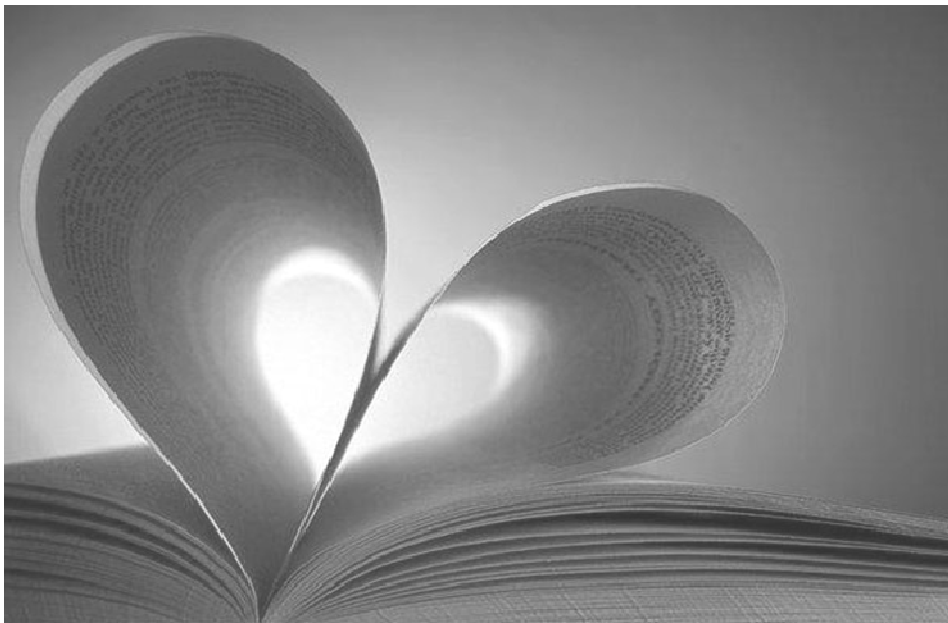


Book Group Survival Kit

A collection of resources for book lovers



“Reading groups are to the literary world what slow food is to our fast food nation. They encourage people to slow down and think deeply about themes, characters, and plot. They encourage discourse in a culture where most communication is by text message.”

-The Women's National Book Association President Joan Gelfand

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Why Join A Reading Group/Book Club?

From: http://www.bookbrowse.com/bookclubs/advice/index.cfm/fuseaction/starting_club

A book discussion group (sometimes referred to as a 'book club', sometimes as a 'reading group') is simply a group of people who get together on a regular basis to discuss books. There are so many reasons to join a book club or start your own. They can be an excellent way to enjoy books more and challenge your mind, they can also encourage you to read more, or to read books that you might not normally choose. In short, most people join a book club, or start their own, in order to have fun, make friends, stimulate the brain cells and meet like minded people!

How To Find A Book Club/Reading Group to Join, or Publicize Your Own

Many reading groups start when a few friends get together and decide that they'd like to meet to discuss books on a regular basis. Therefore, if you want to start a group - who better to start with than existing friends who share your similar tastes and interests?

Equally, if you're looking to join a reading group your first stop should be to ask your friends if they're already part of a group or know somebody who is - but don't be hurt if a friend says that he/she is in a book club but that they're not open to new members, as one of the important dynamics of a book club is its size, and therefore many groups rightly restrict their membership to a limited number of people.

If you're new to an area or want to expand your literary horizons in the company of a new group of people, a good place to start looking (or posting your own announcement) is your local library. Also, many local bookstores will have notice boards or will be able to put you in touch with people - they might even run a book club from the store.

Finding people with similar time constraints and interests as your own can be a plus. For example, if you have children in school, consider posting a notice in the school magazine or on the notice board. Community centers and local newspapers can also be good resources for finding a group or publicizing your own.

Because book clubs/reading groups are most often groups of people meeting informally, often in private homes, there is no one stop resource, online or offline, for finding local groups across the USA (let alone across the rest of the world). Having said that, with a little search engine legwork it's likely you'll find some clues to groups in your area - especially if you live in an urban area. For example, recently I was asked to find a book club in New York - a quick Google search using the terms 'book club new york' produced a wealth of potential links, including one site specializing in information for newcomers with links to all sorts of clubs and groups, including book clubs.

Questions To Ask Before Starting your Own Book Discussion Group, or joining an existing Book Club!

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. At the end of the day, all it takes to start a book group is to get two or more people together and start talking about a book. However, thinking through these questions will give you the best chance of creating a happy and cohesive book club that enjoys meeting to discuss, and disagree about, books - an environment where new friendships can be made and existing ones can be strengthened.

- How many people?

A very small group is cozy but could fall apart if a couple of members drop out or can't make a meeting. A very large group can work but needs to be run on a more 'formal' basis in order to be sure that the conversation stays on track and everybody gets a chance to contribute.

Suggestion: Six to eight people is a good size to start with. It's a small enough number to fit inside somebody's home or around a table in a cafe, gives everybody a chance to voice their opinions, and if one or two members can't make it to a meeting, or drop out altogether, there are still enough people left to form a good discussion.

- What type of people?
Do you envisage your reading group/book club being all women, all men, or mixed? How about 3-4 couples getting together, or mothers with children (with one of you taking it in turns to babysit)? Do you want people to be about the same age - or how about mixing different generations (such as a mothers and daughters book club)?

Suggestion: Look for people with some common ground (e.g. all women, all couples, all 30 somethings) or make a point of mixing things up so that there isn't one individual who stands out. For example, one man in a group of women may find himself defending the 'man's point of view' rather than discussing his own viewpoints - not necessary a bad thing, just something to take into account.

- What is the purpose of the group?
Are you looking for serious conversation focused totally on the book, or are you happy with some off topic conversation triggered by something that the group has read?

Suggestion: Differing expectations is probably the leading cause of book club strife. If one person is expecting to spend the entire time in deep discussion while another signed up thinking there would be a token book discussion plus lots of chat somebody's going to be disappointed! Agree how your group will run at your first meeting and then try to stick to this formula, unless you agree as a group to change it.

- How many books do you want to read and how often do you want to meet?
Do you want to meet every week, once a month, every quarter - it's up to you? Do you want to discuss more than one book at a meeting (not recommended unless they are linked by a theme which is the focus of your conversation - e.g. 2 books by the same author, 2 travel guides for the same place etc).

Suggestion: Start out by meeting once a month at the most, and discuss one book only with about 300 pages or less.

- Where will you meet?
Do you want to always meet in the same place, either somebody's home or a public space such as a room at the library or a coffee bar? Or do you want to rotate around each other's homes?

Suggestion: If the people in your potential group are already known to each other, then meeting in someone's home is probably the easiest option, but keep in mind that some people may not want, or be able, to host a meeting at their own home, whereas for other members - e.g. those with small children and no babysitter - it might be the only way they can attend. Therefore, be sensitive and flexible to each other's needs. If you meet at a different house each time, make sure that the host for that evening provides driving directions in good time before the meeting, and consider having someone else bring the snacks (that is if your group has snacks, and most seem to!) to take some of the load off the host.

- However, if the members of your potential group are not known to you (e.g. you've advertised for members) then we strongly recommend that you meet in a neutral place such as a coffee bar until the group is well established and you are all comfortable with each other.

There are two key reasons for this. The first is that meeting in a neutral location will allow your group to get to know each other as individuals without being weighed down by the preconceptions that come from visiting a person's home before you know that person. The other reason is simply a matter of basic safety - you wouldn't invite a blind-date to pick you up from your house, so don't invite a group of strangers into your house until you know them well enough to be sure you want to continue to meet with them.

- When will you meet and for how long?
Most groups meet in the evening, but others meet during the day, over the weekend, or even for breakfast! For example some people form clubs at their workplace, in which case it may be easier to coordinate everyone's schedules for an early morning meeting, or during lunch, rather than after work.

Suggestion: Select the time of day/evening that will best fit the profile of your group - and try to stick with the same time and day of week once chosen. For example, *1st Tuesday of each month, 7pm.*

For a relatively relaxed meeting schedule aim for about 2 hours. For example: Arrive at 7pm (meet, chat, snack - if food on offer, and discuss any book club issues such as what to read next). 7.30pm start talking about the book. 8.30pm close 'formal' discussion allowing for plenty of time for discussion/chat outside of the group before the meeting ends at 9pm. If you only have an hour to spare, consider setting up an email list to discuss things like choosing the next book outside of your meeting, or spend one meeting every 6 months agreeing your selections for the next six months and discussing any other issues that might have arisen.

Overall, it's best to have a basic structure that your book club can depend on, but to allow flexibility within this. What works for others may not work for your group. The bottom line is that if your book club's going to work the members must want to be there. Stay focused on making the group a fun and interesting place to be and whatever format your group takes it's sure to be a success!

