



Socratic Seminar / Group Discussion: The Crisis of the Civil War

Sean J. Smith and Don Benson, Weston High School, Massachusetts

U.S. History (Grade 10-11)

Introduction:

Few people dispute the influence of the major events from 1850 to 1861 on the outbreak of the Civil War. Yet, historians offer different interpretations of why war occurred and whether it could have been avoided. In class, we will engage in a Socratic Seminar style group discussion about the cause and inevitability of the Civil War.

Learning Objectives:

Students will review the growth of slavery from the ratification of the U.S. Constitution to Election of 1860 and examine four different historical interpretations of the cause(s) of the Civil War.

Guiding Questions:

What caused the Civil War? Was the Civil War inevitable?

Standards:

These standards represent all the skills and content in the lesson. For more authentic assessment, consider prioritizing 2-3 standards for your rubric/scoring guide.

Common Core Standards:

Comprehension and Collaboration:

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1](#) - Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.B](#) - Work with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions and decision-making, set clear goals and deadlines, and establish individual roles as needed.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.C](#) - Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.4](#) - Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.D](#) - Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.A](#) - Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.5](#) - Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2](#) - Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3](#) - Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6](#) - Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7](#) - Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8](#) - Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9](#) - Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

C3 Framework:

- [C3 Standards \(PDF\)](#)
- D1.2.9-12. Explain points of agreement and disagreement experts have about interpretations and applications of disciplinary concepts and ideas associated with a compelling question.
- D2.Civ.5.9-12. Evaluate citizens' and institutions' effectiveness in addressing social and political problems at the local, state, tribal, national, and/or international level.
- D2.Civ.10.9-12. Analyze the impact and the appropriate roles of personal interests and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.
- D2.Civ.13.9-12. Evaluate public policies in terms of intended and unintended outcomes, and related consequences.
- D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.

- D2.His.4.9-12. Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.
- D2.His.7.9-12. Explain how the perspectives of people in the present shape interpretations of the past.
- D2.His.16.9-12. Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.
- D3.3.9-12. Identify evidence that draws information directly and substantively from multiple sources to detect inconsistencies in evidence in order to revise or strengthen claims.
- D4.1.9-12. Construct arguments using precise and knowledgeable claims, with evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging counterclaims and evidentiary weaknesses.

Materials:

- Textbook (e.g. “Out of Many”)
- U.S. Constitution
- Handouts and class notes from the first half of the year, which include many of the Socratic seminar subtopics

Examples of excerpted Primary Sources:

- Thomas Jefferson, “Original Rough Draught” of the Declaration of Independence (1776)
- A Free African American Petitions the Government for Emancipation of All Slaves (1777)
- Phyllis Wheatly, “On Being Brought from Africa to America”
- Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions
- “Hartford Convention” (1814)
- State Laws Govern Slavery (1824)
- The Confession of Nat Turner (1831)
- William Lloyd Garrison, First Issue of the Liberator (1831)
- Proclamation Concerning Nullification (1832)
- Frances Ann Kemble, Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation (1838)
- Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass (1845)
- National Convention of Colored People Report on Abolition (1847)
- A Slave Tells of His Sale at Auction (1848)
- Daniel Webster, Speech to the U.S. Senate (1850)
- Sojourner Truth Address to Women’s Rights Convention (1851)
- Harriet Beecher Stowe, A New England Writer Portrays Slavery in 1852
- George Fitzhugh, “The Blessings of Slavery” (1857)
- Hinton Helper, “The Impending Crisis” (1857)
- Opinion of the Supreme Court for Dred Scott v. Sanford (1857)
- Overseer’s Report from Chicora Wood Plantation (1858)
- Lincoln/Douglas Debates (1858)
- South Carolina Declaration of the Causes of Secession (1860)

- Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)
- *Slave Culture Documented in Song* (1867)

Procedures:

The class will be divided into four groups that will focus on an assigned question(s). Each group will have a turn in the inner circle to discuss the question(s) for seven minutes through the viewpoint of a particular historical interpretation. As one group discusses, the other groups listen. Students in the outer circle may then ask questions for three minutes. At the end of ten minutes (7 + 3), a new group will move into the inner circle and the procedure will be repeated.

Lesson Activity One:

Individual preparation (40 mins in class, prior to Socratic seminar)

Each group member will prepare and understand their assigned historical interpretation. Within each historical interpretation are issues that help to clarify/explain/support the historical interpretation:

- **Group #1 - The moral question of slavery:** The nature of slavery, the Internal Slave Trade, the Fugitive Slave Law (Anthony Burns incident), William Lloyd Garrison/Frederick Douglass and the abolition movement, the ideals of the Founding of the U.S.A., slave rebellions (Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel's Rebellion), Harriet Tubman, Underground Railroad, Liberty Party
- **Group #2 - Constitutional issues (e.g. states' rights):** Slavery clauses in the Constitution, (3/5ths Compromise, International Slave Trade, fugitive slave law), the Alien & Sedition Acts, Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, War of 1812, the Hartford Convention, the Nullification Crisis, the Tariff of Abominations, Dred Scott Decision
- **Group #3 - Cultural differences:** What was the nature of the South and Southern society? Revisit the South/Cotton, and Slavery and the southern values reflected in the system. What was the nature of the North and Northern society? Consider the Market Revolution, reform movements, and the values of the North.
- **Group #4 - Political blunders and extremism:** Compromise of 1850 (stricter Fugitive Slave Law), *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Ostend Manifesto, Kansas-Nebraska Act, Lecompton Constitution, Preston Brooks & Charles Sumner, Dred Scott Decision, John Brown's Raid, Lincoln's election, William Lloyd Garrison/Frederick Douglass and the abolition movement, slave rebellions (Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel's Rebellion)

Additional preparation:

- In addition to the above interpretations, each large group should understand the major events of the Crisis of the 1850s: Compromise of 1850 (stricter Fugitive Slave

Law), Uncle Tom's Cabin, Kansas-Nebraska Act, Preston Brooks and Charles Sumner, Dred Scott Decision, the Lincoln-Douglas debates, John Brown's Raid, Lincoln's Election.

- Each person should try to also include at least one or two statements (historic primary sources) that help to make or refute a particular point of view.
- When discussing, each group should also bring up or challenge another historical interpretation.

Lesson Activity Two:

Socratic Seminar examining four different historical interpretations of the cause of the Civil War. (60 mins; 10 mins / group and a whole class discussion/debrief.)

- Each group will have a turn in the inner circle to discuss the question(s) for seven minutes through the viewpoint of a particular historical interpretation. As one group discusses, the other groups listen. Students in the outer circle may then ask questions for three minutes. At the end of ten minutes (7 +3), a new group will move into the inner circle and the procedure will be repeated.

