

SOCRATIC SMACKDOWN

[Download Lesson Plan PDF](#)

Historians base their arguments on careful research of both primary and secondary sources and then share their thoughts in persuasive ways—through books, articles, presentations, website, exhibitions, films or even live interpretation. This lesson asks students to engage in a debate where they discuss a central question and make a point using data and supported by evidence. This lesson may take two to three class sessions, or more, because it involves research and preparation.

STANDARDS

- United States History National Standards: Era 5, Civil War and Reconstruction (1850 – 1877); Standards 1, 2, and 3
- Common Core State Standards: English Language Arts, grade 8: Speaking and Listening 1, 4; Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 1, 6; grade 11, Literacy RH.11 - 12 1 - 5

Note to teachers: If you have visited a site in the Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area, remind students that interpretive text, exhibitions and films are all ways that historians present and interpret the past. If you are not studying the Civil War, use this lesson as an opportunity for students to flex their persuasive muscles and teamwork skills. Socratic seminars guide students to look closely at sources (markup text, arguments, key points) and then ask them to communicate ideas grounded in evidence.

Unlike typical class discussions, the teacher is an outside facilitator and the students themselves pose questions, raise issues, and refer to sources to provide evidence for their opinions. Look online and in the **Content Resources** section of this lesson for more explanation.

PROCEDURE

1. Discuss the many ways history intersects with our lives: visits to historic sites, museums, battlefields, landscapes, and buildings; reading secondary sources in textbooks; exploring primary sources like letters, journals, photos; talking about local and family history in your community. Why is it important to understand history? What is “public history?” For reference, check out the websites of the [National Council on Public History](#) and the [History Relevance Campaign](#).
2. Explain that students will be engaging in a “Socratic Smackdown,” also known as a “Socratic Seminar.” For more on this classroom activity, see the **Content Resources** section. Provide a bit of information about the way this activity will work: a student-led debate on an issue, fueled by evidence-based research.
3. Choose your central question and introduce students to the topic, resources and issues at hand. For example, students might debate:
 - Large issues pertaining to the field of history (i.e. What is the best way to build stewardship of historic places: historical fiction or documentary?)
 - Topical issues related to historical content (i.e. Was John Brown a hero or an enemy?)

- Places where preservation intersects with the economy (i.e. Does historic preservation revitalize a community or drain its resources?)
4. Once you have determined what they will debate, ask students (in pairs) to explore the central question and determine a stance they would like to take. They should research and collect evidence to support their argument. For example, if you are debating the merits of historical fiction vs. documentary students should have access to scholarly papers, newspaper articles, film reviews, clips of different kinds of films, and other studies. You may need to assist with providing access and orientation to suggested resources. In addition to the resources, students should have access to notepads, highlighters, pencils and paper.
 5. Students may use the “Socratic Smackdown worksheet” to help them prepare. Remind them that they will need to gather evidence – not just base their argument on their own opinions. Consider providing a graphic organizer to help students track and describe the different types of sources and information they gather. They should not rely on one type of source. Once they have gathered evidence, students should form an argument.
 6. Come back together and conduct the “Socratic Smackdown.” What are the differing opinions and arguments? What evidence did they gather? Can consensus be reached?

EXTENSIONS

Consider developing this activity retroactive to a visit to the Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area. Was this a field trip worth

your time? What was the most compelling part of the visit? What might have improved that experience? Would capturing the story of the site in a documentary have been more provocative than a fictional account? Be sure to use the **Content Resources** before, during, and after a visit, to frontload information and then review/analyze upon return.

CONTENT RESOURCES

Your content resources will vary depending on the topic you and your students decide to explore. If your topic is at all related to the Civil War, be sure to check out these robust resources:

- [*Maryland's Heart of the Civil War* film](#)
- [*A Collection of Commentaries* flipbook](#)
- [Crossroads of War website](#)

MORE ON THE FORMAT

A Socratic Smackdown, or Socratic Seminar, is a teaching approach that focuses on allowing students to examine sources (text, film, images) and identify main points and key arguments. Once students have reviewed sources, they must communicate ideas that are grounded in that evidence. Remember that in this approach, the teacher is an outside facilitator and the students themselves pose questions and structure the discussion, referring to sources to provide evidence. Here are some helpful videos and guidelines for reference:

- [Guide](#) from ReadWriteThink, outlining research basis and structure in action
- [Outline](#) to conducting a Socratic Seminar from Facing History and Ourselves

- [Rules](#) for Socratic Seminars by Authentic Education
- [Video](#) of a Socratic Seminar on the meaning of poetic language and prose
- [Prezi](#) introduction video to Socratic Seminars

SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO DEBATE

- Was war the only way to end slavery?
- Was John Brown a hero or an enemy?
- Should Lincoln have issued the Emancipation Proclamation when he did (or earlier or later)?
- Is violence ever justified when grappling with political, social or moral issues?
- Was Reconstruction successful?
- Was the Civil War ultimately an economic or moral debate?
- What is the best way to build stewardship of historic places: historical fiction or documentary?
- Does historic preservation revitalize a community or drain its resources?
- Should the federal government or local communities be responsible for preserving and interpreting Civil War battlefields?

SOCRATIC SMACKDOWN WORKSHEET

A Socratic Seminar is a student-led discussion based on a close and careful process of research and interrogating an argument. You will be responsible for asking questions, raising issues and referring to sources or text for evidence that supports your opinion. Use this worksheet to help organize and prepare.

1. Gather your sources. What sources will you cite to support your position? What examples?
2. In pairs, look closely at what you have gathered. Are there key quotes, arguments, issues or questions have you discovered? What evidence do you have to ground those opinions?
3. What quotes, statistics or facts might be important? What can you cite to support your argument?
4. Consider potential opposing views. Can you prepare to address their main points with counter arguments with concrete evidence?
5. Put all of this work together and develop a closing argument - an opinion you have based on the research you've done. Identify key phrases, points that are most important and try to ground your opinions in evidence.

[Download Lesson Plan PDF](#)