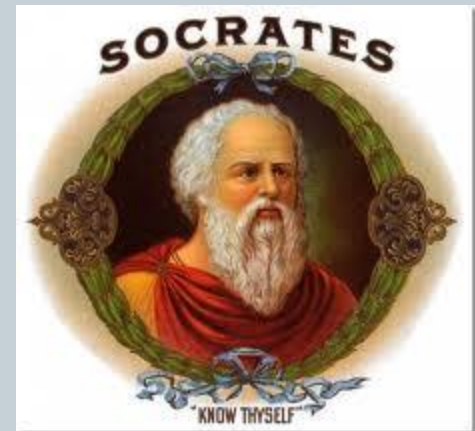


# Socratic Questioning



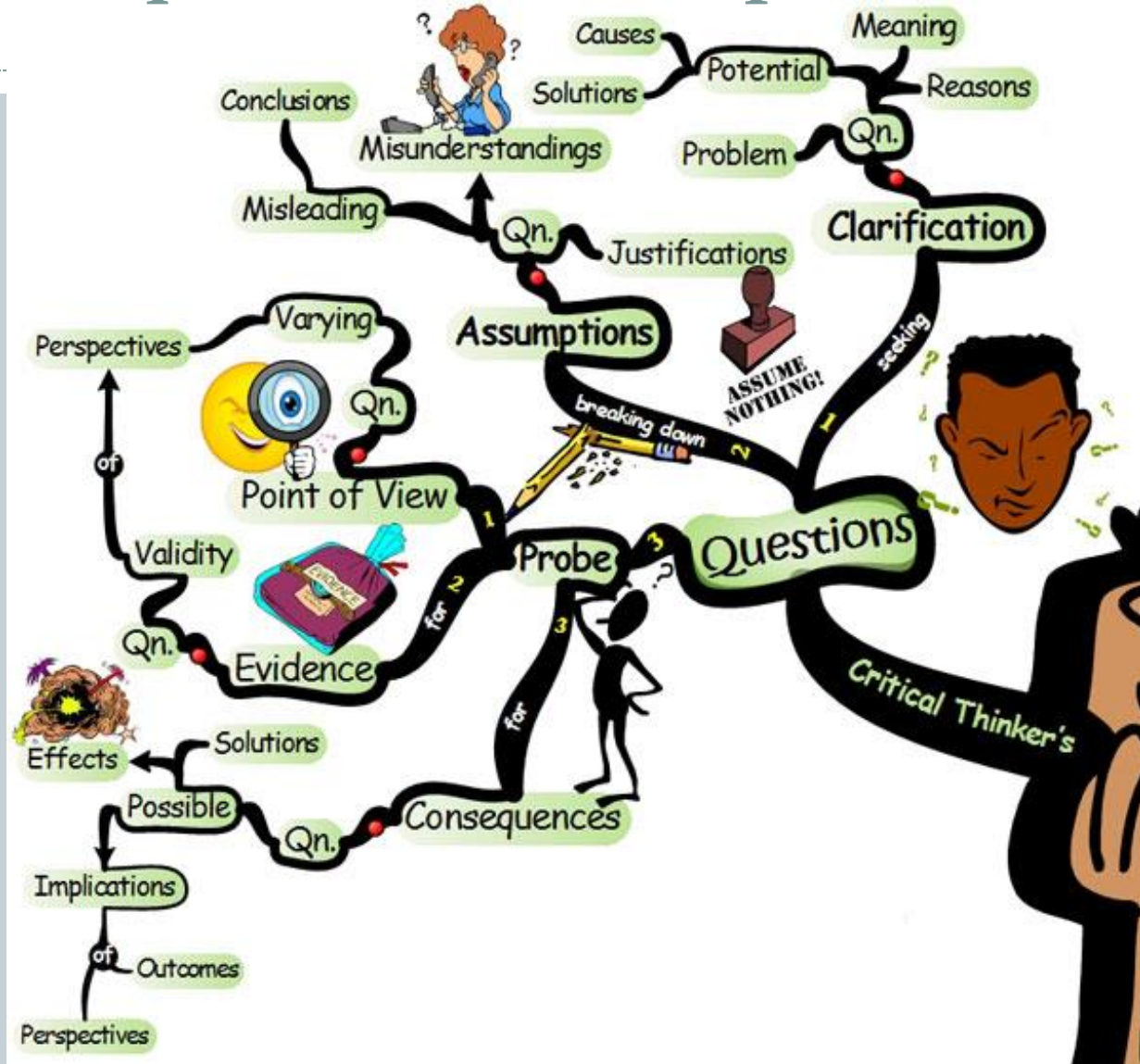
HOW A DEAD WHITE MAN CAN INFORM OUR  
TUTORING PRACTICES



