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How to Start a Book Club

Book Clubs encourage you to read more, or to discover wonderful new books that you might not have chosen on your own. Most people join a book club, or start their own, in order to have fun, make friends, and challenge their minds!

Do you have a few friends, family members, neighbors, or co-workers who like to read? Then you have all you need to start your own book group! The Highland Park Public Library's Readers? Advisors have put together a useful guide to starting a book club of your very own, offering tips on book selection, library resources, research tools, ground rules, meeting format, and how to hold lively but focused discussions!

Getting Started

Finding Members

How do you find members?

Friends and relatives ? If you know two people who are interested, you have a book group! You may have a friend who is interested, and that friend may have a friend. And there you have it! You want to start small and only expand once you have figured out all the rules.

Acquaintances ? You want to talk to everyone! Friends of friends, people you meet at parties, people you see frequently in your community, at your kids? school, at the grocery store, etc. Network!

People connected with local institutions ? You can ask at your synagogue or church, volunteer organizations, clubs, bookstores, libraries, or similar local groups. These organizations may know of existing book clubs that are looking for new members or may know of individuals who are looking to start or join a club.

What are the magic numbers?

3 ? The perfect number to get started and make the rules. It is much easier to find new members once everything is established, and it is easier to bring up your book club in conversation. ?Well, I have to get ready for my book club now. Do you belong to a book club? No? Well you are more than welcome to come to ours!?

5 ? The minimum number for a good, satisfying discussion. With 5 people, you are more likely to have differing backgrounds and opinions, and that leads to good discussions!

12 ? Probably the maximum number you want. Some book groups have more because they assume 1/3 of all members will be absent on any given day. You'll need to consider where the book group will be held. Will you have room for more than 12? If there are more than 12 people, will every voice be heard?

What type of group do you desire?

When choosing individual members, there are several factors to consider:

Member demographics, including:

- Members? age
- Members? gender
- Members? marital status
- Members? reading preferences

Do you want everyone to be the same age? Do you want men and women or just women? Do you want this to be a group for singles only? Do you want this to be a ?mother /daughter? group, or perhaps a ?couples? group? Maybe you think that you don?t have a preference, but it is definitely something to consider before you begin! It is difficult to change the make-up of a group once it is established, and it is always easier to turn people away at the door than it is to kick out long-established members. You will also want to take into consideration the reading preferences of your members. If you want to create a group that discusses serious literary fiction, you probably don?t want to invite a member who only enjoys reading light romance novels!

Themes: Will your group focus on just one author? Only nonfiction? Only mysteries? Only books set in China? Only world literature? This is something best discussed at the outset, because many people have very specific reading tastes and will not be happy in a group that does not match their interests.

Academic vs. Social Time: Do you want your group to feel like a class or like a party? Most people want something in between, but, again, if a member comes to meetings expecting a serious discussion of the book and finds instead a social group who frequently go "off-topic," that member will be dissatisfied.

Note: A good member doesn?t have to like the same books you do, but s/he should be a conscientious reader, a good listener, and an intelligent and focused participant. You also want someone who is on time and attends meetings regularly. A sense of humor doesn?t hurt either!

Rules to Consider

At your first meeting, you will want to make sure everybody is on the same page and wants the same thing from the group. A good way to do this is to go once around the room with introductions and a brief discussion of why everyone is interested in joining the group in the first place. But even beyond these ice-breaker types of activities, the first meeting should be all about setting up the rules. Whether your group is more casual or more formal, everyone needs to know how things will be run and what will be expected of them in the future.

Date and time of meeting? This seems pretty straightforward, but you might wish to consider whether you will meet year round and what to do when a holiday falls on your regular meeting day. Your core group should determine day and time. It?s hard to build membership when potential members don?t know whether group meetings will suit their schedules! Since your core group is already committed to being part of the group, they should be the ones to decide. Try not to stray too far from your chosen meeting time except for on holidays or you?ll lose people who need to plan far in advance.

How long will discussions last? Will you build in time to socialize before or after meetings? It?s good to have a small period of time to break the ice, especially while the group is growing. Everyone will come in the door with something to say. You should try to limit this to about 10 minutes while waiting for late-comers to arrive, and then begin your discussion promptly. Save any additional socializing for after the discussion. Members with tight schedules will appreciate this since they can count on a finite period of time for discussion and can leave right after if necessary.

