the class have been selected as leader at one time or another and have shown the capabilities of facilitating a productive Seminar, the position of leader is randomly chosen. This constitutes the pinnacle of Socratic Seminar leader selection.

The Participants

Socratic Seminar participants share the responsibility with the leader for the quality of the Seminar. Rewarding Seminars occur when participants process the text closely in advance, listen actively to the discussion, 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 or their peers' ideas. Participants acquire effective Seminar behaviors through participating in Seminars and reflecting on them afterward. After each Seminar, the lead and participants discuss the experience and identify ways of improving the Seminar process. Before each new Seminar, the leader also offers coaching and practice in specific habits of mind that improve reading, listening, thinking, and **discussing**. Eventually, when participants realize that the leader is not looking for the "right" answer, but is instead encouraging them to think out loud and to openly exchange ideas, they discover the excitement of exploring important issues through shared inquiry. This excitement creates willing participants eager to examine ideas in a rigorous, thoughtful manner.

ELL Integration: The leader should also encourage all students to use tools, such as academic language scripts, in order to help students frame how they will verbally share information.

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Text Selection for Socratic Seminar

Socratic Seminar focuses on deep discussion around a central text, so it is important that rich texts, complex enough to invite multiple interpretations and require negotiation to arrive at meaning, are chosen. Consider the following list of sources to help you think about your text selection:

All Content Areas – Print Texts

- Philosophical treatises
- Song lyrics
- Essays
- Articles (e.g., journals, magazines, current events, AVID Weekly, etc.)
- Editorials
- Political cartoons
- Policies (e.g., government, business, health, public)
- Workplace documents (e.g., contracts, instructions, manuals, etc.)
- Communication/public relations documents (e.g., flyers, posters, propaganda, etc.)

All Content Areas – Non-Print Texts

- Photographs
- Art pieces
- Video clips

Mathematics

- Mathematical proofs
- Mathematical word problems
- Logic “arguments”
- Critical thinking puzzles
- Graphical information and/or data

Science

- Experimental designs or protocols
- Court/legal cases
- Professional organization bulletins (e.g., FDA, CDC, WHO, etc.)
- Medical practice guidelines
- Codes of ethics
- Environmental issues (e.g., policies, current event articles, journal articles, etc.)
- Primary source documents (e.g., Newton’s laws, works of Galileo or Pythagoras, etc.)
- Articles from the web (e.g., sciencenews.org, nature.com, etc.)

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Text Selection for Socratic Seminar

Physical Education/Health

- Codes of ethics
- Professional organization bulletins (e.g., FDA, CDC, WHO, etc.)
- Medical practice guidelines
- Nutrition labels
- Fitness guidelines
- Dietary recommendations
- Weight-loss program descriptions
- “Playbook”—game strategies

Social Sciences

- Primary or secondary source documents
- Historical speeches (written or oral)
- Laws
- Edicts
- Treaties
- Historical Literature
- Legislative bills
- Court/legal cases

Language Arts

- Primary or secondary source documents
- Historical speeches (written or oral)
- Poems
- Short stories
- Excerpts from novels
- Plays
- Biographies/autobiographies

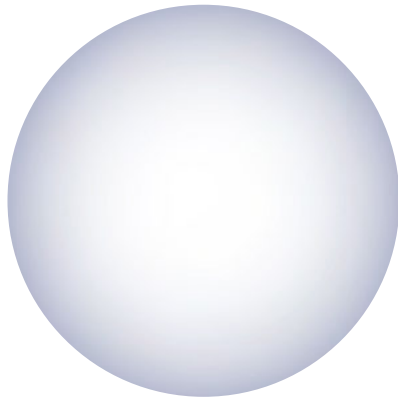
Visual and Performing Arts

- Performance (e.g., dance, play, monologue, musical, etc.)
- Art pieces
- Scripts
- Scores
- Art history texts
- Artist biographies/autobiographies
- Photographs
- Director, choreographer, conductor, animator notes (background information about the creative process)

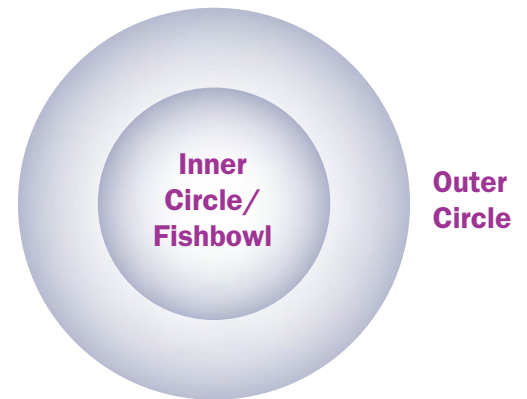
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Sample Class Arrangements for Socratic Seminar