Socrates, 470-399 BC

# What Socratic questions can help with

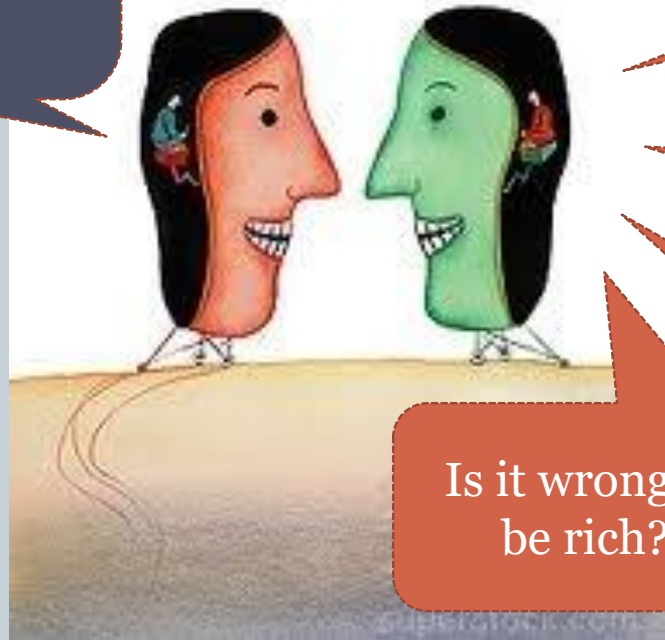
- Engage critical thinking
- Jump-start thought & reflection
- Discover patterns: applications of general rules to my specific piece of writing



# To discover beliefs (discover a thesis)



Some people are super-rich. I'm not sure how I feel about that.



What is "rich"?

Rich in relation to what?

Do you consider yourself rich?

Should anyone be rich?

Is it wrong to be rich?

# To challenge assumptions, test validity



Millionaires and billionaires  
should pay more taxes.

How much *do*  
they pay?

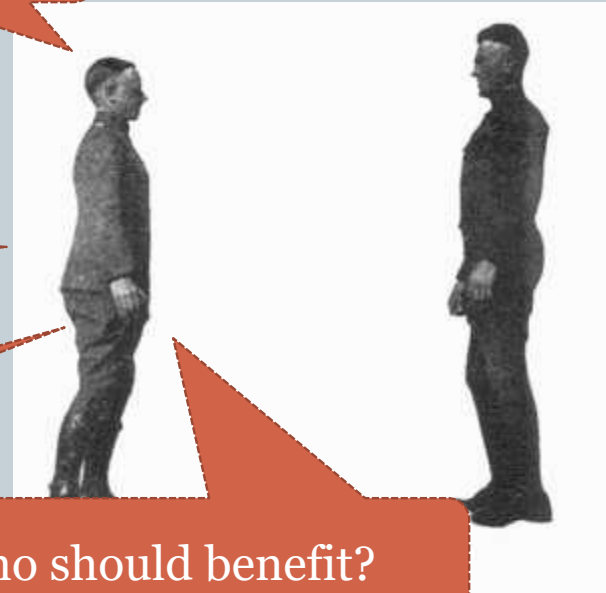
More than what?

How much  
*should* they  
pay?

Who should decide?

What might be the  
results?

Who should benefit?



# To define the limits of beliefs

Is it proper for the government to tell us what to eat?

The government should regulate the amount of fast food we have access to.

Do individuals have rights the government cannot control?

What is a "right"?

What is the origin of individual rights?

What is the origin of government power?

Do individual eating decisions affect anyone besides the individual?

What might be the *unintended* results?

What are intended results?



# To extend understanding (development)



Fast-food restaurants should be banned in poor neighborhoods.

What is "poor"?

Who should decide?

Should they be banned in rich neighborhoods?

What might be the positive results?

What might be the negative results?

