

BOOK GROUP HOW-TOS

Getting Started

Before (or at) your first meeting, discuss:

- When, where and how often your book group will meet
- How long each meeting will last
- Whether you will serve refreshments
- The role of the leader (or if you will have one)
- Who develops the discussion questions
- What types of books you will read and discuss
- Review some basic guidelines for meetings, including:
 - Treating each other with respect
 - Listening to what each person has to say
 - Not interrupting
 - One person talking at a time
 - Giving due consideration to each others' ideas

Choosing Good Books for Discussion

Look for books with complex characters that are forced to make difficult choices under difficult situations.

Books that spell out everything leave little to discuss. Most mysteries, westerns, romances and science fiction/fantasy fall in this category.

Try the following types of books:

- **Books with unclear endings.**
For example, not everyone agrees about what actually happened in Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*, James Buchan's *The Persian Bride* or Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*.
- **Books you can read together.**
You can discuss both books at the same meeting or in separate meetings. Examples: *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azir Nafisi and *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov; *Truth and Beauty* by Ann Patchett and *Autobiography of a Face* by Lucy Grealy; *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* by Marjane Satrapi.
- **Books that raise many, many issues.**
Examples: *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest Gaines, *The Sweet Hereafter* by Russell Banks or *Angle of Repose* by Wallace Stegner.

Not everyone will like every book the group chooses. That's OK. We all have different likes and dislikes. Some of the best discussions come from the kind of books that people either like or dislike intensely.

Reading a Book for Discussion

Reading a book to discuss it is different from reading for pleasure.

Ask yourself questions, read carefully, and imagine yourself in the story. Think about the style and structure of the book. Does it have personal meaning for you?

- **Make notes and mark pages as you go.** This may slow your reading, but saves time searching for key passages later.
- **Ask tough questions of yourself and the book.**
- **Analyze themes.** What is the author trying to say in the book.
- **Get to know the characters.** Consider their faults and motives and what it would be like to know them.
- **Notice the book's structure.** Do the chapters begin with quotes? How many people tell the story? Is the book written in flashbacks? Does the order make sense to you?
- **Compare to other books and authors.** Themes often run through an author's works. Comparing one author's book with another's can help you decide how you feel about the book.

Leading the discussion

- Have 10-15 open-ended questions that can't be answered "yes" or "no." Or ask each group member to bring one discussion question.
- Let the discussion flow naturally.
- Push members beyond "I just didn't like it" statements. Ask them to describe why a book was unappealing. Books that inspire strong reactions – positive or negative – lead to some of the best discussions.
- Balance the discussion between personal thoughts and responses to the book. Groups that spend a lot of time reminiscing or sharing personal reflections are no longer book discussion groups.

Learning More about an Author

Discussion leaders may want to bring background information about the author and book to a meeting. Try Bookbrowse.com or check to see if the author has a website. Or consider taking a look at CLPL's *Contemporary Authors* print series.

Coming Up With Good Discussion Questions

Examine the Book

1. How does the title relate to the book?
2. How believable are the characters? Which character do you identify with?
3. What makes the main character sympathetic, or unsympathetic?
4. Why do certain characters act the way they act? Do they have an ax to grind, a political ideology, religious belief, or psychological disorder?
5. How does the author use certain words and phrases differently than we would normally use them? Does the author make up new words and, if so, why?
6. Are the plots and subplots believable and interesting? What loose ends, if any, did the author leave?
7. How is the book structured? Flashbacks? Many points of view? Why do you think the author chose to write the book this way?
8. How does the way the book is arranged, help or detract from the ideas it contains?
9. What types of symbolism do you find in this novel? What do these objects really represent? How do characters react to and with these symbolic objects?
10. What themes – motherhood, self-discovery, wilderness – recur throughout the book?
11. How is the setting of the book important to the theme?

Draw conclusions

1. What is the great strength – or most noticeable weakness – of the book?
2. What did the author try to do in the book? Was he or she successful?

Think Outside the Book

1. What is the author's worldview?
2. Does this book fit into or fight against a literary genre? Does this book typify a regional (Southern, western) novel?
3. Does the book address broader social issues? Does the author take a stance on, for example, anarchy versus capitalism? How is a particular culture or subculture portrayed?
4. Where could the story go after the book ends? What is the future of these characters' lives? What would our lives be like if we lived in this story?
5. How does this book compare to other books you've read? Would it make a good movie? Is there a film adaptation of this book? What is brought out or played down in the film version?

For more information, contact us:

Crystal Lake Public Library
Adult Services Desk
815.459.1687 x7
Ihaveaquestion@crystallakelibrary.org

Adapted from: **Seattle Public Library Book Group How-Tos**