How many people will you invite to join your group? More than a dozen can make it difficult to be comfortable in a small room and fewer than 5 can mean that any absences severely impact a discussion. Most groups have between 8 and 12 members. Your core group should decide on an upper limit *before* issuing invitations. This is really a personal choice; more members can make a discussion lively, but fewer can make things cozier and more casual.

What will you do in the case of high absenteeism? If a member misses multiple meetings in a row, will he or she be replaced? If you have a large group, this might not be an issue for you. If you have a very small group, though, all absences will have a big impact on your discussion. You want members committed enough to prepare, attend, and participate.

Where will the discussions be held? Do you want to rotate houses? Does someone in the core group love to host and want to do it all? Will the meetings be held in a public place? Will you be flexible? Is it your turn but you?re in the middle of a home improvement project? Not everyone has the space to entertain, so this is something you?ll want to decide within your core group. Again, you might want to be reasonably flexible and creative, but make sure members are given

sufficient notice of a change in location. Consider meeting in public places rather than homes; some groups meet in coffee shops, restaurants, or even bars!

Will you serve refreshments at the meetings? If so, when and what type of food? Dessert and coffee? Hors d?oeuvres and wine? Do you want to set a budget guideline so the food doesn?t get out of hand and become the focus of the meeting? This can become a big issue if the hostess is forever running in and out of the room bringing in dishes and drinks. One suggestion is to provide a sideboard with beverages so members can help themselves during a discussion. If you offer additional snacks before or after the discussion, there?s not as much attention focused on the food. Conversely, if food is important to your group, build in time for it.

Will children be allowed to attend regularly, as a rare exception, or not at all? It might seem like a good opportunity to run a playgroup, but depending on the ages of the children, it can be extremely disruptive to a discussion, even if each child interrupts only once. Some groups are firm on a no-children rule, insisting that even children of the host be kept away from the discussion area. The makeup of your core group will determine which direction you want to go with this.

Will pets they be allowed in the meeting areas? Do you have members with allergies that might prohibit members with pets from hosting at home? This sounds like a picky detail, but allergies or fear of animals can make discussions very uncomfortable for some. If you can?t keep the pets out, you might want to take your discussion outside or to a public place.

Will you levy dues that go toward group costs? If so, who will keep track of them? You may have no need for this discussion if you do all your contact by email rather than mail, use leaders from within your group rather than hiring professional leaders, and have each host responsible for the cost of refreshments. If money will be an issue for your group, you should discuss this in advance.

Will you have a secretary to keep membership contact information and book lists? Even if you don?t think it likely at first, someone will end up doing this work! So you might just want to decide who it will be, and how you will replace that person after a time so the entire burden doesn?t stay with one member. A rotating schedule? A vote? Volunteers only?

Will you focus on a specific genre of book? This is something your core group should determine. If you want to discuss only mysteries, you should create a mystery-only discussion group. Otherwise, reading the chosen books can become a chore rather than a fun diversion. Your group can be firm on this point, or you can opt to focus mostly on one type of book and throw in something different once or twice a year to keep things interesting. (More on Choosing Your Books.)

Who chooses the books? Will the hostess of the month choose? Will the core group choose? Your core group should decide how to choose and who will be responsible for choosing. Some groups rotate, with the hostess of the month choosing the book. Others try to get to a group consensus at the end of each meeting for an upcoming discussion. (More on Choosing Your Books.)

How far in advance will you choose the books? Knowing the title several months in advance

helps all members obtain copies and be prepared. You should know two to three months ahead what you will be reading so that busy members can find time to locate a copy of the book and take their time reading it. Consider a schedule for choosing, with your core group choosing the first several titles. By the time you run through your initial list of 4-6 titles, you will likely have new members on board and can start choosing according to your schedule. For instance, if you start your first discussion with a list of four titles, at your second discussion you can add one title, and at each subsequent meeting you?ll add one more title so you?ll remain 3 months ahead in your choices. You can vary this in endless ways to suit your group.

