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DISCUSSION FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

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A Guide for Beginning a Book Discussion Group

The First Meeting

At your regular meetings you may not need one person to lead the group. However, at this first meeting you need to take the lead! Keep in mind that, just like the chairman of the board, the role of the moderator/group leader is not to make all the decisions but to ensure that:

- The discussion stays on track.
- There is a reasonable degree of consensus within the group.
- Everyone feels that their voice has been heard.
- No one person's voice is heard too much (and that includes your own!)

The first meeting is the perfect time to talk about your expectations for the book club, listen to what others think, discuss books in general and the types of books members have read or would like to read. The key purpose of this meeting is to ensure that everybody is on the same page before you move ahead with regular meetings.

The American Library Association recommends answering ten easy questions to get your book discussion off the ground. Establishing these answers early will help you avoid any trouble down the road.

American Library Association Quick Start Guide

Quick Start Guide retrieved from: <http://www.ala.org/tools/atoz/book-discussion-grps>

1. ***What kind of book club?*** Decide on a club orientation: somewhere between highly social and seriously academic.
2. ***What kind of books?*** Choose a literary genre or a mix of genres: fiction (current or classic), poetry, drama, mystery, sci-fi, current events, history, or biography.
3. ***How many members?*** 8 to 16 members are best: enough for a discussion if several are absent, but not too many to make discussions unwieldy.
4. ***How often should we meet?*** Once a month works best for most clubs. Some meet every 6 weeks. Pick a schedule and try to stick with it.
5. ***When should we meet?*** Weekdays: mid-morning, lunchtime, dinner, evening—depends on jobs, childcare, family dinners or difficulty driving at night. Weekends: Saturday morning, or Sunday afternoon or evening.
6. ***Where should we meet?*** Homes, clubhouses, public libraries, churches, local Y's, restaurants—all make good meeting places.
7. ***What should we call ourselves?*** Give your club an identity — Brookville Book Babes, Reading's Red Hat Readers, New London Literary Lions. Or simply the Lakewood Book Club — that works.
8. ***How do we keep in touch?*** Send out monthly meeting reminders. If not everyone uses email, mail postcards. Distribute a complete list of phone numbers, home addresses, and e-mails.
9. ***Keeping memories.*** Keep a club journal—a 3-ring binder to keep track of the books you've read, plot summaries, discussion highlights, and members' opinions. It's especially useful to bring new members up to speed.

10. ***Give back to the community.*** Collect dues for a scholarship or an annual literacy award at a local school. Purchase books for your local library, or become involved in a tutoring program.

Other Things to Consider

- **Do you need a moderator?** Not all groups do, so decide what works best for your discussion format. If you decide having a moderator works best, then you must decide to have one person lead all of the meetings or to rotate the responsibility among members. Also, will moderating be mandatory for participation? Without a designated leader, you can take turns going around the room, allowing each member to talk about his or her experience reading the book. You can also try hand out index cards. Ask everyone to write a question or observation, and then select one or more to discuss. Another option is to invite an outside facilitator (English teacher or librarian), paid or unpaid.
- **Do you want to choose books with 'official' reading guides?** A few book clubs actively avoid discussion guides, some are never seen without one, most are somewhere in the middle using discussion guides as a useful tool for generating interesting discussion topics but not worrying when there is no guide available. Suggestion: Choose books with prepared reading guides for the first few meetings and then leave it up to whoever chose the book or is due to moderate the meeting to bring a discussion guide if they feel they want one. A discussion guide is intended to guide your conversation not control it - if you're going to use one, use it to get the conversation flowing or to redirect the conversation if you think a topic has been exhausted - it's not necessary to work through the questions one by one!
- **Are you planning to buy or borrow books?** If you want to read the most current titles then you're going to have to buy hardcovers or chat with your local librarian to see if he/she can get enough copies in for you and your group. If you're going to buy books, do you want to try to put a cap on the costs? Paperbacks are obviously cheaper, but usually follow the hardcover by about a year, so if you want to read very current books you'll likely be reading hardcovers.
- **What are the expectations of each person?** It's very important that you agree up front how seriously your group is going to take the discussions. Can a member come to a meeting if they haven't read the book? What's the policy on skipping meetings? These may sound like rather officious topics for discussion but the majority of discord in book clubs happens because of different member expectations - e.g. one member thinks of the book club as an optional thing to turn up to when time allows, while another would never consider missing a meeting; one thinks they're coming to chat with friends under the ruse of discussing a book, while another wishes to engage only in erudite literary discussion, etc.
- **How many people do you want in your group & how do new people join?** At an initial meeting, when there's likely to be just a handful of you, it may seem silly to worry about the group getting too big - but what if each of you invites a friend, and then they invite friends? Before you know it the group could be too big to be manageable - so take a few moments up front to agree what the maximum optimal size for your group is and how new people can join (e.g. can somebody just bring a friend along, or do they have to consult the other group members first before issuing an invitation?)
****About 12-15 people is the optimal size for a book discussion.**

