

The Reading Group Center's Tips for Book Club Discussions



STARTING OR JOINING A READING GROUP

Reading groups offer book lovers a wonderful opportunity to meet new people who share their interests, enjoy stimulating discussion about interesting topics, and best of all, read great books! Whether your group is an intimate one organized with friends or a large one run by professionals, the goal is the same—to meet other readers, share theories and opinions, and develop a more enriched understanding of the book.

Not sure how to get started? Read on for information about how to join a group or how to start one of your own. Then, when you're ready to take the next steps, browse our ideas on how to run a successful group meeting!

GETTING STARTED

Interested in joining a group or organizing one of your own? Not quite sure how to do it? Here are a few tips to get you started:

TRIAL RUNS

Not sure that a book club is for you? The best way to find out is to attend a meeting of an existing group and see what it's like. Most local bookstores and libraries offer open groups that meet on-site on a regular basis and welcome walk-ins and new members. Ask at the front desk about existing groups—their themes, meeting times, and membership policies. Most likely you'll find at least one that interests you, and there will be no pressure to join if you find it's not what you are looking for. Or join a group online! Many online bookstores and book review sites host book discussions, often including live chats with authors.

JOINING A GROUP

Interested in joining a group but don't want to start one on your own? Again, your local bookstore or library is the best place to start. They often sponsor a variety of different groups which are open to the public, providing the location—and often the leaders—for group meetings. Many bookstores even offer discounts on bulk purchases for reading groups that register with their store, while libraries take advantage of the inter-library loan system to ensure that club members have access to book club selections.

If neither of these options appeal to you, check their bulletin boards for private groups looking for new members, post a listing online, or contact your local church, synagogue, alumni club, or professional association—even if these organizations don't have groups already, they'll likely be able to put you in contact with other interested readers.

STARTING A GROUP OF YOUR OWN

It's easier than you think! All you really need are a few avid readers and a good book. There are no set rules. Reading groups can be single sex or coed and may vary in size. You may find that smaller groups (4-12 members) tend to provide the liveliest discussion and allow each group member to participate. Quite often groups are formed by friends—try calling a few of yours who enjoy reading and suggesting that you all read the same book. Then meet informally over lunch or dinner to discuss it. If that doesn't work, post a notice at work, in your church, or synagogue; place an ad in the paper; or contact the local branch of your college alumni club or professional organization.

TIPS FOR MEETINGS

The most important part of a reading group is, of course, the books. But no matter how good the book, it's sometimes hard to get a great discussion started. Whether you're a first-time group leader looking for general tips on what to talk about or an established group looking for ways to liven up your discussions, we've compiled a set of tried and true ideas—culled from our newsletters and suggestions from actual reading group members—to help.

Do Research

Look for materials that will supplement your reading. For example, try looking for interviews in newspapers, magazines, and Websites to see if what the author has to say about his or her work provides additional insights into the book. Does any of it seem autobiographical? Are there any cultural or historical aspects that you can research to supplement the discussion? If you find them, bring both positive and negative book reviews to the meeting so that you and the other members can discuss whether you agree or disagree with reviewers' assessments of the book.

Attend a Reading

One of the easiest—and most rewarding—things you can do with your group is to read a book and then attend a reading by the author at your local bookstore. Many stores will even arrange for the author to meet personally with groups registered with the store who have read the book in advance of the appearance. Ask your local bookstore for a schedule

of authors who will be in town in the coming months. You'd be amazed at how enriching the experience can be!

Take a Trip

At first, this may seem like an impossible idea, but in fact, many reading groups enjoy combining their reading with travel—from day trips to local museums or historical sites to extended vacations to foreign countries! It's up to you to set your limits—and to be creative. Are you reading a book that's set in the Renaissance? You could take a trip to your local art museum to view its collection of Renaissance art, or you could organize a trip to Florence to get a more multifaceted, firsthand experience.