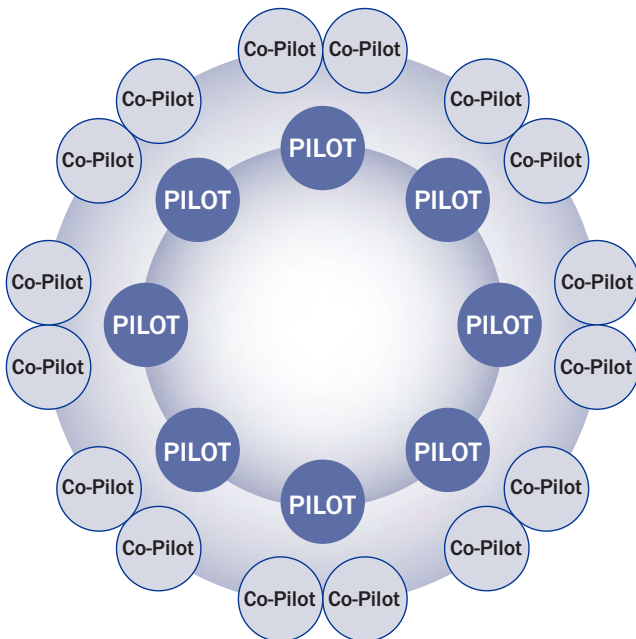
One Large Seminar



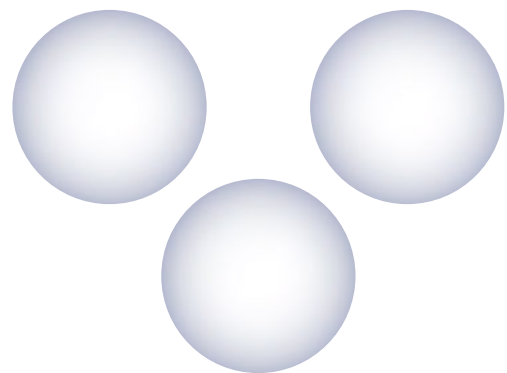
Inner/Outer Circle or Fishbowl



Triad Seminars



Simultaneous



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Tips for Socratic Seminar

The points listed below are suggestions to enhance the Socratic Seminar process for both teachers and students, and to provide additional ideas to consider before, during, and after the discussion.

Teachers

- Be prepared with a higher level starter question in case the group questions do not meet the overall goal for the discussion.
- Don't try long texts or long Seminars at first; build gradually.
- Take notes during the Seminar (e.g., evaluate students, chronicle main ideas discussed) and use the notes during the debrief to help coach individual students and to help students set goals for the next Seminar.
- Note when one conversation thread has runs its course and introduce a new line of inquiry.
- Never neglect the debrief. Feedback is vital if the group is going to grow with each Seminar. Request specific, non-judgmental comments to help improve future Seminars.
- Over time, use a variety of print and non-print texts: arguments, proofs, fiction, essays, poetry, quotations, artwork, editorial cartoons, multimedia, etc.

Leaders (Student or Teacher Seminar Leaders)

- Your task is not to make participants “cover” the topic, but to help them use their minds well.
- Read the text in advance and take ample notes to have a deep understanding.
- Focus the group on the opening question as quickly as possible.
- Allow for “think time.” Participants need time to think and process information and ideas.
- Model thoughtful behavior. Ask clarifying and probing questions if others seem stuck or are not asking for evidence, reasoning, or connections back to the text.
- Rephrase a question if participants seem confused by it—or ask another participant to rephrase it.
- Don't let sloppy thinking or gross misinterpretations go unexamined. Ask participants to offer textual support for their thinking, or to consider what _____ would say about their interpretation.
- Pay attention to what is *not* being discussed. If there is a perspective that is not being represented, introduce it.
- Guide participants to discuss their differences and work through conflicts respectfully.
- Involve reluctant participants while restraining more vocal members.
- Avoid making eye contact with participants if they continually talk to you rather than the group.
- Do not dominate the discussion or withdraw entirely; you are a participant, too.

Adapted from Boldway, S., Carter, M., Compton, R., Gutierrez, S., Mullen, M., & Valdez, S. (2012). *The write path English language arts: Exploring texts with strategic reading*. San Diego, CA: AVID Press.