- **How long will you meet?** Establish a format. Find what works for everyone and stick with it. Allow at least two hours for the meetings and adjust as needed. Here is a suggested schedule for a 2 -2.5 hour long meeting:
 - 30-45 min. — social time
 - 15-20 min. — club administrative matters
 - 60-90 min. — book discussion

In short, by the end of the first meeting make sure that you all agree on

- How often you'll meet, where and for how long.
- What you're going to read at your next meeting (preferably next 2-3 meetings to allow people time to read ahead).
- How future titles will be selected
- How the meetings will be run - will you have a consistent moderator, rotate the job or allow a “free for all”
- How to contact each other between meetings?

Icebreakers

At your first book club meeting, or whenever new people join your reading group, it's important to spend a few minutes getting to know each other. This can be as simple as going around the group taking it in turns to introduce yourself, and possibly saying a few words, such as what you're looking forward to about the book club (if you're new) or the book you've most enjoyed (if you're an existing member). However, this format can be a little intimidating for some so an alternative is to play a game! You don't *need* to do any of these activities but the chances are that spending half an hour 'playing games' at the outset will have individuals feeling like they belong in the group faster than if you don't. The purpose of all the activities is to give people a chance to meet each other and to share information about themselves. Emphasize that the activity is meant to be a fun game, not a test, and that nobody will be keeping score!

Several variations of icebreakers can be found online, but here is a fun and easy example:

Pass the Hat

This game is best in groups of about 10 people or less. Think up one or more questions per person (if the group is large have one question per person, if it's smaller have more). Cut the paper so each question is on its own sheet, fold the papers, and put them in some sort of container. Take turns to pull a question out of the hat and answer the question. Once somebody has answered his/her particular question, other people might want to share their own answers. You'll probably want to set a time limit per question in order to keep things moving along - you don't have to announce this up front, just keep an eye on the time yourself and move things along if necessary.

Example Questions:

- What was the first book you remember reading/being read?
- What is your favorite book of all time?
- Which book has left the most lasting impression on you?
- Which book have you read most frequently?

- What books are on your bedside table at the moment?
- Name one book/author that you really can't stand?
- What types of books do you like reading most?
- If you were given \$30 to spend on a book today, what book would you buy?
- Where's your favorite place to read?
- Which character in a book do you think is most like you?
- Which character in a book would you most like to be?
- What book do you plan to read next?
- Which literary character would you most like to have a 'significant relationship' with?

Important: The questions above assume that the group who are getting together already consider themselves relatively well read. However, if you're starting a group with people who may not think of themselves as "readers", you might want to consider more generic questions, such as favorite sport, favorite place to visit, person they most admire, etc. This game is intended to help people feel comfortable with each other, not embarrass them by asking questions they're not comfortable answering!

Leading a Book Discussion

It's your turn to moderate/lead your book club's discussion. What can you do to ensure a successful meeting?

First, the role of a moderator will vary from group to group. Some groups might be very formal with an 'official' moderator - for example if your group is run by the local library it is quite likely that a member of the library staff will lead the meeting; other groups might rotate the role; others may not feel they need one at all. The moderator's role is somewhere between a chairperson and host/hostess. It's the moderator's responsibility to:

- Keep the meeting on track - digressions are fine but if the conversation strays too far off topic it's your job to bring it gently back on track again.
- Make sure that everyone feels that their voice has been heard.
- Make sure that no one person's voice is heard too much (and that includes your own!).
- Encourage consensus up to a point. This does not mean that everybody has to agree as it wouldn't be much of a discussion if they did, but that people express their alternate opinions in constructive ways that open a point up for discussion rather than disrespectfully squashing the opposition!
- Make sure that the meeting gets off to a good start by ensuring that everybody knows when and where it's taking place. To that end it's a good idea to call or email a couple of days ahead to remind people!

