

World War II Socratic Seminar

Which was more important for achieving victory in the Second World War: strategy, technological superiority, human resources, industrial capacity or ideology?

What is a Socratic Seminar?

In a Socratic Seminar, students carry the burden of responsibility for the quality of the discussion. Good discussions occur when participants study the material closely in advance, listen actively, share their ideas and questions in response to the ideas and questions of others, and search for evidence to support their ideas. The discussion is not about right answers; it is not a debate. Students are encouraged to think out loud and to exchange ideas openly while examining ideas in a rigorous, thoughtful, manner; however, playing the “devil’s advocate” is very useful in a Socratic seminar as it helps uncover alternate perspectives.

It is shared inquiry, not debate; there is no opponent save the perplexity all persons face when they try to understand something that is both difficult and important.

— Walter Parker, PhD, University of Washington

What you need to do

- Discuss the relevance of each of the above factors to specific battles / campaigns / theatres of war, specific countries, and the war in general. Specific details will carry the day – a Socratic seminar is designed for exploring a depth of knowledge, so make sure not to skip over a topic just because it has been mentioned.
- Prepare several questions in advance. Questions must be open-ended, reflect a variety of perspectives, and have no ‘one right answer’! During the seminar, use particular questions to move the discussion along.

Sample questions to keep the discussion going:

- What battles might relate to this topic?
- Who has a different perspective?
- Where do you find evidence for that?
- Can you clarify what you mean by that?
- How does that relate to what (someone else) said?
- Has anyone changed their mind?

Tips:

- Come prepared. Bring notes and info that is relevant to the discussion.
- Participate, participate, participate!
- Back up your comments with evidence/ facts.
- Try to comment on someone else's previous statement before you give yours.
- Keep discussion alive by asking open-ended, thought-provoking questions.
- Disagree with comments, not individuals. Pose questions that might lead to other perspectives.
- Use your speaking time fairly (contribute but do not control).