Leadership

The Responsibilities of Leadership

Being the leader of a book group can be quite a responsibility! The leader or moderator will be something between a group chairperson and a host. It is the leader?s job to not only keep the discussion moving, but also to make sure that everyone in the room is comfortable and engaged.

He or she will need to:

- Prepare for the discussion
- Not dominate ?or let anyone else dominate?the discussion
- Keep the discussion flowing

Note: *For more information on moderating a book discussion, see the Running Meetings section*.

Professional Leader, or Member-Led?

Choosing the leader for your book group is an important consideration, with several different factors. Some groups choose to hire a professional leader from outside the group and others select leadership from within the group on either a permanent or rotating basis. There are pros and cons to both the professional and member-led options.

Hiring a professional leader, the pros:

1. Nobody within the group needs to prepare. The professional leader will do all the work needed to lead the discussion, including selection of the book itself.

2. The discussion will be focused and well-structured every time. When rotating leadership among group leaders, the quality of the discussion is likely to vary depending on the experience level of the individual leader.

3. Because the professional leader has no personal relationship with the members, he or she is better able to deal with possible "problem" members without fear of offending them or losing a friendship.

Choosing a member to lead, the pros:

1. Members are in control of the choice of books, meeting date/time, and the structure of the discussion. Generally, a professional leader will choose his/her own books and the members will have little or no say. Professional leaders also have a set time and structure for their discussions.

2. No extra expenses! Professional leaders can cost anywhere from $75 to $200 per session, possibly more!

3. With rotating leadership, the entire burden of preparation does not fall on one member every time and all members are able to have a sense of "ownership" in the group.

Finding a Professional Leader

Professional leaders aren't always easy to track down, and some areas may have more people in this profession than others. If you decide this is the route you want to take, however, here are some ideas for locating a professional leader:

1. Talk to your friends, relatives, or acquaintances who are in book groups. They may already be using a professional leader, or have hired one in the past.

2. Attend book discussions at local bookstores and/or libraries. Often, these organizations hire outside leaders, and those leaders may be available for private book groups as well.

3. Talk to English teachers at high school or community college. Teachers or professors may be willing to take a night or weekend to lead a discussion.

Running Meetings

As discussed in the Leadership section, leadership of a book group can be quite a responsibility. The leader is generally in charge of not only choosing the book to be discussed, but also moderating and directing the discussion itself, providing some background information on the book and author, and dealing with any problems that may arise during the discussion. Some groups get around this by hiring a professional, but if your group has gone the member-led route and is looking for some direction, we've compiled some tips for you on all the details involved in running your discussion.

BEFORE the Meeting

First of all, take a cue from the Boy Scouts and **be prepared**. If there are discussion questions available for your book from one of the many sources we?ve compiled here, the leader or discussion moderator should print those out and go over them, perhaps adding a few questions or taking notes on areas he or she particularly wants to focus on in the discussion. If there aren?t prepared questions available, the leader will need to write them, using generic questions as a base. At least 8 to 12 opinion- or interpretation-based questions (**not** yes-or-no questions) are essential to provide enough structure and direction for a successful discussion. Good generic questions are readily available on some of the online resources linked to above.

In addition to finding or creating book discussion questions, the leader should consider reading up on the background of the author and/or getting a little more information on the time period or setting of the book, if that would be helpful. This information can often be found in the Library's online databases. (You will need a valid Highland Park Library card number to log into these resouces.)

DURING the Meeting

Be supportive, be flexible, be a good listener!

The leader/moderator should:

1. Break the ice and make sure all members know each others? names

2. Make sure every member gets to speak at least once. A suggestion is to begin the meeting by going around the room and asking everyone for their initial thoughts about the book. This serves as both an ice-breaker and as a good way to bring up a lot of discussion points and opinions to pursue.

3. Keep the discussion on track. Socializing is fine to a limited degree, but needs to be kept to a minimum during the discussion itself.

4. Make certain discussion goes beyond simple ?I liked it/didn?t like it? statements. Draw people out with leading questions. The motivations behind strongly-held opinions can form the basis of interesting discussions.

5. Provide some direction to the discussion, but allow it to flow naturally into areas the members seem to find most interesting. Don?t feel compelled to stick to a pre-defined list of questions; if question 5 captivates the group?s attention, don?t stress too much about whether or not you get to questions 6, 7, and 8.

