

SOCRATIC SEMINAR: FORMULATING SPARKING QUESTIONS

Overview

Some of the best discussions that people engage in are the types of discussions that ask more probing and thought provoking questions than there are answers. When people ask beyond the basic *who, what, where, when, and how* and get to the *why*, they begin to push the boundaries of the discussion beyond just the current topic and/or text. These questions “spark” further discussion, curiosity, and begin to make connections to larger implications and ideas outside of the current topic/text.

Sparking Questions are questions that “spark” further conversation and are the fuel of Socratic Seminars. Sparking Questions do not simply ask *who, what, where, when, and how*, but they instead ask *why*. Sparking Questions use supporting details in the text to ask questions that either:

- Lead to more questions
- Lead to analysis and inferences
- Lead to connections to other topics/texts/ideas

In short, Sparking Questions are critical thinking questions that push discussions forward, sparking debate and curiosity, and require a deeper engagement and thinking with a topic/text.

What do Sparking Questions look like?

Generally speaking, Sparking Questions are derived from the text itself. Any deeper, critical thinking question should always been drawn from a specific passage. It is not enough to simply ask *who, what, where, when, and how*—thinkers have to know the answers to those questions already. What we’re looking for are “Sparking Questions” that spark brilliant debates, inferences, and inquiries during Socratic Seminars.

Use the following template to form your own Sparking Questions:

In (author’s name) ’s (name of the text), (name of the author, narrator, or character) states that, “ (insert quote) ” (citation). (Insert Sparking Question here)?

In _____ ’s _____, _____ states that, “ _____ ” (citation). _____ ?

Example of the Sparking Question Template in use:

In Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, John Proctor is accused by Mary Warren of being the “devil’s man” who put her up to the mischief she has caused with the court. When John Proctor is accused by Danforth as being possessed by Anti-Christ and is asked to speak to that accusation, Proctor proclaims that the town has “pulled down heaven and raised up a whore” and that “God is dead” (Miller 110). **Why does Proctor denounce God in front of the court knowing fully well that it will not help his cause? In connecting this scene to the larger allegory, what larger statement might Miller be making about his circumstances through Proctor’s character?**

How do I know when I have a good Sparking Question?

Use the rubric (see back of page) to help you ascertain your Sparking Question’s rigor. Another way to check your Sparking Question would be to ask yourself the following question: “If a teacher were to ask this question on an essay assignment, could I develop an arguable thesis and essay on this question?” If the answer is yes, then you most likely have a great question!