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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.

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