

Book Club How-to's

From the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library

Ideas for setting up a book discussion group

Before you get started:

Once you figure out these details, the fun begins - reading and talking about good books!

When, how often, and where will your book club meet?

How long will the meetings last?

Will you serve food?

What's the role of the leader, or will you even designate a leader?

What types of books do you want to read - fiction, memoirs, nonfiction, a combination?

Contemporary works, classics, both?

Who makes up the questions for the group to discuss?

Choosing books for discussion:

Choosing what books to read is one of the most enjoyable, often frustrating, and certainly one of the most important activities the group will undertake. One of the best parts of belonging to a book discussion group is that you will be introduced to books you're unfamiliar with, and books that fall outside your regular areas of interest. This is good! Remind people that there can be a big difference between "a good read" and "a good book for a discussion." (See next section.) It's always a good idea to select your group's books well in advance (at least three months works well). You don't want to have to spend time at each meeting deciding what to read next.

What makes a particular book a good one for a discussion?

Probably the most important criteria are that the book be well written and that it explores basic human truths. Good books for discussion have three-dimensional characters who are forced to make difficult choices, under difficult situations, whose behavior sometimes makes sense and sometimes doesn't.

Good book discussion books present the author's view of an important truth and sometimes send a message to the reader.

During a book discussion, what you're really talking about is everything that the author hasn't said - all those white spaces on the printed page. For this reason, books that are heavily plot driven (most mysteries, westerns, romances, and science fiction/fantasy) don't lend themselves to book discussions. In genre novels and some mainstream fiction (and often in nonfiction), the author spells out everything for the reader, so that there is little to say except, "I loved the book" or "I hated it" or "Isn't that interesting."

(Incidentally, this "everything that the author hasn't said" idea is why poetry makes such a rich topic for discussion.)

Other good choices for discussions are books that have ambiguous endings, where the outcome of the novel is not clear. For example, there is no consensus about what actually happened in Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*, Sara Maitland's *Ancestral Truths*, or James Buchan's *The Persian Bride*.

It's important to remind the group that not every member is going to like every book the group chooses.

Everyone may read the same book, but in fact, every member is reading a different book. Everyone brings her own unique history, memories, background, and influences. Everyone is in a different place in his life when he reads the book. All of these differences influence the reader's experience of a book and why she may like or dislike it.

There are also pairs of books that make good discussions.

These can be discussed at one meeting or read and discussed in successive months. Some examples include "A Dangerous Friend" by Ward Just and "The Quiet American" by Graham Greene, "The Hours" by Michael Cunningham and "Mrs. Dalloway" by Virginia Woolf, and "The Poisonwood Bible" by Barbara Kingsolver and "King Leopold's Ghost" by Adam Hochschild.

Finally, there are some books that raise so many questions and issues that you just can't stop talking about them.

These may not be enjoyed by everyone in the group, but they're bound to lead to spirited discussions: Ernest Gaines's "A Lesson Before Dying", Russell Banks's "The Sweet Hereafter", Andre Dubus III's "House of Sand and Fog", Frederick Busch's "Girls".

How to read a book for discussion:

The best books are those that insinuate themselves into your experience: they reveal an important truth or provide a profound sense of kinship between reader and writer. Searching for, identifying, and discussing these truths deepen the reader's appreciation of the book.

Reading for a book discussion - whether you are the leader or simply a participant - differs from reading purely for pleasure.

Asking questions, reading carefully, imagining yourself in the story, analyzing style and structure, and searching for personal meaning in a work of literature all enhance the work's value and the discussion potential for your group

Make notes and mark pages as you go.

Ask questions of yourself and mark down pages you might want to refer back to. Making notes as you go slows down your reading but saves you the time of searching out important passages later.

Ask tough questions of yourself and the book.

Asking questions of yourself as you read means you don't know the answer yet, and sometimes you never will discover the answers. Don't be afraid to ask hard

questions because often the author is presenting difficult issues for that very purpose. Look for questions that may lead to in-depth conversations with your group and make the book more meaningful.

Analyze the themes of the book .

Try to analyze the important themes of a book and to consider what premise the author started with. Imagine an author mulling over the beginnings of the story, asking himself, "what if _ " questions.

Get to know the characters.

When you meet the characters in the book, place yourself at the scene. Think of them as you do the people around you. Think about their faults and their motives. What would it be like to interact with them? Are the tone and style of their dialogue authentic? Read portions aloud to get to know the voices of the characters.