Read Authors In-Depth

Consider focusing on a specific author's books—either for one meeting or a series of meetings, tracing his or her progression as an author, the changing themes in the various works, and the effects of biographical events on the writing. You may want to include a biography as part of your list to provide your group with a better understanding of the author's life and times.

Focus on a Theme

Choosing titles on a specific theme, such as love and war, or a subject, such as current events or history, is a great way to compare and contrast books with each other.

Explore a Different Culture

One of the most rewarding aspects of reading is the opportunity it provides to expose you and your group to new cultures and civilizations. Think about our current selection. Can you bring some of the cultural aspects of the book to your meeting? Consider the music, food, and customs described in the book and try to re-create some of that for your group. If you are reading a novel set in Japan such as *Memoirs of a Geisha*, consider including the tea ceremony in your meeting. Find a book with instructions for the ceremony—or a particularly descriptive passage in the novel—and give it a try. If your book is full of references to a certain artist or composer, bring a sample of that person's work and share it with your group. Experiment with new kinds of foods, or sample a restaurant that specializes in the cuisine of your chosen culture.

SETTING UP THE MEETING

You've chosen your first selection, so now what? Here are a few simple things that will help your discussion run more smoothly:

Choose a Discussion Leader

While a leader is not necessary, many groups find that having one provides focus to the discussion and helps to make transitions from one member's comment to another's. Often the person who suggested the book becomes the discussion leader, but your group can also rotate leaders, appoint a permanent group leader, or invite guest speakers—local teachers, librarians, booksellers, etc.—to lead discussions. There are even professional book group leaders for hire. Call the Association of Book Group Readers and Leaders (ABGRL) for more information.

Set a Meeting Time

Most groups meet every 4 to 6 weeks, and discussion tends to last 2 to 3 hours. You may find it helpful to designate a certain amount of time for socializing—either at the beginning or the end of the meeting—so that your discussion of the book can proceed uninterrupted. Of course, finding a day and time that works for everyone may be difficult—you may want to consider setting regular meeting days and times to allow members to plan ahead.

Pick a Place

The most popular meeting place for most reading groups is a member's house. Often members take turns hosting the meeting to alleviate the pressure on one person. But there are plenty of other options as well. Your local bookstore or library may have a space that you can reserve free of charge for your meeting, as may your church, synagogue, community center, or place of employment. If you are meeting with people you do not know, it may be best to choose one of these informal, public spaces—or a restaurant or pub—for your meetings until you feel more comfortable.

STARTING THE DISCUSSION

Once you've taken care of the details, it's time to focus on the discussion itself. Here are some suggestions for a lively, stimulating meeting:

Come Prepared

Many groups ask each member to bring at least one question to the meeting to help generate discussion. It can also help to ask members to mark up their books as they read—making notes of favorite passages, key scenes, and questions that arise. Background information can be equally important to have at hand during your discussion—author biographies, interviews, reviews, historical background, cultural information, etc. It is usually the group leader's responsibility to provide these materials, as well as a list of potential discussion questions. Your local library and the Internet are good resources for this kind of information.

Set the Tone

The atmosphere of your group meeting is entirely up to you. The more creative you are, the livelier the discussion will be, and the more enjoyment you'll get out of the experience. Does your group prefer to meet for a social hour before discussion starts? Would you like to meet more casually over dinner? Can you bring some of the cultural aspects of the book to your meeting? Consider the music, food, and customs described in the book and try to re-create some of that for your group. If you are reading a historical novel set in England, try meeting for high tea. If your book is full of references to a certain artist or composer, bring a sample of that person's work and share it with your group. Experiment with new kinds of foods, sample a new restaurant, or take a field trip to a place that has some relation to the book you just read. Better yet, ask your local bookstore for a schedule of authors who will be in town in the coming months and plan to read one of their new books before their arrival. Then attend the event with your group. You'd be amazed at how enriching the experience can be! Most importantly, relax and enjoy the discussion.

Source: <http://reading-group-center.knopfdoubleday.com/>