

## Using Socratic Questioning in Online Discussion Forums

Instructors can design discussion forums to engage students in a Socratic questioning process to help them grapple with and build understanding of complex topics or readings. Below is a recommended process.

1. **Choose an appropriate text.** Assign a challenging article or set of resources aligned to a module focused on a key and complex topic.
2. **Explain the purpose and process of Socratic questioning forums.** Since most discussion forums include discussion questions or prompts, it is important to explain to students how Socratic questioning differs and why it is a useful process for their learning. For example,

*Next week, we are going to discuss a challenging article written by one of the founding fathers of modern epidemiology, John Snow. This article, “On the Mode of Communication of Cholera,” discusses his work tracing the source of a cholera outbreak in London in 1854. To help us understand Snow’s process and influence on our current practices in modern epidemiology, we are going to spend the week engaging in a Socratic questioning process. My role in this process is to ask you questions that lead you to developing a deeper understanding of Snow’s process and links to modern practices. To give you an idea of what to expect, I’ve posted a list of the types of questions I will be asking as we move through the module.*

*Over the weekend, you will read the article and reply to the first set of questions in the discussion forum on Monday. After I read all of your responses, I will synthesize, clarify, summarize your ideas, and then pose a second set of questions on Tuesday. And finally, on Friday I will ask you to build on your previous responses and delve deeper.*

3. **Design question forums.** To allow time for all students to think deeply and participate fully, divide the Socratic questioning discussion into three separate discussions, and pace them throughout the week/module. Set up the discussion forums to require students to post a response before being able to view other responses.

**Socratic Forum #1 (Monday):** Ask questions that focus on factual knowledge and clarify basic understanding. For example,

- *Why did John Snow write this article?*
- *What process is he recommending?*
- *What evidence does he provide to support his recommended process?*

**Follow up:** After reading all responses, submit a final post synthesizing and clarifying ideas.

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**Socratic Forum #2:** Based on responses from the first forum, pose a second set of questions focusing on relevance, accuracy, or other question stems (refer to the Planning Guide on Nilson’s Question Stems) designed to build on the foundational level of understanding from Socratic Forum #1. For example,

- *What similarities and differences were there in Snow’s process of identifying the source of Cholera and the process we read about last week in discovering the source of the Ebola outbreak in 2014?*

**Follow up:** After reading all responses, submit a final post synthesizing and clarifying ideas.

**Socratic Forum #3:** Refer back to Forum #2 responses; ask questions that focus on assumptions, viewpoints, or question stems designed to move students beyond Socratic Forum #2. For example,

- *Several of you commented that there were errors made while tracing the Ebola outbreak due to faulty assumptions. How did Snow’s assumptions and line of reasoning differ from the predominant logic of the time?*

**Follow up:** After reading all responses, submit a final post synthesizing and clarifying ideas.