Starting a Group

From: <http://www.book-clubs-resource.com/book-clubs/before-starting.php>

Book clubs -- or reading groups, if you prefer -- seem simple enough to throw together, but fledgling clubbers inevitably hit a few snags after the initial burst of momentum. Here are 5 things you may not have thought about but should definitely consider before starting one of your very own.

1. Decide what kind of books you want to read. Not every book club has to have a theme, but if you go the "random" route, you should at least collectively decide what kind of books no one wants to spend weeks struggling through. For instance, if you have a group of mystery lovers, other kinds of fiction might be ok, but self-help manifestos should probably be outlawed. Being honest (and up front) with your fellow readers in the beginning about the fact that graphic novels make your skin crawl will help avoid tension later.
2. Hammer out the logistics. You might think things like food, beverages and location are small details that matter less than the actual content of your club, but little sticking points like where to have it, who's bringing the food and -- perhaps most importantly -- what to drink while you're gabbing can become big issues later on. Figure out in advance whether whoever's hosting will provide the hors d'oeuvres or it's a potluck deal so no one ends up contributing more than their share and getting pouty.
3. Keep the invitation open. It's tempting to limit your book club to a certain number of people, just to keep things simple and make sure your get-togethers are manageable and comfortable. This is completely understandable, and if you've got a solid group and you know everyone's going to show up to every time, go for it. However, the truth about most book clubs is that they usually have a pretty substantial turnover rate. People have kids, they move, change jobs, adopt puppies and do all sorts of other things that make it impossible for them to show up to your club. This is why it's important to keep the invitation open. Always be on the lookout for potential members so your club doesn't fall on its face every time there's a big sale or a season finale.
4. Set out your style. Agree in advance what kind of style your club will have. Do you hate interrupters so much that you want to bring along a talking stick, or are you cool with everyone jumping into the fray (and may the loudest one win)? Should you choose only books that come with discussion questions in the back, or are you happy coming up with your own? And is it ok to talk about that month's book for a little while and then move onto more enticing subjects like work, kids, celebrity gossip and weekend plans? Set expectations in advance.
5. Moderate the moderators. It's a good idea to come to a mutual decision about how you want your moderators to get the job done. First off, is the hostess always the moderator, and does that person have carte blanche to choose whatever book they want the group to read? Do you like a structured environment, in which the moderator asks questions and calls on people to answer, or can he just throw out a discussion topic and let the commentary commence?

These are the kind of tiny details that can make or break a book club. Getting buy-in from the entire group in the beginning (as well as letting any new members know what's up when they're thinking about joining) will keep your club running smoothly so you can focus on the literature.

Starting a book group: the checklist

From: <http://www.realsimple.com/work-life/start-book-club-checklist-0000000001100/index.html>

Decide on the tone and theme of the club. Are you a die-hard mystery buff? A shameless Anglophile? Or an equal-opportunity bookworm? Decide whether you would prefer to focus on one genre or have an Amazon.com free-for-all, and set the tone, too: a scholarly meeting of the minds, a reason for a get-together, or something in-between.

Spread the word. Alert friends, family, and coworkers that you're starting a club; be sure to mention your expectations. Start collecting e-mail addresses. Your goal should be between 5 and 15 people, so everyone gets a chance to speak. New to the area? Post a flyer on the community board at your local bookstore or library, or check out Craigslist.org and ReadersCircle.org.

Figure out the best time for everyone to meet. Coordinating busy schedules can be the toughest part of this process, but finding a good slot will boost attendance down the line. (After dinner, when younger kids have gone to bed, is a popular choice.) Something to consider: Will the time of the gathering warrant a meal (hello, potluck!), snack, or BYOB (beverage)?

Pick a convenient location. Lots of groups take turns at one another's homes, but if you want to remove the pressure to entertain, then quiet cafes and restaurants are an easy option. You can even ask for a discount at one spot if you'll be meeting there regularly. If you want to get really creative, you can vary the meeting place and cuisine based on the setting of the book. Libraries, book stores, community centers and churches are other places to consider.

Go over the ground rules via e-mail. You'll want to give people an idea of what to expect: how often you'll meet (once a month is typical), how long the meetings will be (about two hours usually does the trick), and any other need-to-knows. Or let them know you'll make those decisions together.

Finalize how books and moderators will be chosen. For the first meeting, it makes sense for you to suggest the title and prepare a few discussion questions. Depending on the seriousness level of the group, you may want to do a bit of research on the author, time period, etc. Moving forward, every member should have a voice, with the group reserving veto power in case too many have already read the book or don't consider it appropriate. Don't want to deal with the committee selection process? Follow a best-seller list or recommendations from a website that focuses on your genre. P.S.: It's a nice courtesy for the moderator of the next meeting to send everyone a reminder e-mail a few days beforehand.

Consider starting a blog or an online forum to keep track of the club. Websites like bigtent.com or qlubb.com are free to join, easy to use, and allow all the members of your club to post on a communal site. You'll save time by eliminating the need for group e-mails, and it will come in handy when you're recruiting new members.

Your first meeting: the checklist

Start the first meeting by stating the agenda and making introductions. If some of your guests don't know each other, go around and have everybody introduce themselves. You may also want to do this at subsequent meetings if new members are in attendance. Ask that people tell the group a little bit about themselves and their reading interests. During the introductions, send a clipboard around so people can record their contact information, write down book suggestions, and sign up to bring refreshments or take a turn at facilitation.

State or decide the structure of the group
Some issues to discuss are:

- How often the group meets, and for how long, and where. Most groups aim for about 2 hours.
- Do you want to set rules about the books, such as pricing or content? If the group isn't genre-based, at least find out what kinds of books *no one* wants to spend time on. Are people willing to buy best-sellers, or want to stick to older books you can pick up used? Do you want a page limit?
- What are the members' expectations of the group, and what are their responsibilities as members?
- Do you want a facilitator for each meeting, and what are they expected to do? They might simply keep the group to a simple agenda, or it could be much more structured.
- Who takes care of communication between members between groups?
- Is the group gender-specific? All couples? A general age group? Or random?
What is the group's policy on smoking, pets, tardiness, and telephone calls during book discussions?
- Are members allowed to bring their children if they don't have a babysitter? Some will not mind if children are present, others will. The tone of a meeting is very different if children are present.
- What is the group's policy on food and drink? Is alcohol allowed? Encouraged? Banned?
- Can members bring a guest? Of course, this is the best way to build book club membership.
- Can new people join, or is there a limit to the group size? The ideal size is less than 10 -- otherwise, people just don't have an opportunity to discuss and contribute.
- How do people join your group? Book groups do tend to have a lot of turnover, and new people bring new energy. One approach is to invite a new person to be a guest for one, two, or three meetings, with the understanding that it's ok if the new person, or the group, doesn't find it a good fit.
- What's the group style? Do you use a talking stick so only one person speaks at a time and you go around the table, or do people jump in all at once? Are side conversations ok? Is personal sharing appropriate, or do you stick to talking about the book? Set your expectations in advance (and fill in newcomers).

- Decide on the first book to read. The easiest way to do this is to simply pick a book yourself -- try to pick one with wide appeal -- but if you don't want to go out on a limb, you can decide as a group. Ask that members bring their own suggestions and any external reviews that may help inform other members of the book. During the meeting have members vote on the next three books -- which gives members some time to find and read the books.
- Make sure that you decide on a name by the end of the first meeting. This will make the book club more official and members will feel like they really belong. Don't just hastily choose a name though. Have the members suggest ideas and everyone vote.
- Break out the refreshments and chat. Now that the really hard work is done, relax and let people talk and leave as they will. Be sure to speak to each person again so they feel more comfortable and invested in the group.

Other tips:

- Get some **nametags**. Especially at the first meeting, it's a good idea to have nametags so that people can start to learn each other's names. Placecards work nicely too.
- Deciding as a group which book to read next may take quite some time. Here are some ways on **how to select the books** to read:
 - Either take turns choosing, or put one person in charge of scheduling the books. This person should try to ensure that everyone who wants to suggest a book gets their chance. Some people may not want to.
 - Alternatively, you can have the members nominate 2-3 titles each at the beginning of the year, and take a vote on the final books to read. Pull out the calendar and schedule the titles and then stick to the calendar. That way it won't take up time at every meeting. You WILL have to devote a little time to this business matter at the beginning of each year.
 - If you want to make choosing books really easy, just agree to use the selections of an established book club, such as Doubleday's or Oprah's. Search the internet, and you'll probably find a book club whose selections interest you, no matter what genre(s) you prefer.
- At future meetings, you can let the person who suggested the book start the discussion, or assign a meeting facilitator beforehand. Then go around the circle in order at least once. This way everyone is encouraged and enabled to talk about what they've read, and the group can comment on their points.
- Be prepared to politely maneuver on to the next person if one member goes on too long.
- Make sure that the discussion remains lively and engaging, and that everyone is given a chance to speak.
- Don't panic if things are a little stiff in the beginning. People will grow more comfortable over time.
- If you're taking turns hosting or providing refreshments, be sure to remind people at the meeting before their turn.
- Many book stores offer discounts to book groups. Ask around before you buy. Use your libraries.
- Remember that not everyone WILL like every book, just as all people don't relish chocolate ice cream even though it may be delicious. Encourage people do be open-minded about books the group has selected.
- Manage the book club online -- it will significantly reduce the overhead. Place the book club meeting times/locations onto an online group site. For each meeting, put the book being discussed and link to any relevant reviews, author interviews, or reading guides. These online groups sites (including online group startups like Qlubb and traditional group lists like Yahoo! Groups) are also helpful in that they can send out automatic reminders and RSVP request.

