

How to Start & Lead
Engaging, Lively & Intellectually Stimulating Book Discussions
In Your Reading Group

INTRODUCTION

For many years the phenomena of being a member of a reading group has become extremely popular.

If your library doesn't offer a "regular" reading group at your library now is the time to start. Hopefully your library has a reading or two or three in place for your patrons to participate in. This presentation will help you start a reading group and provide you with tips to enrich, enhance and complement the reading group experiences of a particular book and its author.

HOW TO DEVELOP A READING GROUP PROFILE

When you decide that you and your friends or you as a library employee and your library want to offer regularly scheduled Reading Groups to your patrons consider the following.

How often should the group meet?

- Twice a month
- Every other month
- Once a month
- Once every three months
- Other

How long should each meeting run?

- One hour
- An hour and a half
- Two hours

When should the meetings be held?

- Mornings
- Afternoons
- Evenings

What types of books should be discussed?

- Contemporary works

- Classics
- Both
- Other

What types of books will be discussed:

- Fiction
- Nonfiction
- Both

What types of books should be emphasized?

- Well-known works
- Lesser-known works
- Both

Set Down the Rules-At your first meeting, set down your rules and guidelines. Decide what type of group you are going to be. Will you be reading just fiction books or a sampling of lots of various types of writing? Non-fiction? Poetry? Short Stories? Will you be reading one particular genre? Contemporary fiction? Classics? Science Fiction/Fantasy? Will you be serving food at each meeting? Will wine be allowed? How many members will make up the group? You don't want to have too many members because that makes good discussions difficult. Make sure everyone agrees to honor the mission of the club. One of the rules that should be highly stressed is that members should come to each meeting having read the **ENTIRE** book. This insures that no one gives away the ending.

Dates and Times of Meetings-Decide on what day and time best fits with the schedules of the members. Plan at least 6 months in advance and stick to the dates and times. It will be extremely difficult to continually have to change the schedule to accommodate everyone's busy lives. If someone can't make it, that's their decision and should not upset the apple cart.

The Leader-Will one person be the leader for all of the meetings or will this responsibility be rotated among the members? How much background information should be presented? In order to be fair for the leader, you don't one person bringing a lot of extra materials and another a limited amount.

Selecting the Books-How are you going to select the books? Will each monthly leader select his/her book for their specific month? Will you set aside one meeting a year to discuss possible choices presented by all the members and select one for each month from the titles that are on the table? Once the books are selected, members should refrain from initially complaining about the selection. They can complain only after reading the entire work.

Interruptions-There will always be a member who breaks in while another person is speaking. Most often, this is because the person is very enthusiastic about the conversation. Try to control interruptions by asking the person to hold the thought until the other speaker has finished his/her thought.

Conversation Monopolizers-Some members are more outgoing than others. Cut short a longwinded member using tact. Make sure that everyone has a chance to contribute to the lively discuss. Engage more reserved members by posing open ended questions but don't badger those who do not want to participate.

Keeping on Topic-If members start to wander off the subject, bring them back to the topic at hand. Members should contribute to the flow of the discussion by keeping personal references to a minimum.

Listen-Whenever necessary, rephrase a member's comments or question so that everyone understands what is being asked. Be open, learn from the thoughts of others and always acknowledge that members will have different opinions about a subject. Everyone should have the opportunity to offer new thoughts.

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RULES FOR GREAT READING GROUPS

Members must enjoy reading and be eager to weigh and consider what they read and then share their responses.

Members must be willing to listen.



At the meeting there should be only one discussion taking place at a time – splinter discussions should be discouraged.

Most groups need a group coordinator – someone who is in charge of such things as meeting dates-and in most cases this role should be rotated.

Most discussions benefit from a discussion leader who is prepared to keep the discussion going and is diligent in letting each member have a voice.

In selecting books all members should have a voice – meaning that not every book will be each member’s personal choice.

Each member must be committed enough to give the selected book a full reading including finishing the work and to attend meetings regularly.

When starting your group agree on guidelines – make them clear – and stick to them.

When in trouble return to your focus which is the book.

Confront your divas before they spoil the group.

If you are not enjoying your reading group – and cannot fix it – drop out and start or find a new one.

