

The Socratic Method & Socratic Questioning

Definition¹

The **Socratic method** (or **Method of Elenchus** or **Socratic Debate**), named after the Classical Greek philosopher Socrates, is a form of inquiry and debate between individuals with opposing viewpoints based on asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking and to illuminate ideas. It is a dialectical method, often involving an oppositional discussion in which the defense of one point of view is pitted against the defense of another; one participant may lead another to contradict him in some way, strengthening the inquirer's own point.

The Socratic method is a *negative* method of hypothesis elimination, in that better hypotheses are found by steadily identifying and eliminating those that lead to contradictions. The Socratic method searches for general, commonly held truths that shape opinion, and scrutinizes them to determine their consistency with other beliefs. The basic form is a series of questions formulated as tests of logic and fact intended to help a person or group discover their beliefs about some topic.

The term **Socratic Questioning** is used to describe a kind of questioning in which an original question is responded to as though it were an answer. This in turn forces the first questioner to reformulate a new question in light of the progress of the discourse.

How do you do it?²

Although "Socratic questioning" appears simple, it is in fact intensely rigorous. As described in the writings of Plato, a student of Socrates, the teacher feigns ignorance about a given subject in order to acquire another person's fullest possible knowledge of the topic. Individuals have the capacity to recognize contradictions, so Socrates assumed that incomplete or inaccurate ideas would be corrected during the process of disciplined questioning, and hence would lead to progressively greater truth and accuracy. Also known as the dialectical approach, this type of questioning can correct misconceptions and lead to reliable knowledge construction.

The **overall purpose** is to challenge accuracy and completeness of thinking in a way that acts to move people towards their ultimate goal.³ Socratic questioning helps people think critically by focusing explicitly on the **process** of thinking.²

6 Types of Socratic Questions⁴

1. Questions for clarification.

- Why do you say that?
- How does this relate to our discussion?
- "Are you going to include the _____ needs in your potential solicitation?"

2. Questions that probe assumptions.

- What could we assume instead?
- How can you verify or disapprove that assumption?
- "Why are the _____ needs not part of the solicitation?"

3. Questions that probe reasons and evidence.

- What would be an example?
- What is _____ analogous to?
- What do you think causes _____ to happen?
- Why?

4. Questions about Viewpoints and Perspectives.

- What would be an alternative?
- What is another way to look at it?
- Would you explain why it is necessary or beneficial, and who benefits?
- Why is _____ the best?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of _____?
- How are _____ and _____ similar?
- What is a counter-argument for _____?

5. Questions that probe implications and consequences.

- What generalizations can you make?
- What are the consequences of that assumption?
- What are you implying?
- How does _____ affect _____?
- How does _____ tie in with what we learned before?

6. Questions about the question.

- What was the point of this question?
- Why do you think I asked this question?
- What does _____ mean?
- How does _____ apply to our situation?

3 Ways to Use Socratic Questioning²

To explore a problem.

"Describe different types of tectonic movement along plate boundaries."

To encourage creativity and brainstorming.

"Think of as many causes as possible for the origin of a large boulder found perched upon a nearly flat plain that is underlain by a rock type different from that of the boulder."

To focus attention on specifics.

"Compare the evidence used by scientists to support the idea of biological evolution (or modern global warming) with that used by others who reject the possibility of evolution (or global warming)."

In summary, Socratic questions are used to sharpen focus, and clarify a situation through dialogue.

¹ Wikipedia contributors. "Socratic method." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 24 Apr. 2010. Web. 25 Apr. 2010.

² Merritts, Dorothy and Robert Walter. "Using Socratic Questioning." *Starting Point*. 21 December 2006. Science Education Resource Center of Carleton College. 25 April 2010.
<<http://serc.carleton.edu/introgeo/socratic/index.html>>

³ Straker, David. "Socratic Questions." *ChangingMinds.org*. 18 April 2010. Syque. 25 April 2010.
<http://changingminds.org/techniques/questioning/socratic_questions.htm>

⁴ Folger, H. Scott and M. Nihat GOrmen. "The six types of Socratic questions." Thoughts on problem solving. College of Engineering, University of Michigan. 30 September 2004.
<<http://www.engin.umich.edu/~CRE/probsolv/strategy/cthinking.htm>>