Consider the structure of your group

- tone** social time? casual? book-focused? academic?
- theme** genre? equal opportunity bookworm?
- who** how much diversity do you want in membership?
who leads? pros/cons of having one facilitator or sharing the role
can you meet without a designated facilitator?
- when** be consistent if possible
- where** be consistent if possible
impacts how large the group can be
- why** be clear, or get clear together
- how** how do you recruit members?
-network through friends and families, collecting emails of interested parties
-flyers at bookstores, libraries, grocery stores
-Craigslist etc.
- how do you communicate?
email; qlubb.com;* phone tree
- how do you select books, and how often?

* Qlubb.com offer book clubs the ability to post meeting dates/locations, sent automatic meeting reminders, and add sign-up sheets (for discussion leaders and refreshments). An online clipboard also allows members to add online reading guides and connect to book reviews. There are many other group-management tools online.

Keeping notes for the group, either online or in a notebook, creates a history of the people, books, and group decisions involved. Inevitably, you'll want to consult this information.

Book Group Meeting Minutes (sample)

Date of meeting: _____

What book did we discuss? _____

Who came: (list attendees) _____ (include contact info of any people new to the group) _____

Any group decisions we made: _____

Our next meeting date: _____

Book we'll discuss then: _____

Facilitator for that meeting _____

Refreshments that meeting _____

Secretary that meeting **(person who keeps & distributes minutes)** _____

Sample meeting agenda

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Always start on time | Otherwise, you're training each other to be late. |
| Call the group together | A formal beginning can focus the group and mark a separation between social chatting and an actual discussion |
| Greet one another | Share your names every time, esp. if there are new people. Some folk have a hard time remembering names. Placecards are an option too. Try to make sure everyone feels individually welcomed. Record the contact information of any newcomers. |
| Review "housekeeping" items | A time to care for group business and review Ground Rules |
| Book Discussion | |
| "Next time" | Review what book you'll read next, who is responsible for what |
| Thank you/ Goodbyes | Recognize the people who contributed to the meeting, and formally close (marks a separation between group time and dispersing). |

Ground Rules for wonderful small group discussions

We are curious about
what others think

We listen and respond
with respect

We debate ideas,
not individuals

We welcome differing opinions

We try not to interrupt

We love to laugh



Burlington
Public Library

Burlington's Hub for Information and Ideas

What makes a book good for discussion?

From: <http://www.piercecountylibrary.org/reading-books/book-club-kits/book-club-tips.htm>

People often ask what qualities make a book a good candidate for book discussion. Probably the most important criteria are that the book be well written, have an interesting plot and three-dimensional characters. Good book-discussion books present the author's view of an important truth and sometimes send a message to the reader. A good book-discussion book often stays in the reader's mind long after the book is finished and the discussion is over. These books can be read more than once, and each time the reader learns something new.

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 plot driven (most mysteries, westerns, romances, and science fiction/fantasy) don't lend themselves to book discussions. In genre novels and some mainstream fiction, the author spells out everything for the reader, so that there is little to say except, "Gee, I never knew that" or "Isn't that interesting." Librarians, booksellers, and friends can often supply you with suggestions of good books to discuss.

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

-
1. Well-written, with style and beauty.
 2. Thought-provoking themes and characters.
 3. Not *too* densely written...not *terribly* long.
 4. Accessible, with enough narrative energy to keep us reading.

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 at the same time.

You can discuss both books at the same meeting or in separate meetings. Examples: "Reading Lolita in Tehran" by Azar 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; "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, and contrasting opinions make for good discussions.

- Branch out! Think about non-fiction, poetry, graphic novels, teen and children's books.
- Can't think of books? Google "best book club books" and fasten your seatbelt.
- You may want to avoid books published in the last year, or mega-popular ones, since they're more difficult to procure and people may not want to buy them.

The question of which qualities cause particular readers to avoid a book is important for individuals to ponder and is magnified when an entire book group makes selections. On one hand, it may be futile to pick books that several members are guaranteed to dislike or avoid reading. On the other, the group shouldn't be held hostage to the preferences of one or two readers, and risks becoming one-dimensional or dull by an overlimited selection policy.

Regardless of your group's method for selecting titles, the best practice is to have a discussion about what qualities might be "deal breakers" for your group. If a leader or small group makes selections, group input will help guide future choices. If individuals take turns making selections, this discussion will help prevent inappropriate or problematic choices for the upcoming meeting. You might even want to summarize the results of the discussion and make it available on a group web site or future selection meetings.

Long-standing groups should repeat this discussion of "deal breakers" every couple of years. Membership changes, reading interests shift, and what was once understood to be true may no longer be clear to many members. When you have this conversation, preface it by noting that the goal is not to generate a huge list of every potential offensive quality, nor is it to let pet peeves preclude books that the majority of readers might enjoy. The purpose, instead, is to identify qualities that a strong majority finds offensive or beyond the group's reading goals.

As part of this discussion, it is wise to identify options for individuals who find an upcoming title problematic. For instance, it might be a standing policy that individuals are allowed to report briefly on another book by the same author or to select a book with a similar subject or theme. This may become a benefit, adding dimension to the discussion. It's certainly better than losing membership because readers stay away when they don't like the book or allowing ill feelings to build because selections are viewed as insensitive, inappropriate, or just plain annoying.

If your deal breaker discussion reveals great discord about what is appropriate, your group might consider switching, in at least some meetings, to a thematic format where each member introduces a book that fits within a larger theme instead of reading a common selection.

1. PRICE

Even groups with an affluent membership may face a revolt if the cost of books is too high. It's a good policy to think carefully before selecting a title that's only available in hardback unless it's one of the select few titles targeted by booksellers for big price reductions. Don't expect libraries to bail your members out here: we often have hold lists for new titles marketed to book groups. Besides, there is something to be said for waiting to see if the book's prominence survives the original hype. Wait for the paperback option; keep price on your list of deal breakers.

2. AVAILABILITY

As a librarian, I cringe when I hear some of the titles selected by book groups. Titles that are out of print or only available through specialty publishers are just a bad idea. Selecting them is a mistake that will result in frustrated readers who don't come to the meeting. The error is especially common in groups that rotate selection through each member. This system can lead to some great, esoteric picks, but if you use it, require that selectors introduce their choices at least two months in advance and bring an alternate title in case something about the first choice proves problematic. Call your local library and see how many copies of the selection are in the system and if there is a big hold list. Check to see if it's in stock at local bookstores or back-ordered with major online booksellers. A little homework will save a lot of aggravation.

3. LENGTH

Modern lives are busy, and even hardcore readers appreciate room in their reading list for titles beyond the book group selection. So as much as I'd love for groups to be able to take on titles with pages counts over 500, it probably isn't a good idea. If your group is more social than literary, you might want an even lower limit, maybe under 350 pages. You can spread long titles over two months, but it's difficult in practice to divide the discussion. Do, however, consider pacing as well as length. Some long books read quickly while some titles of 350 pages or less can still be difficult to digest in one month for many readers. You might consider choosing one long book a year, skipping one meeting to allow extra reading time.

4. SERIES

There's nothing wrong with selecting the first book in a series for your book group. Frame the resulting discussion by asking whether readers will continue and why. Make a spoiler warning though: ask readers who have already continued in the series not to reveal later elements. Unless the series does not require sequential reading, later books in series are best skipped, even if the group read the earlier work. Some members will still have missed the first book, others will not want to continue, and even when everyone wants to proceed, much of the discussion may have been expended on the first title.

5. LACK OF DISCUSSION MATERIALS

Perhaps it's a pet peeve, but I'm always taken aback when I see book group leaders casting about too desperately for discussion questions. If you read the book, you are capable of writing your own discussion questions. Don't let the lack of a pre-packaged list of questions be a deal breaker. That said, a book by an unknown, first-time author with little biographical material posted on the web does lose one fruitful aspect of discussion. Lack of discussion materials is not the same as just plain difficult to discuss. I'll discuss literary elements that can be deal breakers because they inhibit discussion in the third post in this series next week.

6. GENRE FICTION

Genre fiction—mysteries, science fiction, fantasy, thrillers, romance, horror, graphic novels, and historical fiction—should never have been ghettoized by mainstream literary critics, English departments, and many readers. There have always been discussion-worthy works of literary merit in these genres. That's more true now than ever as dozens of our most gifted writers work their craft in genre settings. If you or your book group still avoid all genre fiction, it's time to drop the knee-jerk pooh-pooing and find a more sophisticated, considered opinion. Dismissing an entire genre (and by extension, its readers) as fluff isn't better than other forms of bigotry that generate antipathy for an entire group because one has encountered a few bad apples among its members.

