

Opening Questions

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A good opening question in a Socratic seminar, according to Dennis Gray:

- ...arises from genuine curiosity on the part of the leader;
- ...has no single or “right” answer;
- ...is framed to generate discussion leading to greater understanding of the text;
- ...can best be answered by reference to the text.

Additional things to think about:

1. Opening questions are not intended to be analytical, per se. Rather, they are intended to help participants BEGIN a conversation about the text. They should invite thinking, but don't have to be terribly thoughtful.
2. Simplicity is often a great attribute of an opening question. For example, if the author is making some sort of argument or case for something, an opening question might be as simple as “Does the author make a compelling case?” Another example would be if there is a list of items like school/classroom rules or instructional values. An opening question could be “Which of these is most important?” or “Which of these is the hardest to implement?”
3. Avoid opening questions that ask about feelings such as “How does this piece make you feel?” While there are places where it makes sense to explore feelings during a seminar, opening with a “feelings” question takes people away from the text and into their own experiences.
4. Students can be asked to each write an opening question they would like to discuss. Collect these, read all of them aloud, and then decide as a group where to begin.
5. Sometimes, it works to ask students, at the very beginning of the seminar, to think about and write down a title (or new title) for the text. Allow several minutes for all to complete this task and then go around the circle hearing each suggestion. Write them on the board as they present them. The seminar can begin with the most interesting or novel one...with the one (or ones) that elicit the most reaction.
6. If using a poem, it is common to begin by having a participant, *not the leader*, read the poem aloud. Long poems can be broken into stanzas for several students to read. Sometimes, a seminar begins with reactions to the reading of the poem.
7. A seminar on a piece of art can begin by having participants go around the circle identifying specific things they see. Two or three go arounds can be sufficient and, like with poetry, a seminar often begins with reactions to what is “seen” in the piece.