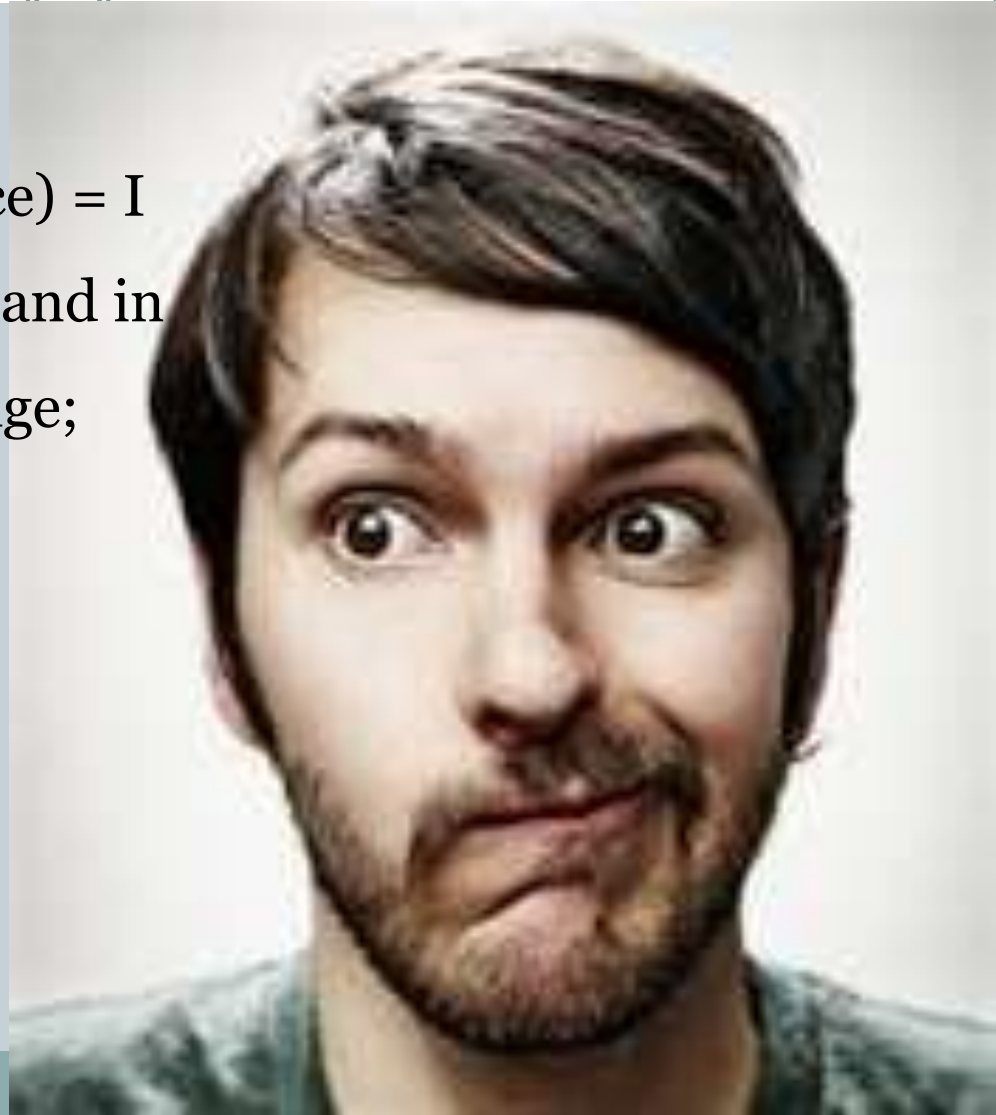
What might be the unintended results?



# Basis of Socratic questioning



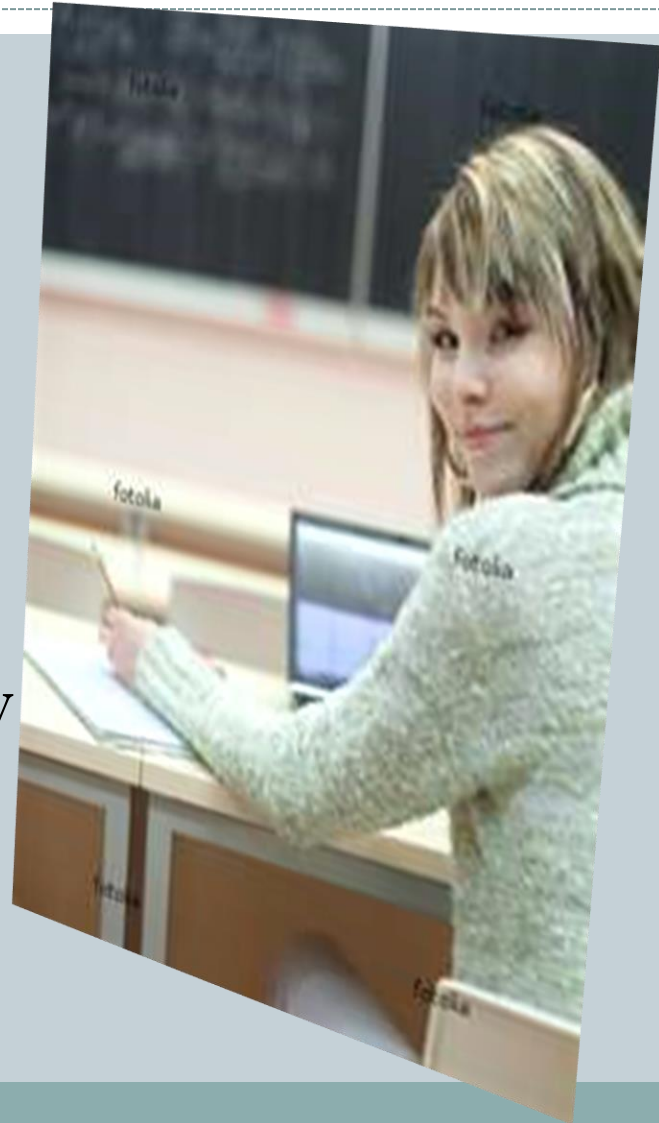
Socratic irony (Socratic ignorance) = I am as ignorant as anyone else and in need of reflective self-knowledge; therefore...