7. PLOT-DRIVEN FICTION

One of the reasons that genre fiction is underread by book groups is that the greatest strength of many of its works is plotting. A clever, twisty-but-believably-integrated plot may be elegant, but it's easier to admire or to recount than it is to discuss. So to avoid a quick resolution to your discussion, seek out plot-driven works that also have strong characters, interesting conflicts and themes, and unusual settings.

Don't, however, give up on the plot discussion. It might just be a matter of asking the right questions about the plot. Discuss whether or not readers were surprised by particular twists, debate what was believable and what wasn't, ask if there were holes in the plot, or even delve into the what-ifs of alternate plot developments. Devote an occasional month to a thematic meeting where each reader introduces a plot-driven book instead of discussing a common book.

8. DIVISIVE SUBJECT MATTER

Elements such as politics and religion can lead to fascinating discussions, but can just as easily result in arguments. Whether or not to select books that focus on such subjects requires judgment, experimentation, and mindful facilitation, as some groups handle conflict more gracefully than others. I would encourage groups not to assume that they cannot handle controversial subjects without at least making a few attempts. These are big, potentially rewarding subjects to eliminate by default. Look for books with a considered, complex take on such subject matter, not those with an axe to grind. It never hurts to preface discussion with a reminder to be respectful to the beliefs and backgrounds of others.

9. POTENTIALLY OFFENSIVE SUBJECT MATTER

Each book group must work to determine its own threshold for sex, violence, dark humor, and other potentially offensive themes. On one hand, you don't want to neuter your group's reading, but on the other, you don't want to lose members who are consistently uncomfortable with selections. It probably isn't necessary to set policies about strong content in advance, but if you notice that discussion flags whenever such content is present, your group's leadership may need to screen titles more carefully, leaving time for someone (preferably someone who isn't *too* squeamish) to read certain books a few months before they are assigned to the full group. For most groups, such content shouldn't block discussion, but instead require more sensitive facilitation.

10. DEPRESSING OR DISTURBING SUBJECT MATTER

I've always felt that the carping about Oprah's book group selections being too depressing was a little misguided, and frankly, I feel a little sorry for readers who always need upbeat books. Reading about sad subjects or confronting conflict in good literature helps readers to develop their own ethics, morality, and coping skills. By reading about the challenges of others, we become emotionally prepared to handle our own challenges when they come. Facing the darker side of life can ultimately be cathartic, helping readers release the pain from their own tragedies. A book group, where one can process such content and the feelings it raises in the company of supportive friends, may be the best place to take on tragic material like the aftermath of crime, abuse, bigotry, illness, or death.

That said, groups do need to find a balance between lightness and dark. Reading only heavy subject matter may become oppressive or begin to numb your members' responses. If you've got a couple of sad books coming up, make sure to throw in a lighter title to cleanse the palate. Be sensitive to the life struggles of your individual members. If for instance, portrayals of rape, child abuse, or sad declines from Alzheimer's disease have provoked strong personal reactions from one of your members in the past, it may be best to steer clear of those subjects in the future.

11. LITERARY CHALLENGES

Nobody would suggest that every book needs to be the equivalent of *Ulysses*, and I know that some groups are designed with the express mission of pursuing fun and escapism, but I hope that literary challenges won't be a deal breaker for your group. Elements such as non-linear, intentionally disorienting plots, unlikable or untrustworthy protagonists, or extreme approaches to style may not make for fast reading, but they can lead to great discussions. By all means, seek balance between tough books and lighter selections, but your readers will find real satisfaction and pride, at least occasionally, in conquering a complex title. A good technique for facilitators is to forewarn readers about some of the more challenging aspects of upcoming titles. In discussion, treat complexities as well intentioned, not as attempts by the author to show off. Ask the group directly why the author chose to employ such devices, and don't settle for sneers or easy answers.

In the end, I hope your group will not let its list of deal breakers grow too long. You'll be happier in the long run if you can maintain flexibility and the sense that you are collectively capable of taking on all kinds of books. The key is to keep a sense of balance and contrast in your reading list. With that approach, you'll keep your discussions fresh and your group flourishing.

How to Pitch a Book to Your Group

from ReadingGroupGuides.com

For many groups that select books just once a year, 'tis the season to be making selections. This is the time for book club members to hone their pitch skills. Why? Well, the difference between the book you want to have your group read being selected --- or not --- could be the way it is pitched to other members of the group.

What to do:

- 1) Know what might interest your group about "your" book and touch on those points.
- 2) Be passionate. Talk about why the book moved you, kept you up all night or why you want to discuss it.
- 3) Frame your book by giving it some reference to other titles that your group enjoyed.

Here's an example. One group member I know pitched **The Paris Wife** by Paula McLain to her group. She did her homework, and when she presented it, she talked about how, to her, **A Moveable Feast** was Ernest Hemingway's story of these years, while **The Paris Wife** was the story from Hadley's point of view. If members of their group wanted to do some extra reading, they could read both books. She referenced other books like **Loving Frank** that the group had read and enjoyed. Her passion for the book came through. Touching about these angles, the group had voted to read it unanimously, which is a very satisfying feeling.

The rest of their eight selections will be **A Blind Eye, Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet, Little Bee, One Nation Under Sex, The Senator's Wife, The Widower's Tale and The Wizard of Lies**. What did not make the cut? Such terrific books as **Cutting for Stone, The Mitford Sisters, A Reliable Wife and Unbroken**. This is not to say that these are not all excellent selections. They are. BUT they were not presented in a compelling way that the group would select them. In some cases the group members could not be there to present their selections, and somehow reading their words was not the same as hearing and seeing their passion. Ponder this as you are "making a case" for your selection.

How to Talk About Books

By Neil Hollands

First attempts at book group discussion can be awkward. Heck, if you're like me, your hundredth book group can be awkward. When I was first getting started, I'd make comments that I thought were insightful, but the group would react as if I'd made armpit noises at the Mozart society or talked about my last bout with Montezuma's Revenge at high tea with the Queen. I'd make a remark that I considered mild and get a reaction as strong as if I'd been caught substituting plastic explosives for the Playdoh at the daycare.

OK, I'm exaggerating a bit (I do that), but most book group participants experience feelings of inadequacy when they join good groups and discover that their book discussion skills aren't up to snuff. No matter how much you read, your skill at that art won't necessarily translate into success in *talking* about books. My posts for the next few weeks will provide a few hints to help you show grace under book group pressure. This week I want to focus on three hints for getting ready for group.

1) READ THE BOOK. COME TO GROUP.

I know this seems obvious. I know life has many demands. But if you make the commitment to a book group, find time for the reading and the meetings. People will notice if you consistently fail to finish the book or miss most of the meetings. Once they do, it might not matter how brilliant your discussion is, their natural reaction will be to pay you just a little bit less attention. If you haven't finished the book, don't make a fuss, go on about everything that kept you from the reading, or ask others to limit their discussion so they don't give away plot points. They made sacrifices to read the book too: don't expect sympathy if you didn't. Just contribute what you can, and try to finish next time.

2) DO SOME HOMEWORK. BRING THINGS TO PASS AROUND.

Extra background always helps book discussion. Look up the author's biography or bibliography online. Read a review or two of the book. If the book is older, research the reaction to the book on its original publication or find out what other authors were popular at the time. Better yet, print these materials up and bring them to group to pass around. If you find a biography of the author with pictures, or a deluxe edition of the book, bring them along to share. How about pictures of the book's setting? Or a related (or surprising) work by the same author? All of these will add depth and fun to your group's discussion and help make you a popular member.

3) THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU WILL SAY IN ADVANCE

As many readers are, I'm a quiet person. I can be tongue-tied in a social setting. If you have this problem, or just don't come across the way you would like, you might find that it pays to quit trusting spontaneity: Prepare a few comments before you go to group. I've known some folks who even bring in a paper and read their comments. Most groups will be accepting, even appreciative, if such comments are BRIEF and well composed. But unless you're a chronically bad public speaker, it isn't necessary to go that far. Just make notes to yourself about three aspects of the book you would like to discuss, then find the appropriate moments during the group to bring these points up. If it helps, find other readers outside your group and try the

ideas out on them beforehand. With a little practice and forethought, you'll find you can make better comments during the actual group.

Advance preparation can pay extra dividends if each reader is bringing a different book. Organize what you will say about the book in advance and practice it once or twice to keep yourself from being too brief, or conversely, from rambling.

Three Things Not to Do

1) DON'T UNDERMINE YOURSELF.

