

The Thinker's Guide
to

The Art of
**Socratic
Questioning**

Based on Critical Thinking Concepts & Tools

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*A Companion to:
The Thinkers Guide to Analytic Thinking
The Art of Asking Essential Questions*

The Foundation for Critical Thinking

Dear Reader,

It is hard to imagine someone being a good critical thinker while lacking the disposition to question in a deep way. It is also hard to imagine someone acquiring the disposition to question in a fuller way than Socrates. It follows that those truly interested in critical thinking will also be interested in the art of deep questioning. And learning the Socratic art is a natural place to start.

Of course, to learn from Socrates we must identify and practice applying the components of his art. Without a sense of these components, it is hard to grasp the nature of the questioning strategies that underlie the art of Socratic questioning. The art requires contextualization. And in that contextualization, the spirit of Socratic questioning is more important than the letter of it.

In this guide, we provide analyses of the components of Socratic questioning, along with some contemporary examples of the method applied in elementary through high school classes.

To get you started in practicing Socratic questioning, we begin with the nuts and bolts of critical thinking (Part One), followed by some examples of Socratic dialogue (Part Two), and then the mechanics of Socratic dialog (Part Three). The fourth and fifth sections focus on the importance of questioning in teaching, the contribution of Socrates, and the link between Socratic questioning and critical thinking.

As you begin to ask questions in the spirit of Socrates—to dig deeply into what people believe and why they believe it—you will begin to experience greater command of your own thinking as well as the thinking of others. Be patient with yourself and with your students. Proficiency in Socratic questioning takes time, but time well worth spending.

We hope this guide is of use to you and your students in achieving greater command of the art of deep questioning.



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The Art of Socratic Questioning Checklist

The following list can be used to foster disciplined questioning on the part of students. Students might take turns leading Socratic discussions in groups. During the process, some students might be asked to observe the students leading the discussion, and then afterwards provide feedback using the following guidelines (which all students should have a copy of during the discussion).

1. Did the questioner respond to all answers with a further question? _____

Keeping Participants Focused on The Elements of Thought

1. Did the questioner make the *goal of the discussion* clear? _____

(What is the goal of this discussion? What are we trying to accomplish?)

2. Did the questioner pursue relevant *information*? _____

(What information are you basing that comment on? What experience convinced you of this?)

3. Did the questioner question *inferences, interpretations, and conclusions* where appropriate or significant? _____

(How did you reach that conclusion? Could you explain your reasoning? Is there another possible interpretation?)

4. Did the questioner focus on key ideas or *concepts*? _____

(What is the main idea you are putting forth? Could you explain that idea?)

5. Did the questioner note questionable *assumptions*? _____

(What exactly are you taking for granted here? Why are you assuming that?)

6. Did the questioner question *implications and consequences*? _____

(What are you implying when you say...? Are you implying that...? If people accepted your conclusion, and then acted upon it, what implications might follow?)

7. Did the questioner call attention to the *point of view* inherent in various answers? _____

(From what point of view are you looking at this? Is there another point of view we should consider?)

8. Did the questioner keep the *central question* in focus? _____

(I am not sure exactly what question you are raising. Could you explain it? Remember that the question we are dealing with is...)

9. Did the questioner call for a clarification of *context*, when necessary? _____

(Tell us more about the situation that has given rise to this problem. What was going on in this situation?)

Keeping Participants Focused on Systems For Thought

1. Did the questioner distinguish *subjective* questions from *factual* questions, from those requiring reasoned judgment within conflicting viewpoints? _____

(Is the question calling for a subjective or personal choice? If so, let's make that choice in terms of our personal preferences. Or, is there a way to come up with a single correct answer to this question? Or, are we dealing with a question that would be answered differently within different points of view? If the latter, what is the best answer to the question, all things considered?)

2. Did the questioner keep the participants aware of alternative ways to think about the problem? _____

(Can you give me another way to think about this problem?)

Keeping Participants Focused on Standards For Thought

1. Did the questioner call for *clarification*, when necessary? _____

(Could you elaborate further on what you are saying? Could you give me an example or illustration of your point? Let me tell you what I understand you to be saying. Is my Interpretation correct?)

2. Did the questioner call for more details or greater *precision*, when necessary? _____

(Could you give us more details about that? Could you specify your allegations more fully?)