Allow a little time at the start of the meeting for people to say hello, possibly grab a snack and get their socializing done.

Now you need to get the meeting started and, if the group is newly formed or you think needs a refresher, remind them of the 'rules' of your book group and how much time you have to discuss

the book. Suggestion: A minute or two reviewing the 'rules' of your group can be time well spent. If you or other members feel there has been a problem in earlier meetings (e.g. one person dominating the conversation or too much off-topic conversation), this is the appropriate time to remind people what was previously agreed, without it appearing to be a personal attack on an individual.

Get an initial reaction from people about the book. It's quite likely one or two might not have finished it (maybe they ran out of time or just found it tedious) - it's not a big deal, this is supposed to be fun, not a test.

Whether you use an 'official' reading guide or think up your own discussion points, decide ahead of time where you want to start the discussion and which discussion points you really want to cover - this will help you keep the conversation on track and enable you to throw in a new question if the conversation lags, goes too far off topic, starts to repeat itself or gets too contentious.

It is quite likely that you won't get through all the potential topics for discussion. If the conversation is flowing the chances are that the conversation will naturally expand from the original topic into other interesting areas. If you do feel the need to move the conversation on, look for a way to weave the next discussion point into the current conversation.

Don't be too rigid keeping people on topic. As Harold Bloom (one of America's leading literary critic) says, the purpose of a book is

"to get in very close to a reader and try to speak directly to what it is that they either might want out of the book or might be persuaded to see... [to persuade the reader] that certain truths about himself or herself, which are totally authentic, totally real, are being demonstrated to the reader for the very first time"

In other words, the person who appears to be off topic may be finding a way to express and understand an experience in their own lives - so don't be too quick to redirect them!

How to Handle Difficult Situations

Unfortunately, you really might need to be prepared for some of these scenarios.

- **One of our members keeps on putting down the opinions of others in the group** It's difficult to imagine a good discussion without disagreement - but there are ways to express a difference of opinion in a constructive way that builds trust and openness within the group - and then there are ways to crush somebody so that they never feel comfortable opening their mouth in public again! Something to consider here is that some people actively enjoy a robust debate, while others don't - but at no point is it appropriate to belittle another person's opinion, or to repeatedly interrupt them before they've been able to have their say. If you feel that someone in your group is too strident in their disagreement with another member, consider taking the person aside and gently pointing out what they're doing - they're probably not aware of the effect they're having (and it's probably not just at your book group meetings that they're doing this!). However, before

doing this, make sure that this person is actually considered out of line by the other members of the group. It is possible that you are being oversensitive and the others do not consider this member's conversational style to be an issue. The most important thing you can do is make sure that *you* practice good communication skills yourself. For example, if a person is interrupted by another, when the latter has stopped speaking, immediately steer the conversation back to what the first speaker was saying and ask them to talk more on the subject, or make reference to what they said when you next speak and build on their thoughts. Even if you don't agree with their viewpoint you can, at least, acknowledge that you have heard it and respect their right to have that view!