It's understandable that you don't want to come off as a know-it-all, but I've seen many book group participants take this to the opposite extreme, trying so hard to appear modest or self-effacing that they practically erase themselves from the group. If you have the urge to apologize before each remark, to qualify every comment that you make, to constantly defer to other "wiser" readers, swallow the self-effacement and just make your point. Put yourself on equal footing: Pretend that you feel like your comments are worth hearing, even when you don't. Others will be more likely to appreciate your contribution if you act like you believe it yourself.

2) AVOID ABSOLUTISM.

On the other side of the scale, overly strong opinions put other readers in an uncomfortable position, creating one of the fastest paths to awkward silence. Maybe you hated the book, but to say so categorically isn't likely to get the discussion anywhere. It may stifle the comments of other readers who liked the book or felt mixed about it, but who don't want to be confrontational or exhibit bad taste. Conversely, your unabashed praise for the book may leave them with no role to play but the undesirable part of wet blanket. This does NOT mean that you shouldn't put your opinions on display, only that you should work hard to identify the specific pleasures of the book, the specific problems that you encountered. By getting specific, you'll turn a dogmatic, awkward comment into a conversation booster. A little verbal fencing is good fun, but you've got to leave others with room to riposte. No matter how strongly you feel about the book, opening the conversation with a verbal atomic bomb is likely to leave your discussion with nowhere to go.

3) DON'T BE THE DERAILER

Book group discussion is all about momentum, and nothing will make you unpopular faster than being the person who consistently throws the discussion off the tracks. Don't be so anxious to make your own points that you cut off those of others. Yes, the book might remind you of one of your favorite stories. Yes, someone else's comment might have been the perfect set-up for a pun or a joke. And yes, you might know a bit of trivia that might enhance the discussion, but BE CAREFUL. You don't have to speak every word that pops into your head. Put yourself on a five-second delay, and think quickly about whether or not your comment will interrupt others, change topics prematurely, or simply leave others with nothing to say in response.

Three Things To Do

1) BE SPECIFIC

Perhaps the most common problem that plagues boring book groups is overgeneralization. The enthusiasm wears thin fast when half a dozen people blandly repeat that the book is “good,” that it’s “well-written,” that they “REALLY liked it.” Dig deeper. Talk about how the author handled conflict, or characters, or setting. Talk about the pacing. Talk about what you found suspenseful. Consider what you would do if faced with the dilemmas the characters faced. Note which sections you found believable and which you did not. Search for the author’s life experience in the book’s events. Before you go to group, try to prepare three to five specific points of discussion and be prepared to use them.

2) DRAW CONNECTIONS

To find favor in your group, draw connections. Compare the book with others by the same author. Try sentences that start with “This reminds me of...”, “If you liked most of this book, but didn’t like the...”, or “Another author who handles this material well is...” If your group likes video, compare the book to films or choose a director and cast for its adaptation. Comparisons keep the conversation buzzing and send everyone home with lists of new books to seek out.

3) LISTEN. ASK QUESTIONS. BUILD THE CONVERSATION.

It’s simple, but so often overlooked. Sometimes we get so tied up in inserting our next brilliant comment that we fail to listen. We change subjects prematurely, cut off others, or let interesting comments get lost. You’ll make better conversation, and more important, better friends, if you quit worrying so much about talking and LISTEN. Ask follow up questions, particularly if someone’s point is good but not fully explained. Provide examples for the generalizations they might make. Try rephrasing them with “That’s interesting, what you’re saying is...” or supporting them with “I like that idea, tell us more.” Book groups are a team sport, and often the most valuable player is the one who makes everyone else better.

Read-Think-Talk About a Book

Print out this handy chart and tuck it inside your book.

1. Does the book engage you?
Do you want to keep turning pages?

2. Why or why not?

3. Explore the following:

Style

Does the author's use of language (**diction and syntax**) **draw you in, or put you off?**

How would you describe **the style: lyrical, pompous, complex and wordy, easy and straightforward, humorous, or offensive?**

Character

Are the characters convincing? Do they come alive for you? How would you describe them — as sympathetic, likeable, thoughtful, intelligent, innocent, naive, strong or weak? Something else?

Do you identify with any characters? Are you able to look at events in the book through their eyes — even if you don't like or approve of them?

Are characters developed psychologically and emotionally? Do you have access to their inner thoughts and motivations? Or do you know them mostly through dialogue and action?

Do any characters change or grow by the end of the story? Do they come to view the world and their relationship to it differently?

Plot

Does the plot hold your interest? **Does it keep you turning pages? Does it move briskly or unfold slowly?**

What is the story's central conflict? **Is it between characters, a character and society, a character and nature? Is it internal—an emotional struggle within the character? Does the conflict create tension, even suspense, to hold your interest?**

How is the story told— in chronological **order? Or does the author play with time, veering back and forth between past and present?**

Is the plot simple or complex? **Are there subplots related to the main plot—or separate, distinct story lines, operating independently and merging at the end?**

Were you surprised by the ending? Was information withheld till the end? Were there cliff-hangers at the end of chapters? Did that irritate you or make you want to read on?

Imaginative Development

Can you think of the work's **themes**, or its larger meanings? What might the author be trying to get at, to say?

Symbols intensify meaning. Can you identify any in the book—people, actions or objects that stand for something greater than themselves?

Does the author use **irony**—a different outcome, or reality, than expected. Irony mimics real life: too often the opposite of what we want or intend happens.

Source: <http://www.litlovers.com/howtoread.htm>

Tips for leading a small group meeting

The role of the facilitator is to make sure that discussions are satisfying, plans are developed, and commitments are made, in a manner that is enjoyable for all. A good facilitator is concerned about both a meeting's content and its style.

How to begin. Start on time! If you start late, you are rewarding those who are late and penalizing those who were on time.

Welcome Everyone. Welcome everyone who comes to the meeting.

Introduce People. Review people's names. If people don't know each other well, you might ask each person to share something quick with the group ("Name one of your favorite authors.")

Review the Agenda. Go over what's going to happen in the meeting, in what order. It's helpful to attend to "business" first, noting the date of the next meeting, the book chosen for that month, or any other details people need to know.

Seek Commitments. Once people have agreed to a task, note their names in the minutes or in your group's notebook. You may want to send out e-mail reminders before the next group, and you can remind them of their task then.

Review the Ground Rules. Ask everyone to speak respectfully and listen with curiosity. You may want to use the "Ground Rules" poster included in this kit, or your group may want to make their own standards of behavior. It's good to have an understanding about confidentiality and what that means specifically to your group members, and repeat it at the start of each meeting. Repeating these guides every time helps to develop an atmosphere of trust. No one participates where they do not feel safe to do so.

Encourage Participation. Everyone should be encouraged to speak and participate to get all points of view. Turn questions back to the group for their input. Ask people to comment on something just said. Compliment people on their ideas and thank them for their input. Ask open-ended questions. If there are very quiet people participating, you might try "make a space" for them by directing asking them a question, or simply noticing that they're quiet today and wondering if there's anything they'd like to share.

Respect Everyone's Rights. You may need to ask the more quiet people for their thoughts, and tactfully interrupt the longwinded ones to move the discussion along. Try one of these phrases for dealing with domineering people: "We've heard a lot from this side of the room. Are there people with thoughts on the other side of the room?" Or, "Let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet."

If several people are trying to talk at once, ask them to take turns. Try to identify who was first, second, etc., and make sure to get back to everyone in his or her proper turn.

Keep the group "on task." If the discussion is getting off-topic, point this out and redirect it back on course. If someone is getting hostile, argumentative, or needlessly negative, refer back to the "ground rules." If people are tending to be more social, ask the group to make a decision together about how they want to spend time.

Don't be afraid of silence. It's a useful tool. It gives people a chance to consider and collect their thoughts.

Don't be afraid of conflict. Disagreements will come up. If people are uncomfortable, recognize it out loud: "We're hearing some different opinions." Try and use some humor to lighten things up, but encourage continued discussion (about the *topic*, not each other) so that each person is able to be heard. If you're really at a loss, call a short break.

Conclude the meeting. Give a five- or ten-minute warning before the meeting ends. Take the last two minutes to draw a warm conclusion to the gathering. Thank people for coming and participating; thank people who helped in specific ways. Summarize the details and task-agreements for the next meeting.

Sources:

Process/Groundrules, from the BiNet USA Newsletter, December 15, 1992; Antleader Guidelines #C2: Running Effective Meetings, published by the Student Activities Office at the University of California, Irvine

Utah Department of Health:

<http://health.utah.gov/eol/utc/history/handouts/facilitator.pdf>

<http://health.utah.gov/eol/utc/articles/steve3.pdf>

Interested in more? Try these links:

<http://www.uchsc.edu/CIS/SmGpChkList.html>

The Job Description of a Group Facilitator

Great Meetings! How to Facilitate Like a Pro, by Dee Kelsey and Pam Plumb

- Plans and designs the meeting process
- Helps everyone get acquainted and feel welcome
- Clarifies the purpose of the meeting, the desired outcomes, the process to be used and the roles of each person
- Works with the group to establish and get buy-in to the ground rules
- Draws out opinions and encourages full participation from all members
- Clarifies communication between people
- Helps keep the group focused and on track
- Protects participants from attack
- Provides a safe place for creative ideas
- Listens intently
- Handles difficult situations and behaviors
- Names conflict when it arise and guides those involved through a negotiation of their differences
- Adapts the process as necessary to help the group move forward
- Makes process suggestions
- Encourages the group with affirmation and appreciation
- Monitors the pace of the meeting and any time deadlines
- Summarizes progress of the meeting at key points
- Guides the group in coming to conclusions, agreements, clarity
- Maintains neutrality, reflecting content and process back to the group
- Serves the whole group rather than individuals, and the process over content

General Discussion Questions

If a conversation lags, any of these can get it rolling again.

