

“Tickets” For Socratic Seminars

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Students can only participate in Socratic seminars if they have read the text. How can a teacher know this and do so in an easy way? The solution has come to be known as the “ticket” assignment. The ticket assignment came about, primarily, as a quick and easy way for a classroom teacher to determine who was in or out of the seminar circle. It was also a way to create a useful assignment for seminar text preparation. As any teacher can confirm, asking a student if she did the reading doesn’t necessarily result in either an honest or accurate reply. The ticket assignment eliminates those discussions. Here is how it works.

When students enter the classroom on a seminar day, the desks should already be arranged in a circle. As students take their seats, they are instructed to take out their text and their ticket. When the bell rings, the teacher quickly goes around to each desk to determine if the ticket exists. If there is no ticket, the student is asked to assume an observer role. There is no need for argument or debate about “I did the reading, I just forgot the ticket.” Either the ticket exists or not...period. This bright line helps a teacher get to the start of the seminar and reinforces one of the principle philosophical foundations of seminars—that it is a rigorous conversation about a text that all in the seminar share in common.

A teacher can choose whether or not to collect the ticket assignment at the conclusion of the seminar, but there is certainly no overriding reason to do so. The core utility of the ticket is accomplished at the start of the seminar. Frequently, seminars don’t even refer either directly or indirectly to the ticket. The ticket serves as a way of supporting student preparation in advance of the seminar and as a means of accountability for the teacher. It is the rare teacher who needs an additional set of papers to correct. Instead, a note can be made in the grade book of which students were and were not prepared for the seminar. Patterns of preparation can be a useful place for assessment conversations with students.

As an assignment, the ticket cannot be completed without reading the text, and by completing the ticket a student should have to develop initial understandings of the text. It is never a series of basic recall questions like those found at the end of a section of a textbook. The task defined by the ticket should help students be better prepared for the seminar, but not be so daunting that it prevents participation in the seminar. Finally, the ticket assignment should never “telegraph” a sense of implied right or wrong interpretation of the text. That is the work of the seminar, itself.

Creating ticket assignments takes a certain willingness to step outside the box of more traditional homework assignments. A ticket might be a drawing instead of answers to a series of questions. It might be a retrieval chart or self-selected vocabulary words. Whatever the task, it should require students to delve more deeply into the text as they begin the process of making tentative interpretations of what is going on in the text. Specific examples of tickets include:

-drawing and labeling a map or picture of the events in the text. For example, in George Orwell’s essay, *Shooting An Elephant*, a series of events unfold as Orwell recalls this incident. The ticket assignment is to draw a map that shows the sequence of those events. In this case, the map begins with Orwell receiving a phone call, then leaving his office, coming upon villagers here and later there, etc. This cannot be accomplished without a careful reading of the text and by completing this task, the student should have a much clearer literal sense of what is going on in the text. Drawing a picture might be used when reading the excerpt from Darwin’s *Origin of Species* that talks about the metaphor of the tree. What does this tree look like given the explanations that Darwin provides?

-similar to the above, students can be asked to create a timeline of events in the text and then to rank order the 3-5 most important events in that timeline. This is an example of a ticket that might lead right into an opening question such as “What was the turning point in this text?” Students would be able to refer to their tickets as they began the seminar discussion.

-identifying 7-12 vocabulary terms in the text that are new or unclear, circling them, finding the most appropriate definition, and writing that definition in the margin of the text. Vocabulary-based tickets are helpful when the text is terminology laden or when the class has a history of struggling with the meaning of terms. Because each student decides what terms to look up, there is generally a wide coverage of vocabulary and many students can contribute to the work of the seminar. A variation on this ticket is for students to identify and define specific terms that are important to understanding the author’s thinking. This was a ticket for a seminar on Aristotle’s *On Happiness*.

-Summarizing the moral or theme of the text in one, clear paragraph. This ticket supports the skill of summarization and boiling a text down to its essence. Again, the task supports an opening question such as “what is the moral of this text?”

-making and completing a retrieval chart of the main ideas in the text. This is a common ticket when working with Supreme Court decisions. Because Supreme Court decisions often have a number of opinions, a retrieval chart helps students keep the ideas of each Justice separate and distinct. The chart might have columns labeled “Justice,” “Type of Decision,” and “Principle Lines of Reasoning/Major Ideas.” It is common to see students referring back to the chart during the seminar as a way of recalling ideas from a large text.

-listing characteristics or values that are discussed or explicated in the text. For example, chapter ten in *Johnny Got His Gun* is an excellent seminar text. In this chapter, the main character ruminates on the various causes for which young men go off to war. The ticket assignment is to list all of the reasons from the chapter (freedom, womanhood, etc.) and then place them in rank order for the reader.

-when the text is a piece of artwork, asking students to write down 25 things they see in the artwork and, again, identifying the most important 3-5 visual elements. Students might also be asked to identify a certain number of visual elements and to theorize on the symbolic nature of each of those elements.

-while it is not in the spirit of his poetry, a ticket for an e.e. cummings poem might be to punctuate the poem so that it reads in a way that makes the most sense to the student. This ticket requires that students develop an initial sense of the poem in order to complete the ticket and the completion of the ticket implies a certain tentative interpretation. Other poems can be addressed in a similar manner.

-if the text is a video that is being watched outside of class, a ticket might be to list the character and then to develop a storyboard showing the significant scenes or turning points in the film.