6. Encourage constructive disagreement rather than conflict. Don?t strive for complete consensus; everyone's thoughts and opinions are equally valid!

7. Make sure the discussion is well-balanced among participants. No one should dominate, and no one should feel left out.

Dealing with "Problem" Members or Difficult Discussions

The most common problems a group is likely to encounter during discussion are reticence and verbosity. You may have one or more members who barely if ever speak, and one or more members who do nothing but, even going so far as to interrupt other members!

Shy or Quiet Members

First determine whether the member's silence really is a problem. Some people prefer to listen and only speak when they have a well-considered point to make. Not speaking very often is not necessarily a problem, as long as they are still contributing to the discussion in some way. If, however, you truly have someone who never says anything, or seems uncomfortable about speaking up, you may need to find ways to draw them out. Consider making a point to chat with them one-on-one before the discussion begins, perhaps even ask them their thoughts about the book. This will help put them at their ease. In addition, you can then refer back to a point they?ve made to you but may not have expressed to the group. ?Oh, Sarah made a good point when we were chatting earlier?Sarah, why don?t you tell everyone else what you told me?? Also, if you don?t think it would make them too uncomfortable, you can always use the simple expedient of directly asking the quiet members their thoughts on the points currently being discussed.

Too-Talkative or Dominating Members

If you encounter someone who dominates the conversation, interrupts others, or even tends to be dismissive or critical of others? opinions in favor of her own, it may be a more important problem to address than a quiet member. A group member who behaves this way may make other members uncomfortable or even angry, and this can lead to tension among members if the problem is not addressed.

During the discussion, find ways to redirect conversation away from the too-talkative member. If the member has interrupted someone, remember who and what that person was saying, then go back to that person?s point as soon as you can, making a point to address the interrupted person by name and asking her to expand upon what she?d already said. If the too-talkative member simply goes on for too long about any given point, interject at the first polite opportunity to do so and, while validating her opinions, redirect by asking a question of the group. ?Jessica?s made

some great points! Group, what do you think about what Jessica said about Y? Do you agree?? If the too-talkative member is dismissive or critical of what others have to say, gently point out that while her opinion is certainly valid, others? opinions are as well and that it is okay to disagree. Then redirect, either by asking someone else?s opinion of what is being discussed or asking a new question altogether.

If the inappropriate behavior continues, someone may need to take the problem-causing member aside and explain to her how her actions are making the other group members feel and ask her to tone it down a bit.

Another option that might help with both the too-talkative and the too-quiet member is to institute a ?talking stick? policy. Choose some object to pass around the group. Only the member currently holding the object may speak, and the leader will determine who is next in line for the talking stick. This has worked well in some groups to formalize the speaking process and make certain that everyone gets equal input into the discussion.

And don?t forget?you can always use the two type of problem members against one another! Enlist the talkative one to help you draw out the quiet one, and enlist the quiet one to help you balance out the talkative one! Sneaky, but effective!

Choosing Your Books

Finding Good Titles for Discussions

There are a variety of resources a book group can use to track down books that will make good discussion titles.

Browsing the titles on a source like Reading Group Guides, Book Browse, or the Fiction_L booklists at can be a great place to start. (For a longer list of suggested resouces, see our Resources for Reading Groups page.)

Lists of ?recommended? books at your local library or bookstore can also be great resources, as can looking at the titles selected by libraries for their book group collections!

In addition to our ever-expanding Book Club Kit selections, the Highland Park Public Library provides quite a few booklists by theme or subject, including a collection of Recommended Reads lists that goes all the way back to 1992! In addition, we write book reviews of our own personal reading and post them online at our Bibliofiles blog. And, of course, you can always come over to the Readers? Advisors? desk and ask one of us in person?there?s nothing we enjoy more than talking about books, after all!

Making the Final Selection

When it comes down to the nitty-gritty of making the actual final selection for a discussion title, groups go about it in different ways. Some ask each member to bring a book choice to each meeting and a vote is taken as to which book the group will read the next time. Others ask the group or discussion leader to provide a small selection of 3 or 4 possible titles, and, again, majority vote rules the day. In other groups, the discussion leader picks the book with little to no input from members. Some groups set aside one or two meetings a year solely for discussing and choosing the next few months? worth of books. Whatever works for you, there are some important things to consider when choosing your books.