If you can get your readers to either walk in the shoes of some of the book's characters or to take a strong stance against some of their behaviors, you'll probably have a good meeting. Sympathy, empathy, antipathy are all emotional pathways to becoming involved in the book.

- Do you identify with the protagonist/s? At what point in the book were you most caught up in their decisions?
 - Which secondary character did you like the best? The least? Why?
 - What's the single most important decision or realization that the protagonist made during the course of the book?
 - Did you find character X believable? Would a real person have acted differently in situation Y?
 - What will happen to character X after the book is over?
 - Who would you cast in the different roles if this book was made into a film?
 - Did character X grow and change over the course of the novel? How?
 - Were some of the characters static types? If so, do you think the author made them so on purpose, or just failed to bring them to life? Could the static character be representative of a wider group or idea?
 - Which character is the most like you? How so?
 - Which character do you think is most like the author?
 - Did any of the characters remind you of anyone you know, of anyone famous, or of a character in another book?
 - If you could change one trait or action of character X, what would it be?
-
- What three words would you use to describe the tone, style, or mood of the work?
 - Is the author's life or experience reflected in the work?
 - How does this work compare with other items in the author's canon?
 - Did you make connections or comparisons between this book and others? Why? If you made a comparison, did this book compare favorably?
 - How does the book reflect the time period or culture in which it was published? If the book is not new, do you think it would still be written or published in this form if released today?
 - What, if anything, do you think will stay with you about this book?
 - Would this book make a good film? Why or why not?
 - Does this book inspire you to read more? If so, what does it make you want to read? If not, does it make you want to avoid a certain subject or style of writing?
 - If you could ask the author one question about the book, what would it be?
 - To what kinds of readers would you recommend this book? Who will probably not enjoy it?

When Difficulties Arise

Most difficulties in book groups come from a few main sources, and conflict in discussion is rarely one of them. Encourage group members to say what they think and counter each other, because disagreement creates stimulating conversation, and also helps the group to think about how the book affected them, or even go back for a closer reading.

More often, a group runs into trouble in one of these ways.

Problem behaviors

People who talk too much, or who won't stick to the topic, or other difficult behaviors can turn a great evening into a frustrating experience. Fortunately, there are all kinds of resources on how to deal kindly with these behaviors.

Lack of agreements

Taking the time to agree on group standards ("ground rules") lays the groundwork for stability, and provides a starting point where difficulties do arise.

Incomplete communication

People leave book groups because the focus changes or they feel they no longer belong in some way. This is not necessarily bad; groups evolve over time.

If you would like to avoid that situation, however, it's important to try and encourage everyone to fully share how they feel in every group decision, from what book to read next, to who brings what snacks. When people acquiesce to others without feeling their own position is heard, acknowledged, and valued, they begin to separate themselves from the group.

It does take some time and skill to keep a group happy and healthy over time.

Ask your local librarian about resources you can access to help your group learn these skills and increase their awareness. Isn't it worth it, for the pleasures involved in sharing books?

Coping with difficult participants

Adapted from "The Skilled Facilitator," by Justice and Jamieson.

One of the most challenging things for us to deal with as facilitators is the "difficult" participant. I'm sure you've all experienced this either as a member or leader of a group. You know the kind of person I'm talking about. He's the one who keeps interrupting the group to ramble incessantly on some seemingly irrelevant topic. It seems that everyone but him can sense the tension in the room and the members psychically screaming for him to "Please shut up!"

Or you maybe you remember the antagonist. The one member that has to disagree, argue, or criticize every comment someone makes.

We've been so conditioned to be "nice" in our culture that we feel tongue-tied and helpless when someone else isn't being so nice in our groups. As facilitators, and hopefully as participants too, we have got to learn to compassionately and effectively handle these kinds of behaviors.

General Guidelines

1. When possible, talk to them privately to point out the problem and coach them toward more desirable behaviors. Approach as a friend and ally, not as an authority figure.
2. Focus on a specific desired behavior.
3. Don't judge a person's behavior as right or wrong.
4. Try to maintain the balance between protecting the group from the distracting behavior and protecting the individual from undue attack.
5. Accept what they're doing. Describe it. Ask about it.
6. Legitimize their feelings, perceptions, or rights.
7. Work with their issues when it will be productive for the group, or defer the issues to a time when the group is likely to perform well, despite the distraction.
8. Be sure to have ground rules and norms for participation, so that the group can self monitor. Refer to the group for enforcement when someone is out of line.

The Joys of Conflict

From: <http://www.pitt.edu/~groups/hadindex.html>

Often times, **conflict** can be anything from a simple disagreement to an all out war. It can be observed in small groups when two or more people express differing and incompatible ideas. For example, if one person in the group wants to do something one way and another disagrees, the result is conflict.

There are a number of ways to solve these problems. Here are a few that researchers suggest:

- focus on common interests, not positions
- parties must be willing to discuss issues
- compromise

What is conflict?

Conflict can range from a simple disagreement to a war. You can observe conflict in a small group when two or more people express differing and incompatible ideas. For example, Anne suggests that her group presents a skit for its presentation, but John feels that skits are childish. That conflict must be resolved somehow in order for the group to complete its task of making a class presentation.

What are some myths about conflict ?

There are a number of myths that should be looked at when dealing in small groups.

- “Conflict is harmful and should be avoided.”
Although conflict can cause hurt feelings and in some cases can cause a group to dissolve, there are also some positive aspects to conflict. First, conflict can help a group understand the issues surrounding a decision or problem more completely than if the initial disagreements are not expressed. Second, conflict can improve a group's decisions. A logical outcome of members understanding an issue more clearly is an improvement in the group's decision making.
- All conflicts can be resolved if parties are willing to discuss the issues.
As we can see, not all conflicts are resolvable. Whether or not a conflict can be resolved depends on the parties involved and the reason for the conflict. For instance, conflicts involving moral issues cannot be resolved because of differences in assumptions and values. Conflicts over such things as goals within the group are easier to resolve because the basic values and goals are the same, so group members are more likely to see each other as allies rather than enemies which makes it easier to resolve the conflict.

Conflict Management Styles

- **Avoidance** occurs when any group member chooses not to disagree or to bring up a conflicting point. It is the basis of groupthink- members choose to go along with the crowd rather than bring up potential problems or disagree with the favored decision or proposal. This style can also be appropriate at times when the issue is not important to the group. The refusal to speak up at these times can often be positive because it will avoid a conflict rather than spark one.
- **Accommodation** is also called "appeasement" or "giving in". This occurs when one person gives into another without making much of an argument for a different point of view. One should be honest with themselves should they choose to accommodate. Don't give in if the issue is really important to the group or one's own interest. This can only hurt the group in the long run if not done with thought.

- **Collaboration** is sometimes referred to as the "win-win" style of conflict management. This occurs when the people in the conflict are motivated to meet the opposing parties' needs along with their own needs. Collaboration assumes that individuals will argue strongly for their points of view. They make sure when arguing that they do not say anything that will harm the relationship, but make sure they get their point across.
- **Compromise** represents a middle ground that can be called a partial-win solution for each party. Unlike the collaborative style, those using the compromising style give up something in order to get something in return. This style is typical for labor management and government bargaining.

The Care and Feeding of Book Groups

Does your book group feel tense, bored, tired, frustrated, even hostile? Looking to create a participation, encourage discussion, or show other readers that you notice them will roll downhill, eventually snowballing into a avalanche of good feelings. Try inserting one or two of these comments into your next meeting:

- “It’s good to see you. Thanks for coming.”
- “I’ve been thinking about _____’s comment about _____ last time. I just can’t get it out of my head.”
- “I’ve been repeating your story about, your review of, your funny comment regarding _____ to my friends ever since our last meeting.”
- “I’m curious to see what _____ has to say about this book. She had such witty things to say about this authors last book/It reminds me of one of his favorite books _____/It fits so well with her own experiences or areas of expertise.”
- “This book reminded me of our discussion on _____ because _____. That was a good meeting.”
- “What an interesting way to look at the book, _____. You always find the most interesting angles for discussion.”
- “I can always count on you to say something witty/smart/intriguing, _____, even when I don’t really love the book we chose.”
- “I want to go back to what _____ said about _____. It was such an interesting idea and I don’t think we explored it enough.”
- “This book was a challenge/this next book will be a challenge, but I think this group will do it justice because you are such insightful readers.”
- “_____, you don’t always talk much, but when you do, I can’t wait to hear what you’ll say.”
- “_____, we can always count on you to dig a little deeper.”
- “We’ll see you all next month, I can’t wait to hear what you’ll come up with then.”
- “It was fun to hear people defending their ideas so vigorously tonight. What a debate!”

