

# Socrates Cafe

So, what goes on at a Socrates Café? I can only give experience from the Ridgedale Library and Brooklyn Center groups, but the basic format goes something like this.

We are all sitting in a [group](#), either a circle or in rows at first with a writing board at one end. After a general greeting and introduction of the moderators, one of the moderators goes into a little monologue about how the group works. He goes through what Socrates Cafe is and how it started, then he talks about the Guidelines that we have set up.

1. Respect your fellow thinkers ...This one is pretty obvious, if someone is talking don't interrupt and try to make sure you do not hog the conversation.
2. Attack the opinions not the people ... We want to make the group conducive to a discussion and if people are being attacked or feel that they are being attacked then they will stop contributing or stop coming all together.
3. Consensus is not expected and agreement is not necessary ...We know that most questions have no one answer and we don't get together to figure out how to achieve world peace. We get together to have a conversation to discover what we think and what others think, whether we all agree or not. We want to leave knowing that it's okay to disagree.
4. We want a safe environment for an argument ...Now when lots of people hear or see the word "argument" they think yelling and screaming, but that's not the best idea of an argument, it's not even the proper meaning. Dictionary.com defines argument as "A discussion in which disagreement is expressed; a debate." and this is exactly what we are trying to do. We are trying to have an intellectual argument.
5. Look for the "good question" ... This is a more difficult point to cover. Basically when choosing and discussing a question we look for four main things:
  - Examine the question for built in assumptions. For example

the question: "How do we stop evil?" assumes that all evil must be stopped. Someone could then ask "Doesn't evil have it's place in the world?"

- Examine the question for embedded concepts. In the question: "How do we stop evil?" we might ask "What is evil?"
- Examine the question for differences in kind and degree. Are there different kinds of evil? Can one "evil" be more "evil" than another?
- Examine the question for logical consistencies and inconsistencies. Would stopping a naturally occurring idea such as "evil" be an evil in itself? What are we without evil?

But the most important guideline that we have is also the simplest. **Listen.** You cannot have a good argument without listening to the other side. We don't ask you to agree, we don't even ask you to accept their ideas, but we do ask that you listen to them.

After the moderator goes through the guidelines, we start asking questions that we would like to discuss. They are written on the board and then voted on. In our group, we ask for one person-one vote. You don't have to vote, and you don't even have to vote for your own question. After the vote and a question is selected, the person who asked the question gives us a lead on what they were thinking of when they asked the question, what was behind it. Some people have come prepared with written statement and facts, some just speak what's on their mind.

Then, depending on how large a group we have, we split into 2-3 separate groups of 15-20 people, sometimes up to 30. The best size group is 10-20 depending upon your surroundings. Too many people, and you may feel that you wouldn't have anything to contribute and hide in the shadows all night. Too few people and you may feel that if you don't speak people will think ill of you. We don't make people speak out if they do not want to. We have had a few wallflowers who only speak when they feel very strongly about something and then say nothing for weeks, just as we have a few people who if they don't say anything, you might wonder if they are feeling well.

That is the basic format of the group. It's basically a free speak from there on, you don't have to raise your hand but it sometimes helps in a larger group. We sit and talk about the question and wherever it may lead for the next hour and half or so. We take a break in the middle and the reconvene. At the end we break up, sometimes with more difficulty than others, and look forward to the next Socrates Cafe.

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