

Seminar Structure

The Seminar can be divided into three time periods:

Before the Seminar

- Introduce the seminar and its purpose (to facilitate a deeper understanding of the ideas and values in the text through shared discussion).
- Have students read the text. They may use one of several formats to process the information. The Open-Ended Questions and/or the Critical Reasoning Analysis Sheet can be used to help students understand the content. These can be used as the 'ticket' to participate in the seminar. Share any expectations related to assessment.
- Review the Discussion Norms
- In addition to the classroom discussion norms you may have already set, it is important to include the following norms, or ones that are similar:
 - Don't raise hands
 - Listen carefully
 - Address one another respectfully
 - Base any opinions on the text

Additional norms might include

- Address comments to the group (no side conversations)
- Use sensitivity to take turns and not interrupt others
- Monitor 'air time'
- Be courageous in presenting your own thoughts and reasoning, but be flexible and willing to change your mind in the face of new and compelling evidence

During the Seminar

- Be seated at the level of the students and remind them to address each other and not you!
- Pose the key question.
- Ask participants to relate their statements to particular passages, to clarify, and to elaborate.
- If the conversation gets off track, refocus students on the opening question by restating it.
- Use additional questions to move the discussion along.
- Invite those who have not spoken into the conversation. Some teachers use talking chips (each student is allotted a number of chips that they use when they make a contribution) or a talking chain (asking each person to comment or pass in a circle). The chips may be especially useful when working with very young children but should be used only until students 'get the idea'.
- You may wish to record for your own purposes the main ideas discussed and the contributions people make (using a shorthand or diagram) to refer to as you facilitate.
- It can be helpful to summarize the main points made in the discussion, either at a quiet point or towards the end of the discussion.

After the Seminar

- Ask debriefing questions of the students.
- Share your own experience with the seminar as a facilitator.

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STAGE 1: PARTICIPATION

Goal: Students begin to speak to one another and not only to or through the teacher.

In this stage, the discussion leader focuses effort to establish an environment in which each participant feels he or she can speak to and learn from peers. This is the beginning of authentic group formation.

STAGE 2: COOPERATION

Goal: Each student has a voice and opinions that should play a role in the discussion.

In stage two, each participant must feel comfortable being a speaker whose perspective is valued by the group. Participants in the first two stages need to put as much effort into understanding the process of discussion as they put into understanding the text.

STAGE 3: ACTIVE LISTENING

Goal: Students accurately understand the points of view of other speakers and the text.

Listening is a complex activity that requires much more than our sense of hearing. Active listening occurs when a person actively tries to hear and understand what a speaker or author is trying to convey.

STAGE 4: COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

Goal: Students are both participants and leaders.

Shared leadership is achieved when each member of the group is equally responsible for the success of the discussion. When a group achieves shared leadership, it is often difficult to distinguish the leader from the participants.