Themes

Some book clubs are entirely centered on a particular theme, genre, or author. There are book clubs that only read non-fiction, book clubs that only read fiction about women?s lives, book clubs that only read science fiction, and even book clubs that only read Jane Austen! If your group?s members have a particular interest in a fairly narrow area, a theme could be a great choice!

But even if you want a bit more diversity in your discussions, your group could still use a theme structure to help pick your titles. Perhaps a rotating theme arrangement would be more to your tastes?a few books in one area, then a few in another, and so on!

Themes that could help your discussion get moving might include such things as books about a certain country or part of the world; genres such as science fiction or mystery; award winners; books set during a particular period of history; or books by a particular prolific author such as Jodi Picoult or Joyce Carol Oates.

In addition to helping you narrow down your book selection further, a theme can also provide more opportunities for fun during your group meeting! Perhaps you?re reading fiction set in China?why not try out some Chinese recipes for your meeting snacks? Reading books about art, or gardening? Consider moving your meeting to a café at or near your local art museum or botanic garden and taking a walk around after your discussion ends! The possibilities are endless.

Discussion Potential

You want to have a good discussion about your book, right? Picking a book with a controversial subject, a surprising twist, or a complex subject is usually your best bet. Frothy, light-weight books are definitely fun to read, but hard to talk about later! Not everyone has to enjoy the book you pick; in fact, a difference in opinion often makes for a more satisfying discussion!

Book reviews can be a good way to get a sense of the discussion potential of a book. Bookmarks magazine provides concise overviews and excerpts from other reviews so you can get a sense of what people are saying. Other good sources of reviews are Bookpage magazine, newspaper book sections, and the fiction database NoveList, which can be accessed via the Library's databases page. (You will need a valid Highland Park library card number to access this resouce.) And remember: be adventurous! Book clubs at their best aren?t only about reading just the books members enjoy the most; they?re also about being exposed to a wider range of topics, opinions, and experiences than one would get reading on one's own!

Availability of the Book

Newer books are usually only available in hardcover, which can be expensive if you?re planning to buy the books each time. Bestsellers, meanwhile, often have very long waiting lists at public libraries! So if the group wants to pick a relatively new bestseller, you'll either have to wait a while until the library's waiting lists clear out, or you?ll have to resign yourselves to buying hardcover copies!

Popular older books, meanwhile, are usually available relatively cheaply in paperback copies...if they?re still in print! An easy way to check on whether a book is still in print is to look up the book at an online retailer such as Amazon.com. If the site has ?new? copies in stock, the book is in print and can probably be obtained fairly easily, but if they are out of stock and direct you away to used book sellers, it?s a good bet that the book is out of print and will be hard for your members to obtain in time for the meeting. Libraries often only have one or two copies of older books regardless of whether or not the book is in print or not, but may have no copy at all if theirs was damaged or lost after the book went out of print.

If you don?t want to buy your books, a good idea is to check your local library and a few other nearby libraries to see how many copies they own and whether any of them are available **before** choosing the book. It will be frustrating to the group if there are few or no copies available!

Keep in mind that if you pick the books far enough in advance, members can share copies amongst themselves!

Book Discussion Guides

And finally, you might want to consider whether or not there is a book discussion guide available for the title. Many publishers these days are providing book discussion guides and/or questions for their titles. Sometimes these are in the back of the book itself, but often they are available

online at either the publisher?s website or the author?s website. Some websites, such as Reading Group Guides and Book Browse, provide discussion questions for a wide variety of titles. In addition, many libraries, including Highland Park Public Library, buy multiple copies of books that would be good for discussions and create book discussion guides to go along with the titles. Highland Park Public Library?s book discussion kits provide biographical information on the author, discussion questions customized to the book, an interview with the author, a book synopsis, and any other material that might be of use to a group.

Some groups love the convenience of having information pulled together for them; others prefer to create their own questions and run the discussion their own way. Whatever your preference, knowing the availability of such resources can be an important factor in picking a title.

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