# ...therefore...



- I am **respectful** of the insights the learner brings to the transactions and...
- I am **non-directive**—not bossy, badgering, or dogmatic, and...
- I respect the learner's autonomy by **offering choices**.
- I value **curiosity and effort**.





# Characteristics of Socratic questions



- Are open-ended, not yes/no.
- Are not accusatory.
- Are not “leading” (in the sense of leading the learner to see it my way or demanding that the learner acknowledge he is wrong or inadequate).
- Do not have just one right answer.
- May not have *any* definitive answer.
- Are followed by wait time (they are *authentic* questions).

# It's not a fishing expedition!



(If you're fishing repeatedly and unsuccessfully for a particular "right" answer, stop fishing and just *supply* the right answer. This is probably *not* a Socratic question.)

# What might Socratic questions look like?



*The student writes:*

“The scholars control society’s perception of what intelligence is.”

*I ask:*

“Do you believe their control is absolute, or do you think it’s conditional?”

“If their control is absolute, does that mean you don’t have the freedom to form your own perceptions?”

“If their control is conditional, what conditions diminish their control?”

# Why would I ask that?



- The student is led to **examine his own claim** more closely. Does he really believe *exactly* what he said?
- The student is led to **consider the existential implications** of his claim, e.g., is there such a thing as free will?
- The student is led to **imagine counter-claims**: other conditions (places, times, personalities, character flaws or strengths, etc.) that might challenge his claim.
- The student **might decide to revise** or fine-tune his claim.

...or...



*The student writes:*

“Dweck explains that a fixed mindset leads to less academic success.”

*Possible questions:*

“Could a fixed mindset also affect other things, like the dynamics within a family, or attitudes in the workplace?”

“Can you imagine a setting where a fixed mindset might be an advantage?”

# Why ask that?



- Extending the discussion to other possible effects **generates material for further development**. Most essays can use more development!
- Asking whether a fixed mindset might not be an advantage in some settings challenges Dweck's claim and may **generate a counter-claim**.

# Use the diction of possibility

- “do you believe...”
  - “might”
  - “could”
  - “if”

Conditional language offers possibility,  
respects choice, defers to the author.



# Not all good questions are Socratic...



- **Focusing questions**
  - “What are we working on today?”
  - “Where are you at with this paper?”
  - “Do you think you have a punctuation problem? Like where, for instance?”
  - “Have you been told you write fragments? Can you show me a sentence that you think is a fragment?”
- ***Underlying message***
  - “*This is an interactive process. You will be taking an active part.*”
  - “*You are responsible. Identify the problem. Formulate a question.*”
  - “*You are capable of finding your own errors.*”
  - “*You are in the driver’s seat.*”



# Other good questions



- Clarifying questions

- “I’m not sure I understand this sentence. Can you think of another way to say it?”

- Underlying message

- *Avoids making assumptions leading to misunderstanding.*
- *Defers respectfully to learner as author & owner of this paper.*
- *I” statement is less critical than “You don’t make sense here” or “This doesn’t make any sense.”*

# Is “Right?” a good question?



- Or is “Right?” really a verbal hiccup?
- “Right?” requires *me* to confirm that *you* are right. Am I, conversely, by implication, wrong?

# The *pace* of questions



- Staccato or serial questioning is intimidating
- If you ask a question, wait for an answer
- Observe wait time! Just do it!





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