HOW TO BEGIN YOUR READING GROUP DISCUSSION

Use name tags so the participants get to know each other.

Use an ice breaker activity if this is your first meeting. Go around the room and ask the participants to name their favorite book or least favorite book and why.

Introduce the book by presenting a short biography of the author.. You can also Goggle the author’s name and discover a great deal of resources on the author and his/her works.

Read several reviews of the book to the participants. These should include both positive and negative reviews.

Provide background information on important aspects of the book such as the Chinese custom of foot binding that was prominent in Lisa See’s **Snow Flower and the Secret Fan** or the art of Vermeer when reading **Girl in Hyacinth Blue** by Susan Vreeland or the architecture style of Frank Lloyd Wright when reading **Loving Frank** by Nancy H



Distribute copies of any author interviews you find in your informational searches.

DO NOT ASK: Did you like the book? This should not be your first question. This is not the point of the group, and this question goes nowhere.

TIPS FOR LEADERS

Remember that the leader serves the group, not the reverse. A leader's job is to: keep the ball rolling, maintain order, and keep the discussion on track.

Use active listening.

Even if you use a list of standard questions, come up with questions specific to the book being discussed to add depth to the dialogue.

Ask members to come with 3 questions to generate thought and discussion, marked passages to read, or relevant articles.

Encourage conversation about the idea, not necessarily the plot.

Start and end on time.

Clarify ambiguous responses. If you don't understand a member's comments, it's likely others feel the same way but are hesitant to speak up.

Be comfortable with a little silence. It gives people a chance to think an idea through and then express themselves. You can get some thoughtful observations this way.

Recognize when the group has become too fixed on one aspect and move the discussion along to another point.

Know when to wrap things up.

DIFFICULTIES TO OVERCOME WITH READING GROUP MEMBERS

Leaders will serve as “referees” of each group.

1. Boredom. The selection of books to be discussed becomes boring to the members. Those books that are chosen are not provocative and do not lend themselves for a good discussion.
2. Avoid having one person take over the entire conversation. Everyone should have an opportunity to add to the discussion.
3. Everyone should finish the book. It is hard to carry on an intellectual conversation if a member hasn't finished the book. The group must know that in this setting, the members are “allowed” to give away the ending and not keep it a secret just because one or a few people did not complete the reading of the book.
4. Everything that is discussed must flow from the narrative. A separation of personal information and issues and the discussion of the book must be maintained.
5. Members may not use bad, foul language.
6. Members may not make flippant and ill-considered remarks. All members must respect the insights and responses of everyone else in the group.
7. Members should not interrupt others in the group.
8. Members must not stifle the opinions of others.
9. Try to keep the group under 20 so good, high quality discussions may be carried on.
10. Participants should not be late as this is disruptive to the group.
11. Have members turn off their cell phones before the start of the meeting.
12. Consider “no handiwork” such as knitting and cross-stitching. Again these hobbies are distractive to other participants no matter how good a member is in multi-tasking.

Discussion Questions You Can Use with Any Book

- If this book were to be made into a movie, who would you cast for the main characters?
- Why was this title chosen for the book?
- How does the cover art reflect the themes in the book? If you don't think it does, what would you depict on the cover if you were the editor and jacket designer?

The following section is adapted from <http://book-clubs-resource.com/running/discussion-questions.php> and Reading Group Choices www.ReadingGroupChoices.com.

Discussion Questions for Fiction

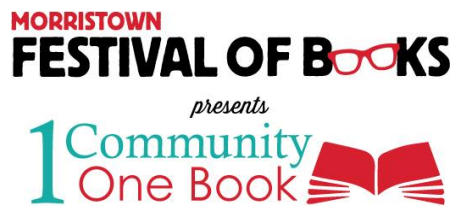
The following general questions can be applied to any novel, and they provide a good starting point for creating your own discussion questions for a given work.