Bringing Back the Buzz

Neil Hollands

Every book group in which I've ever been involved has gone through cycles. In the boom times, every discussion is fascinating, every book choice clicks, and the readers turn out in droves and get along swimmingly. But then perhaps a couple of books in a row will prove to be unhappy choices, a couple of your more difficult members will find new and creative ways to annoy the others, attendance will flag, and book group will become a tough slog where it feels like everyone is just going through the motions of a very tired dance.

Late summer is a likely time for these doldrums to settle over your book group, and in that spirit, I'm going to begin a long series of posts with suggested methods for bringing the buzz back to your book group. We've written about almost all of these methods before on Book Group Buzz, but in this series, I'm going to put them all into one place. I'll post them three or four at a time until I run out of ideas, which should be several weeks from now.

1. SWITCH YOUR CORE FORMAT OCCASIONALLY

Although there are thousands of variations, there are two basic ways to run a book group: everyone reads a shared book and discusses it, or the group selects an author or theme for the month and members select something that fits the monthly theme and introduce it. One method gets a conversation of more depth, while the other creates more variety and spurs new ideas. If you've always used one approach, the simplest way to revitalize is to switch to the other for a couple of months.

2. FIND A FILM ADAPTATION

OK, finding a film with literary origins isn't the easiest thing to do at the end of summer, but a group trip to the local multiplex, or the best video room your membership can muster is a welcome diversion. Watch for films adapted from books that your group discussed in the past, or read the book for the meeting prior to basking in front of the big screen. Afterwards, discuss what worked better in each format, and what was left out or changed for the film and why. Adaptations of two good nonfiction books, Michael Lewis's *Moneyball* and Mark Obmascik's *The Big Year* will arrive in September and October, while November offers a new adaptation of John le Carre's classic *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*. December brings Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and the American version of Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (for extra points, check out the European film as well.) No matter how you watch the film, popcorn is mandatory.

3. PARTICIPATE IN A BIG READ

Make your group part of something larger for a month or two by getting involved in a big read or one community/one book event. Check with a local library to see if any such events are forthcoming or check the lists of events kept by the [Library of Congress's Center for the Book](#) or the [National Endowment for the Arts](#). In addition to discussing the book in question, most big reads include other accompanying programs such as author talks and lectures on related material.

4. IT WAS A VERY GOOD YEAR

Take a time machine to the year or decade of your choice for one meeting. Select books that were published or popular during the year in question. While you're at it, run down the list of the year's bestsellers, review the current events from the year, dress up in period clothing, or cook foods that were popular at the time. As they report on the book they selected, ask each reader to share one personal memory from the year in question.

5. BACK TO SCHOOL

Those book assignments from school days—whether loved or dreaded at the time—greatly shape the readers we have become. If you're like me, you still remember some of those books better than many titles read much more recently. Take a meeting to revisit one of the books that you were assigned in school. You might choose an old favorite, or try a book that you suspect you were too young to appreciate at the time. Either way, this will be a meeting full of great books and funny memories.

6. SELECT THE WINNER OF A PRIZE

This activity may take multiple meetings. Why not put yourselves in the positions of literary prize judges? Many of the major awards publish a long list, short list, or list of nominees months before the big winner is announced. In the intervening months, give each meeting over to one or two of the nominated titles. When they're all read, select your own prize winner. You don't have to limit this activity to expensive new hardbacks, it works just as well to play the game retrospectively, comparing your selection to that ultimately made by the judges.

7. INVITE AN EXPERT

Looking for a little more depth in your discussion? Perhaps it's time to bring in some help. Invite a professor from a local university, a local writer, or anyone who is an aficionado of a particular work or author to lead a discussion. As with any guest, make sure to establish the visitor's role clearly with them in advance. Don't neglect internal expertise, encourage your more scholarly members to lead an exploration of one of their favorites occasionally. Don't limit your guest list to literature scholars either. You might also consider bringing in a historian, someone who knows the book's setting well, or a specialist in a field that is central to the book in question.

8. THE PAGES OF MY LIFE

Sometimes the best solution is to dig a little deeper. Presumably, you've all joined a book group because at some point books made a difference for you. Spend an evening exploring that. Ask each member to bring a book to the meeting that meant something special to his or her life at the time they read it. When one of my book groups tried this, the selections were surprising and fascinating, in several cases not the kind of book that one would have suspected from particular members. It's a good way to get to know each other in more depth and a chance to testify (Hallelujah!) to the power of books.

9. SAY IT OUT LOUD

Instead of spending most of the evening discussing a book, use most of your time in a meeting to actually experience a book. There's a magic to reading a book out loud that many have forgotten. Many books lend themselves to this approach: try children's stories, poetry, a group reading of a play, or any work that is rich in physical detail or crackling dialogue. Take turns reading so that you can hear each member's voice. Some of them might surprise you with depths of feeling or an ability to connect to the book that you wouldn't guess at from their regular conversational tone.

10. GOOD TASTE IN LITERATURE

Years later, I have fond memories of a meeting at a lovely Indian restaurant to discuss Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*. As Proust noted long ago with his madeleine cakes in *Remembrance of Things Past*, there's something about food and memory. This activity works especially well with books that evoke particular ethnic cuisines, whether they be Indian, Italian, Chinese, or down-home American comfort food. It also works with the bumper crop of great foodie literature that is being published today. Or read a book by Michael Pollan or Barbara Kingsolver, begin your meeting at a farmer's market, then hold the discussion over a picnic potluck. No matter how you implement this suggestion, you'll get a memorable meeting, a nice meal, and a strong sensory connection to the book.

11. GUILTY PLEASURES

We've all got them—for one meeting, flaunt them. Ask your participants to bring books that they love, but that they know aren't the finest literature ever published. This is a particularly good choice if your group

normally reads heavy, complicated books. Let your hair down for one month, and indulge your trashy side. Laughter is guaranteed and you may get to know each other better.

12. TRY A PAIR OF JOINT MEETINGS

Is the grass always greener? Find another book group in your area, and for two months, meet together, one meeting on each group's "turf." Try to demonstrate a typical meeting in each case, so that you can learn from each other, comparing and contrasting styles. Add a section at the end where the group reviews some of the titles they have tried in the last year or two, noting how successfully each was received. For added fun, have the visitors bring in the refreshments. If your group has a consistent discussion leader, you might also try trading leaders with another such group once a year just for the sake of variety.

13. SUPPORT A BOOKSTORE

In this age of e-book growth, it wouldn't hurt your group to support your favorite local bookstore. Look into the possibility of holding a meeting on-site, with time built in for your readers to browse the shelves and report on what they find. Or spend one meeting selecting titles from the store, the next reporting on what you found. Discuss the selection available in your favorite sections, or ask a knowledgeable employee in advance to highlight some of the store's features and policies that book group readers might like to know. One of the groups I'm involved in holds regular coffee klatches at the bookstore in the weeks between our book discussions.

14. READ LOCAL—THEN VISIT

If you live near a location that has been used as a setting in a book, consider combining a site visit with your discussion. You could hold the meeting on site, discuss the book first and then visit the site later, or if the locale allows, even bring books and read content aloud at the source of their inspiration. Make sure to consider whether or not the author succeeds in capturing the nature of the place or if something crucial has changed, was left out, or was described inaccurately.

15. TAKE ON SOMETHING EPIC

Book groups often search for quick reads that won't place too many demands on participants' busy schedules, but as an alternative consider trying something epic. Sure, it's a challenge, but it will also feel like an accomplishment. Read a long book over the course of two or three months. Read a short series together. Your big book will deserve a big discussion, so strive for more depth than usual, discussing the book chapter by chapter, sharing reading journals as you work your way through, or combining some of the other activities in this list with your epic read to make it an epic experience.

16. FOR BETTER, FOR VERSE

An evening of poetry can be a lovely alternative to the same old meeting. You can read a common book of poems, but I prefer to mix it up, asking each of your readers to try a new poet, bring some old favorites, or find a poem on a meeting theme. In any case, make sure that reading poems aloud is part of the program, whether it be individual readings of favorites or a group reading of some longer poems. Hearing the language spoken is an important part of the poetic experience.

17. FOCUS ON SIDE READING

Most book group participants read other books on the side, and I've always found that focusing on this side reading is a worthwhile diversion, particularly if your group always reads one common title. You'll know each other better if you know your preferences for reading outside of the group, and may discover shared interests that suggest book group titles or topics for later meetings. Whether you try it once a year for the whole meeting, include side reading two or three times a year, or make it half of the evening at every meeting depends on your group, especially how often you tend to push the limits of your allotted time. However frequently you choose to do this, encourage participants to bring the books with them to pass around. If the amount of time this activity takes becomes prohibitive, limit the number of books each reader can introduce, or go around in a circle, sharing one book per person, with repeat cycles only allowed if time remains.