3. Did the questioner keep participants sensitive to the need to check facts and verify the *accuracy* of information? _____

(How could we check that to see if it is true? How could we verify these alleged facts?)

4. Did the questioner keep participants aware of the need to stick to the question on the floor; to make sure their "answers" were *relevant* to the question being addressed at any given point? _____

(I don't see how what you said bears on the question. Could you explain what you think the connection is?)

5. Did the questioner keep participants aware of the complexities in the question on the floor. Did the questioner ask participants to think deeply about *deep* issues? _____

(What makes this a complex question? How does your answer take into account the complexities in the question?)



This diagram, and the classifications implicit in it, helps accentuate the following important facts about thinking.

- All thinking has a history in the lives of particular persons.
- All thinking depends upon a substructure of reasons, evidence, and assumptions.
- All thinking leads us in some direction or other (has implications and consequences).
- All thinking stands in relation to other possible ways to think (there is never just one way to think about something).

This classificatory scheme highlights four ways we can help students come to terms with their thought:

- We can help students reflect on how they have come to think the way they do on a given subject. (In doing this, we are helping them examine the *history* of their thinking on that subject, helping them find the source or origin of their thinking.)
- We can help students reflect on how they support or might support their thinking. (In doing this, we are helping them express the reasons, evidence, and assumptions that underlie what they think.)

Part Two

Socratic Questioning Transcripts

In this section, we provide four sample transcripts of Socratic dialogues. Each discussion focuses on helping students think critically about a concept or issue.

As you read through these transcripts, keep in mind the critical thinking concepts and tools we introduced in the previous section. Note the “intellectual moves” being made at each point in these dialogues—many of which we point out in parentheses.

Once you read through each of the transcripts—and we recommend that you read them aloud and dramatize them by your mode of reading—hopefully, you will then be motivated to read something of the history and theory of Socratic questioning in the next three sections. However, remember, the theory behind Socratic questioning is important only if it inspires you to learn how to question more systematically and deeply.

In short, Socratic questioning is a discussion:

1. led by a person who does nothing but ask questions,
2. that is systematic and disciplined (it is not a free-for-all),
3. wherein the leader directs the discussion by the questions he/she asks,
4. wherein everyone participating is helped to go beneath the surface of what is being discussed, to probe into the complexities of one or more fundamental ideas or questions.

As soon as you can, we suggest that you get some experience in leading a Socratic discussion. Follow these initial rules:

1. Pass out a transcript of one of the Socratic discussions in this section to your students. Dramatize the transcript by reading it aloud with your students. To do this, assign students to read the “student” parts of the transcript. You read the part of the teacher/questioner.
2. Make a list of questions that focus on a central idea you would like students to master (See pages 51–54 for sample lists).
3. Tell your students you want to try out what is called Socratic questioning and that you are just beginning, so you want them to help you in the process.
4. When leading a Socratic dialogue, tell your students that by the rules of Socratic questioning you are allowed only to ask questions. You are not allowed to answer any questions, except by asking another question.
5. Tell students that their job is to attempt to answer the questions you ask.
6. Think aloud as you lead the discussion. Don't rush. Base each of your questions on the answer given by the last student.
7. Take seriously every answer that is given. Make sure it is clarified so that everyone in class understands it.

Transcript Four

Helping Students Think Seriously about Complex Social Issues (High School)

In the following discussion, Rodger Halstad, Homestead High School Social Studies teacher, Socratically questions students about their views on the Middle East. He links up the issue with the holocaust during WWII and, ultimately, with the problem of how to correct one injustice without committing another.

T: *I thought what we'd do now is to talk a little about the Middle East.*

Remember we saw a film, "Let My People Go," which depicted some of the things that happened in the death-camps of Nazi Germany during World War II. Remember that? It's pretty hard to forget. Who do you hold responsible for what happened to the Jewish people during the holocaust, the Nazi holocaust of the 1940s and the late 1930s? Who do you hold responsible for that? (Seeking Logical Conclusions)

S: Everyone. Um...

T: *What do you mean, "everyone?" (Questioning for Clarification)*

S: It started in Germany. My first thought goes to Hitler; then it goes to the German people that allowed him to take control without seeing what he was doing before it was too late.