Notice the structure of the book.

Sometimes an author uses the structure of the book to illustrate an important concept or to create a mood. Notice how the author structured the book. Are chapters prefaced by quotes? If so, how do they apply to the content of the chapters? How many narrators tell the story? Who are they? How does the sequence of events unfold to create the mood of the story? Is it written in flashbacks? Does the order the author chose make sense to you?

Make comparisons to other books and authors.

Compare the book to others by the same author, or to books by other authors that have a similar theme or style. Often, themes run through an author's works that are more fully realized by comparison. Comparing one author's work with another's can help you solidify your opinions, as well as define for you qualities you may otherwise miss.

Leading the discussion:

Research the author using resources such as Current Biography, Contemporary Authors, and Something About the Author. Find book reviews in Book Review Digest and Book Review Index. The Dictionary of Literary Biography gives biographical and critical material. These resources are probably available at your local library. The Internet is another good source for reviews of the book, biographical information about the author, and questions for discussion

Come prepared with 10 to 15 open-ended questions.

Questions that can be answered yes or no tend to cut off discussion quickly.

Alternatively, ask each member of the group to come with one discussion question.

Readers will focus on different aspects of the book, and everyone will gain new insights as a result.

Questions should be used to guide the discussion and keep it on track, but be ready to let the discussion flow naturally. Often you'll find that the questions you have prepared will come up naturally as part of the discussion.

Remind participants that there are not necessarily any right answers to the questions posed.

Don't be afraid to criticize a book,

but try to get beyond the "I just didn't like it" statement. What was it about the book that made it unappealing? The style? The pacing? The characters? Has the author written other books that you liked better? Did it remind you of another book that you liked or disliked? Some of the best book discussions center on books that many group members disliked.

Try to keep a balance in the discussion between personal revelations and reactions and a response to the book itself.

Of course, every reader responds to a book in ways that are intimately tied to his or her background, upbringing, experiences, and view of the world. A book about a senseless murder will naturally strike a chord in a reader whose friend was killed. That's interesting, but what's more interesting is how the author chose to present the murder, or the author's attitude toward the murderer and victim. It's often too easy to let a group drown in reminiscences. If that's what the whole group wants to do, that's fine, but keep in mind that then it's not a book discussion.

Sample questions for your discussion:

How does the title relate to the book?

How believable are the characters? Which character do you identify with? Is it possible to identify with any of these characters?

Is the protagonist sympathetic or unsympathetic? Why?

What themes - motherhood, self-discovery, wilderness, etc. - recur throughout the book? How does the author use these themes? Do they work?

Why do certain characters act the way they act? What motivates a character to do something that she would not normally do? Does she have an axe to grind, a political ideology, religious belief, psychological disorder? Is there anything that you would call "out of character"? Does the character grow over the course of the story?

What types of symbolism are in this novel? What do these objects really represent? How do characters react to and with these symbolic objects?

Think about the broader social issues that this book is trying to address. For example, what does the author think about anarchy versus capitalism as a means of life? How is a particular culture or subculture portrayed? Favorably? Unfavorably?

Where could the story go from here? What is the future of these characters' lives? What would our lives be like if we lived in this story? Could the civilization portrayed really exist? What if?

What does that character mean when he says " _ "? How does the author use certain words and phrases differently than we would normally use them? Does the author make up new words? Why would he do that?

How does the arrangement of the book help or detract from the ideas in the novel? Does the arrangement contribute to themes or symbols? How is the book structured? Flashbacks? From one or multiple points of view? Why do you think the author chose to write the book this way?

Does this book fit into or fight against a literary genre? How does the author use [science fiction, humor, tragedy, romance] to effect in the novel? Does this book typify a regional (southern, western) novel? How?

How does this book relate to other books you have read? Would this book make a good movie? Is there a film adaptation of this book? How does the film compare to the book? What is brought out or played down in the film version?

Is the setting of the book important to the theme? Why? How realistic is the setting?

What did the author attempt to do in the book? Was it successful?

What is the author's worldview?

Were the plot and subplots believable? Were they interesting? What loose ends, if any, did the author leave?

What is the great strength - or most noticeable weakness - of the book?

For more information, contact:

Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library

1000 Fourth Ave.

Seattle, WA 98104-1109