All I Have to Do is Theme

By Neil Hollands
<http://bookgroupbuzz.booklistonline.com>

Yeah, I've heard it before: Your book group wants to achieve the shared joy that only comes from reading the same book together then collectively beating it into the ground with at least an hour of discussion. It's the current style for whole communities to join together in reading One Book, why shouldn't your group do the same? Besides, that's the way you've always done it... You might want to think twice.

There are many advantages to a different format, one in which each meeting of your group addresses a theme. Preferably, a short list of books that fit the theme is compiled before each meeting, perhaps with a few thematic questions to discuss. Members then make their own selections. At the meeting, someone gives a short introduction to the theme, then discussion proceeds around the group, with each member introducing the book or books they chose to read. Here are twelve good reasons to consider the thematic format:

- 1) Some freedom of choice in selection will keep your readers more happy. When they're happy, they are more likely to attend regularly.
- 2) Based on their own schedules, readers can choose which months to attempt long, difficult books and which will require a short, light selection. In a pinch, one can even choose to introduce an old favorite instead of reading something new.
- 3) The breadth of books you'll be exposed to will expand everyone's reading. You'll never go home from a meeting without a few new ideas.
- 4) If there's something you've been dying to read, you can probably find a theme in an upcoming meeting where it will fit.
- 5) The tone of meetings will be more positive on the whole if readers are responsible for their own selections. You'll avoid those awkward meetings where some readers love the book and others really hate it.
- 6) The thematic format divides discussion more equitably, as each reader in your group will at least speak about his or her selection. Everyone will develop enhanced skill at introducing a book to others.
- 7) There's rarely a dull moment in thematic meetings, and if there is, wait five minutes! You'll be on to a new book. Thematic groups usually pass books around the circle, so there's plenty of visual and tactile pleasure to be had.
- 8) No more fighting for the three copies of the book at the local library or the two copies for sale at the bookstore you all use.
- 9) Themed book grouping fits with the goals of libraries. It encourages circulation of a broader cross-section of the collection and provides a pleasant opportunity for librarians to provide readers' advisory.
- 10) Many excellent books don't make good selections for shared discussion. But those same books work well in a thematic group. If you like plot-driven novels, lighter reading, or many genres, you may find that a thematic group works much better.
- 11) If your group is fracturing because members have different tastes, thematic discussions can accommodate, even benefit from those diverse preferences. And diversity in books might encourage more diversity in your membership.
- 12) Worried about losing depth? Perhaps this will be a problem, but in most cases it is simply shifted: Instead of deeply discussing a book, you'll get a thorough understanding of a theme and how it has been treated in literature.

This approach isn't for everyone, but it's a good alternative that will work better for many groups. At the very least, your group should try an occasional theme instead of always sharing one book.

Taking It Further: Fun Ideas for Book Groups

- **Author visits** are not that hard to arrange. Authors often visit groups through Skype, telephone, or other virtual methods, and of course, local authors may even come in person. Start at the author's or publisher's website, well in advance. Aim for a half-hour visit, starting 15 minutes after your group's start time. Prepare with your group beforehand to have lively questions and tactful opinions ready.
- Many book groups enjoy sharing **food** that reflects the time or place of the book under discussion.... or even coming dressed in clothes that reflect the book. If your group has the energy for such celebrations, imagination is the only limit.
- Read a book which has been made into a **movie**, and then watch the movie together. Discuss the differences between the two media. Does the movie bring up different issues to discuss than the book did?
- Try a **book exchange**: Everyone in the group brings five books that they like but no longer need on those crowded shelves at home. Take turns to choose one book from the stash. Either send unclaimed books home with the person who brought them, allow those whose books were claimed extra picks from the pile, or donate what's left to the local library.
- Collect \$5 from each member and **donate** it to the local library. Most libraries will allow you to specify the kind of items you would like your gift to support and commemorate your donation with a book plate.
- Ask each member of your group to create a **list of favorite reads** (be more specific if you like), then compile the lists into a folded or saddle-stapled booklet. Make enough copies to share this gift with families and friends.
- **Online book groups.** Follow these links to find out how to join or start an online group.
<http://www.book-clubs-resource.com/online/>
<http://www.booktalk.org/online-reading-group.html>
http://dir.yahoo.com/Arts/Humanities/Literature/Organizations/Reading_Groups/Online/
http://www.dmoz.org/Arts/Literature/Reading_Groups/
- **Learn.** Discussions can be personal, funny, literary, or any other quality you can name. If your group has curiosity about more literary criticism, though, there's a great resource to use made just for book groups: <http://www.litlovers.com/about-litcourse>. Take free, short "courses" on plot, theme, irony and other topics.

Using Your Library as a Resource

Use your library's online databases

Public libraries have a treasure trove of online resources most people don't know about. Learn about yours. Some examples, using Burlington Public Library as an example:

- Biographical Resource Center (learn about your author)
- Literature Resource Center (good for academic approaches to books)
- Novelist (get ideas for what to read and discussion questions)

On our website (www.burlington.lib.wa.us) choose "Reference A-Z." Scroll down until you find the database you want. You can access these from home, 24/7, with your library card!

Use your library's reference staff

- Need book recommendations? Provide a list of books your group has and has not enjoyed, and ask for a list of books for the group to consider.
- Having challenges in your group? Ask for a one-on-one consultation. Someone with experience leading groups may be able to suggest some things to try (or at least listen sympathetically).
- Want a guest speaker or an author visit? The staff at your library can point you towards great resources and people.

Use your library's interlibrary loan service

If you plan in advance, you can ask your home library to get you enough books for your group to read. Learn your library's policies about interlibrary loan.

Use your library's space

Many libraries have meeting rooms just the right size for your group (usually for free). Meeting in public means no one has the burden of offering their home (or cleaning it). (You can also try coffee houses or tea lounges in your area who might like to host your group.)

Use your library's collection

Some libraries have book group kits: a number of copies of the same book, information about the author, book group discussion questions for it, and more, available for a long check out. Ask to see if your library offers these.

Also, we have books about book groups! At the Burlington library, check out:
(all in 372.44)

- *The reading group handbook : everything you need to know to start your own book club* / Rachel W. Jacobsohn.
- *The book club companion : a comprehensive guide to the reading group experience* / Diana Loevy.
- *Recipe for a book club : a monthly guide for hosting your own reading group : menus & recipes, featured authors, suggested readings, and topical questions* / by Mary O'Hare and Rose Storey.
- And *Book Lust*, and *More Book Lust*, by Nancy Pearl. (011.73)

Some of the myriad of useful websites for book groups

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

BookMovement <http://www.bookmovement.com>
Free registration allows use of the Essential Book Club Planner.

Booklist Online <http://bookgroupbuzz.booklistonline.com/>
Neil Holland writes for this site.

Generous Books <http://www.generousbooks.com>
Register your book club for special privileges and notifications.

Indiebound (was Booksense) <http://www.indiebound.org/indie-next-list>
Literary titles with helpful lists of book group choices that aren't always the tried-and-true.

LibraryThing <http://www.librarything.com/>
An amazing online community for readers. Keep your library online; find new books you'll like; get Advance Reader's Copies for free, and more.

LitLovers <http://www.litlovers.com>
Book reviews, discussion guides, and even free courses to learn about theme, symbolism, irony and more.

Morton Grove Public Library <http://www.webrary.org/rs/TOL.html>
A library's book discussion site, with an archive of books discussed in the past 14 years. Each title lists links to author information, discussion guides, and more.

Seattle Public Library <http://www.spl.org/library-collection/books-movies-and-music/book-groups>
A comprehensive and excellent resource with book group information and a 30-page list of recommended books.

Reading Group Guides <http://www.readinggroupguides.com>
This is an excellent resource for finding discussion questions and guides for books that are provided by the publishers.

Reading Group Choices <http://www.readinggroupchoices.com>
Win free books, read book group tips, book reviews, and more.

Online book groups. Follow these links to find out how to join or start an online group.

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

<http://www.booktalk.org/online-reading-group.html>

http://dir.yahoo.com/Arts/Humanities/Literature/Organizations/Reading_Groups/Online/

http://www.dmoz.org/Arts/Literature/Reading_Groups/

A Book Group Survival Kit

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For more information, visit our website at
www.burlington.lib.wa.us

and our blog, at
<http://libraryhubbub.wordpress.com/>

Want to register your book group in the
Skagit County Book Club Registry?

Want to indicate interest in finding a book group?

At the BPL website, choose “For Book Lovers” from the left-hand navigation
bar; then click on “Book Group Match Up,” to use our online forms.

Or,

See the bulletin board in the lobby of our library, and fill out a card.



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