T: *Would you punish all Germans? No? OK, then who would you punish?*

S: Hitler.

T: *OK. I think probably we'd all agree to that. Anyone else?*

S: Probably his five top men. I...I'm not sure...there are a lot of Nazis out there.

T: *Well, are you sure everyone was a member of the Nazi party? (Questioning Assumptions)*

S: Well, not all Germans were...um...

T: *Do you want to think about it?*

S: Yeah.

T: *How about somebody else? First of all, we all agree that somebody should have been punished, right? All right, these are not acts that should have gone unpunished. (Questioning for Clarification)*

S: Well, it'd be kind of hard, but, like, I think that every soldier or whatever, whoever took a life, theirs should be taken.

T: Every Nazi soldier who was in the camps? (Questioning for Clarification)

S: Everyone who had something to do with what happened.

T: Everyone who had something to do with the killing of the people in the camps. The Jews, the gypsies, the opponents of Hitler, all those people. All the millions killed. Anybody that played a direct role. You would punish them. What if we had a corporal here, and the corporal said, "I only did this because I was ordered to do it. And if I didn't do it, my family was going to be injured, or something bad was going to happen to my family." Are you going to punish that corporal? (Exploring Ethical Implications)

S: Well, I guess...well, I mean they still took a life, you know, but they were just following the rules. But I mean, you know, if you take a life...

T: What if they didn't take a life? What if they just tortured somebody?

S: Then they, they should be tortured in the same way.

T: So you say anybody who was directly responsible for any injury, torture, murder, whatever in the camps; they themselves should get a similar kind of punishment. What about the people who were in the bureaucracy of the German government who set up the trains and the time schedule of the trains? What about the engineer on the train?

S: Well, yeah, I guess...

T: All those people?

S: Yeah, because if you think about it, if they hadn't of done that, they couldn't have gotten the people there.

T: OK, and what about the people standing on the streets while the Jews got in the trucks?

S: No, I think that's going a little too far.

T: OK, so anybody who participates in any way in the arrest, the carrying out of all these activities, including even people who, ah...what about people who typed up the memos?

S: Yeah, I guess

T: No, says Manual. Why no?

S: Like, for example, if they're put under a lot of pressure. Like, ah, we're going to kill your family, we're going to hurt your family, put them in a concentration camp too.

T: Yes. Yes?

S: It, it's just total...you just can't hold them responsible because their family... it's just like, ah...the next, the closest thing to them, and you can't just say you have to punish them because I don't think they did it on purpose. They

didn't do it because they wanted to see them suffer. They did it because they didn't want to see their family suffer.

T: *So you're saying that anyone who enjoyed what they were doing needs to be punished, right? What if I do it, but I don't enjoy it? (Questioning for Clarification)*

S: I don't think they should be punished.

T: *OK, suppose we brought all those people in here and asked them if they did it because they wanted to and they all said no. They all did it because they were ordered to. What then? How do we know if they enjoyed it or not?*

S: That's a good question.

S: Yeah.

S: Well, ah...that's why I think that it should maybe just be the leadership because they're the ones who made up the concentration camps, and they're the ones who tell the people to do it. And some people will want to do these things, and some people won't, and you can't determine who wants to do it and who doesn't.

T: *OK, suppose I'm Hitler and you are one of my top men and I order you to kill someone or you will be killed and you do it even if you didn't want to. Should you be punished? (Questioning for Clarification and Exploring Ethical Responsibility)*

S: Yeah, because you shouldn't be a Nazi in the first place.

T: *So anybody who is in the camp who does these deeds—even though they did not want to—they should also be held responsible and punished? (Questioning for Clarification)*

S: You can't. There are too many of them. It's stooping to the Nazi's level by killing, by punishing all these people.

T: *So will you let some of them go free because you can't punish all of them? (Probing Implications)*

S: Right, you can't, you can't punish a whole entire group of people, that's like millions of people.

T: *Why can't you do that? (Probing Reasons and Implications)*

S: Because it's doing what they were doing to the Jewish people.

T: *Will we get some disagreement here, Jeannette?*

S: If you can't call a person responsible for making a decision, where does that leave society?

T: *What kind of decision? (Question for Clarification)*

S: They made a decision to follow the order.