- **One member of our reading group always dominates - what can we do?** If the problem is that one or more people tend to talk too long and too much and it has been a problem at previous meetings, try tackling this issue at the start of the meeting and ask for suggestions from the group. If people consistently interrupt each other (and members of the group consider this a problem) consider using a timer and don't allow interruptions until the speaker has had their say (for a maximum of 2-3 minutes), or pass around a small object, such as a ball, and only the person holding the ball can speak.
- **One member of our group rarely speaks - what should we do?** Some people speak a lot and some don't. Quantity of speech is often in inverse proportion to the quality of the thinking behind it so if somebody is fully engaged in the discussion but only chooses to speak occasionally, there's really no need to 'do' anything about it. However, if somebody in your book club really says very little at all (and especially if it is a small group) try and find opportunities to draw them out. For example, make a comment yourself and ask the person directly whether they agree or disagree - but go gently - perhaps the person is having trouble getting a word in edgeways with all the other opinionated people in the room and will welcome your question, but equally they might be perfectly comfortable listening to other people's opinions and feel threatened at a direct question. Try and see things from the individual's point of view. Perhaps they're new to the group or feel that everybody else knows each other but they don't. Or perhaps they think they aren't as well read as the rest of you. Whether this is reality or perception doesn't really matter - you need to find a way to make them feel comfortable in the group, and when they are they'll be more likely to contribute their thoughts. One suggestion is to try and get to know the person better in the conversational time before the formal discussion starts and perhaps even find out his/her views on the book, one to one. That way, if he/she stays silent in the discussion you can make a comment along the lines of 'Alice made a really good point when we were discussing the book before the meeting about xxxx' and ask if she could share it with the group. Preferably, try to sit next to, or near, your reticent friend because when the eyes of the room turn to hear her speak she'll feel more supported if she has someone sitting near her who she knows already values her opinions. As a general rule, when somebody is new to the group it is always a good idea to spend a few minutes at the beginning of the meeting getting to know him/her, and giving him/her a chance to get to know you, either through informal discussion or by playing a group game.
- **We used to meet to discuss books but now it's turned into a gourmet extravaganza with very little time left to discuss the book. It's getting out of hand - worse still, it's**

my turn to bring the food and I don't know what to make. If your group rotates bringing food it's very easy for each person to try to do a little better than the one before and, before you know it, bringing the snack has gone from a quick rustle through the cupboard before leaving for the meeting to something that has to be planned and worried about well in advance. It takes a bit of courage to do this but the best thing you can do for all concerned is to turn up with something simple - a packet of cookies, cheese and crackers, or a plate of vegetables and a dip - the other members of the group will probably breathe a sigh of relief that the pressure is off! Alternatively, if the group members like to flex their culinary muscles, you could suggest that the food for the meetings be kept simple but that every now and then you have a 'theme' evening based on the particular book you're discussing and everybody brings a dish appropriate to the period the book is set in, or its geographical location. You could even go to town and turn it into a costume party with members dressing as one of the characters or, at least, in theme with the book. Why not invite a guest - spouse, partner, sister, friend - and turn it into a party? Then next month you can get back to the cheese, crackers and 'real' book discussion again!

- **We're a newly formed group and one person is making life a misery for the rest of us, she arrives drunk and is offensive.** If you've read this reading guide section from start to finish you've probably already heard me say once, if not twice, that if you're forming a new group with people you don't know that you should meet in a public place until you get to know each other reasonably well, and only then meet in people's houses. I added this comment some years ago after receiving an email from a book club member who, along with the other club members, was being actively harassed by an abusive member of the group who they wished would become an ex-member. Things had reached the point where they had decided to stop meeting rather than confront the individual, but she continued to telephone and visit their homes wanting to know details of the next meeting. The chances of you finding yourself in such an extreme situation maybe unlikely, but a little caution can go a long way, so don't share personal details, such as your mailing address or phone number, until you feel confident of the group - you don't even have to share your regular email address as you can always get a free account from Hotmail, Yahoo etc.
- **One of our members wrote a four-page synopsis of one of the books we were reading and read it to us at our meeting. It was quite interesting, but ever since then she brings a summary of every book we read and insists on reading it to us. We're so bored listening to her regurgitating the storyline that we all know. What do we do - she's very nice and we don't want to hurt her feelings?** This may seem an unlikely situation but it's one that has come up in various shapes and forms a few times. If you encounter a person who insists on taking center stage at each meeting (and you really don't feel able to just ask her not to) you need to find a way to 'redirect' her. For example, in this case, one solution would be to thank her for her input but suggest that it would be even more useful if she could summarize the book and the discussion *after* the meeting (essentially, making her the meeting secretary, responsible for recording the key points of the conversation). Most importantly encourage her to email the summary to the members *before* the next meeting so there is no need to discuss it at the next meeting - but make sure to thank her at the meeting!

DIY DISCUSSION GUIDES

Most book club discussion guides are created by publishers, who are beginning to catch on to the huge growth in book discussion group. However, there are still relatively few guides available and most tend to be for certain types of books (the genre loosely known as 'literary fiction') and often only available once the book comes out in paperback. So, what do you do if you really want to discuss a particular book but there's no reading guide available? Just come up with a few questions to get the discussion going, and start talking! The following are suggested starting points for creating your own discussion questions. As a general rule, start with broad questions and look for where the interest of the group lies, and then focus in on specific issues. Use the ideas below as triggers for creating questions relevant to the particular book you're studying. Aim for about 5-10 key discussion points that will generate conversation - and if everyone is happy discussing one particular aspect, don't feel the need to rush the group on to another topic.