- What was unique about the setting of the book and how did it enhance or take away from the story?
- If the book is from the historical fiction genre, what would be the advantages or disadvantages of living during this time period? Would you like living in this time period? Why or why not?
- What specific themes did the author emphasize throughout the novel? What do you think he or she is trying to get across to the reader?
- What are the major conflicts in the story?
- Who are the prominent characters in the book?
- Do the characters seem real and believable? Can you relate to their predicaments? To what extent do they remind you of yourself or someone you know?
- How do characters change, grow or evolve throughout the course of the story? What events trigger such changes?
- In what ways do the events in the books reveal evidence of the author's world view?
- Did certain parts of the book make you uncomfortable? If so, why did you feel that way? Did this lead to a new understanding or awareness of some aspect of your life you might not have thought about before?
- How would you react if you were in the same situation?
- Have any of the events in this book ever happened to you? How did you resolve the situations?
- Did the storyline change your opinion of an event, place or time period? How?
- If the author were to write a sequel to this book, what do you think would happen to the characters?

Discussion Questions for Nonfiction

While many book clubs choose to only read novels and other works of fiction, there are many fascinating works of nonfiction that make for excellent discussion. Biographies, memoirs, essays, and historical accounts can all be very good reads, with topics ranging from politics and religion to science and technology. The following questions should help provide some ideas for discussion.

- What did you find surprising about the facts introduced in this book?
- How has reading this book changed your opinion of a certain person or topic?
- Does the author present information in a way that is interesting and insightful, and if so, how does he or she achieve this?
- If the author is writing on a debatable issue, does he or she give proper consideration to all sides the debate? Does he or she seem to have a bias?
- How has the book increased your interest in the subject matter?



Resources for Reading Groups

There are many lists of successful and popular books that have been compiled by librarians, reading group members and book lovers who love to discuss books in their reading groups.

Just by doing a Google search will bring up hundreds of good choices for reading groups.

Please check your local library's catalog to see if they own titles and for additional books on how to start and lead a reading group.

Due to the popularity of reading group and book clubs, a wide range of novels and memoirs about being a reading group member or relishing a life of reading have been written in the past several years. Please check your local library's catalog for available titles in these two genres.

The Book Club Companion: A Comprehensive Guide to the Reading Group Experience
by Diana Loevy. NY: Berkley Books, 2006.

The Book Club Cookbook.
By Judy Gelman. NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 2012.

Book Lust: Recommended Reading for Every Mood, Moment, and Reason.
By Nancy Pearl. Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 2003.

Book Lust To Go: Recommended Reading for Travelers, Vagabonds and Dreamers.
By Nancy Pearl. Seattle, Sasquatch Books, 2010.

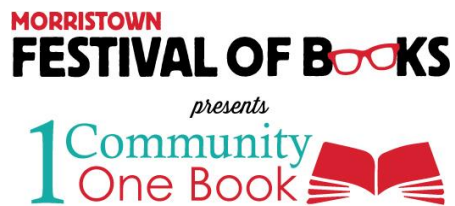
The Book That Changed My Life: 71 Remarkable Writers Celebrate the Books That Matter Most to Them. NY: Gotham Books, 2006.

Good Books Lately: The One Stop Resource for Book Groups and Other Greedy Readers.
By Ellen Moore. NY: St. Martin's Griffin, 2004.

More Book Lust.
By Nancy Pearl. Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 2005.

Now Read This: A Guide to Mainstream Fiction.
By Nancy Pearl. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2010.

Read It & Eat It: From Irresistible Beach Reads to Timeless Classics.



By Sarah Gardner. NY: Hudson Street Press, 2005.

Reading Oprah: How Oprah's Book Club Changed the Way America Reads
By Cecilia Konchar Farr. Albany: State University of New York, 2004.

Reading Women: A Book Club Guide for Women's Fiction.
By Nanci Milone Hill. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2012.

Recipe for a Book Club: A Monthly Guide for Hosting Your Own Reading Group.
Mary O'Hare. Sterling, VA: Capital Books, 2004.

Running Book Discussion Groups: A How to Manual.
By Lauren Zina John. NY: Neal-Schuman, 2006.

Websites:

www.bookbrowse.com

<http://www.readinggroupguides.com>

<http://www.goodreads.com>

<http://www.goodbookslately.com/recommendedbooks/readsmartguides.shtml>

<http://www.book-clubs-resource.com/>

www.randomhouse.com/resources/bookgroup/book_group_guide.html

http://www.sanantonio.gov/library/fiction/fic_discuss.asp

<http://sbcl.sbschools.net/html/booktips.html>

Presented by One Community One Book Committee