How to use this list Use the following list to trigger your own ideas about the particular book you're reading. Remember, you're only looking for about half a dozen discussion points, so you don't have to go through this list exhaustively. Instead, skim it for possible question areas that are relevant to the book you're going to discuss, and in just a few minutes you'll have a list of thought provoking questions specific to your particular book, ready for your book club meeting.

General Discussion Questions for ANY book

Retrieved from BookBundlz: <http://www.bookbundlz.com/BBArticle.aspx?articleId=25>

Story:

1. What is the significance of the title? Would you have given the book a different title? If yes, what is your title?
2. What were the themes of the book? Do you feel they were adequately explored? Were they brought to life in a cliché or in a unique manner?
3. What did you think of the structure and style of the writing?
4. What scene was the most pivotal for the book? How do you think the story would have changed had that scene not taken place?
5. What scene resonated most with you personally in either a positive or negative way? Why?
6. Has anything ever happened to you similar to what happened in the book? How did you react to it differently?

7. What surprised you the most about the book?

8. Were there any notable racial, cultural, traditions, gender, sexuality or socioeconomic factors at play in the book? If so, what? How did it affect the characters? Do you think they were realistically portrayed?

9. How important is the setting & time period to the story? How would it have played out differently in a different setting? What about a different time period?

10. Were there any particular quotes that stood out to you? Why?

Characters:

11. Did any of the characters remind you of yourself or someone you know? How?

12. What is motivating the actions of the characters in the story? What do the sub-characters want from the main character and what does the main character want with them?

13. What were the dynamics of "power" between the characters? How did that play a factor in their interactions?

14. How does the way the characters see themselves, differ from how others see them? How do you see the various characters?

15. How did the "roles" of the various characters influence their interactions? For a woman: Mother, daughter, sister, wife, lover, professional, etc.

16. If you could smack any of the characters upside the head, who would it be and why? (Courtesy of Nick)

17. Were there any moments where you disagreed with the choices of any of the characters? What would you have done differently?

18. What past influences are shaping the actions of the characters in the story?

The Ending:

19. Did you think the ending was appropriate? How would you have liked to have seen the ending go?

20. How have the characters changed by the end of the book?

21. Have any of YOUR views or thoughts changed after reading this book?

22. What do you think will happen next to the main characters?

Overall:

23. Are there any books that you would compare this one to? How does this book hold up to them?

24. Have you read any other books by this author? Were they comparable to your level of enjoyment to this one?

25. What did you learn from, take away from, or get out of this book?

26. Did your opinion of the book change as you read it? How?

27. Would you recommend a friend unleash it?

Online Resources to Get You Started

- **Book Group Buzz, A Booklist Blog**
Book group tips, literary news, and reading lists.
<http://bookgroupbuzz.booklistonline.com>
- **BookBundlz**
Resource that caters to book clubs and book enthusiasts provides a stage for authors and engages in the cause for literacy and education.
<http://www.bookbundlz.com>
- **Booktalk.org**
Online discussion group with several forums for discussion, author interviews, and book reviews.
<http://www.booktalk.org>
- **LitLovers**
Book club resources, reading guides, lit related recipes, lit classes, and more.
<http://www.litlovers.com>
- **Love to Read: Finding Books & Book Clubs**
An ipl2 guide meant to provide users with print and online resources about finding books to read, starting a book group and journaling your reading.
<http://www.ipl.org/div/pf/entry/48523>
- **Readers' Circle**
A directory of academic, social, and civic book groups intended to connect people through reading.
<http://www.readerscircle.org>
- **The Reading Club (UK site)**
TheReadingClub was formed to offer a unique reference point on starting and running your own reading and book club.
<http://www.thereadingclub.co.uk/aboutoursite.html>
- **Reading Group Choices**
Reading Group Choices offers books that have been vetted and deemed "discussible" for reading groups. The group also produces and distributes reading guides and offers relevant articles to creation and continuation of book groups.
<http://www.readinggroupchoices.com/about-us/about-reading-group-choices>