

A Guidance Booklet from Voluntary Arts Ireland



Setting up and running a Book Club / Reading Group

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THE POINT OF A BOOK CLUB IS:

- To get you reading
- To get you thinking
- To share thoughts
- To encourage good debate



MEMBERSHIP

The recommended number of members is 5 – 15, with the ideal number being 8 people. With small numbers of people it can be difficult to get a discussion started, and with too many people it can be difficult for everyone to have their say, especially shy people.

VENUE

The most important consideration about where to meet is that it needs to be quiet. Book Clubs meet in cafes, pubs, libraries, offices, schools and homes. Do check that everyone is comfortable using the sort of place chosen. If you decide to meet in member's homes the venue can be rotated unless one person has a really suitable space and is willing to consistently host the meetings.

ADMINISTRATION

There may be some administration of the group and the need for someone to take on the role of administrator. This could include reminding members of the time, date and place for the meeting, whether by phone or email; taking the phone calls of members who cannot make meetings; notifying if there needs to be a meeting cancelled; typing up and circulating the annual reading list; communicating with the library for books, etc.

This job could be rotated around the group monthly, 3-monthly or annually.

MEETINGS

Book Clubs meet on average once every 4 – 6 weeks for about 2 hours each time. Deciding on how often a group meet depends on how busy people are, if people are quick or slow readers and how interested they are in the chosen book.

Meetings can be informal and social with casual opinion exchange or follow more formal formats with serious, intensive discussions. The choice will depend on the members of the group.

CHOOSING BOOKS

There are a number of ways to choose books:

- The group draws up a book list for the year;
- Members take it in turn to nominate a book;
- The book is nominated by the host of that month's meeting;
- Reading list from Library;
- Online resources for Book Clubs;
- The group follow the reading list of one of the national book clubs (Radio 4's Book Club and Open Book, Channel 4 book group programme);
- Look for reviews in newspapers and magazines.
- Try past or present award lists or prize-winning novels (Pulitzer, Man Booker, Costa etc).

PREPARING FOR MEETINGS

Taking down short notes on a postcard while reading the book helps enormously when it comes to later discussion. Or sticking post-it notes next to sections of the book that interest you as you read. Points to discuss could include: your emotional response to the book, characterisation, themes, most memorable parts (descriptions/dialogue), strengths and weaknesses.

FRAMEWORK FOR DISCUSSIONS

The prime purpose of joining a Book Club is to discuss books and a strong book club has good expansive discussions about the book. Not everyone will agree all the time and this is what makes a club interesting! However, to ensure that the discussions are kept on track it is important to have a framework to follow.

The framework you decide to follow could include:

- A generic list of questions for discussion;
- Book club notes and discussion documents (provided by many publishers and found on publishers web sites);
- Reading notes and questions from large online book clubs;
- People writing their own questions and discussion documents when it is their turn to host a meeting.

LEADING DISCUSSIONS

Book clubs with assigned discussion leaders to facilitate meetings often have much better discussions than those who leave it as a casual 'free-for-all.'

To ensure that the discussions flow well and are a success:

- Decide the role of the facilitator - formal leader or casual presence to guide proceedings. In general a leader's role falls somewhere between that of a host and a chairperson. Therefore, it is their responsibility to keep the meeting on track, to make sure that all members have an opportunity to contribute while also preventing any one member from dominating the meeting and to keep things in order so that constructive debate is the result and not disrespectful argument, when there is a difference of opinions.
- Don't rush people straight into the discussion – especially if the club is relatively new and members are still getting to know each other. It is a good idea to allow some time for socialising and general chat as the more comfortable and familiar members feel with each other, the more willing they will be to offer opinions and ask questions during discussions.
- It is a good idea to start by deciding on how your club will facilitate the discussion.
 - Give everyone a turn to speak;
 - Set a certain time limit for each member to speak on a topic;
 - Informal exchange;
 - It is important to be flexible and let discussion flow.

- As discussion leader, you should be aware of each person's different styles of discussion and expressing themselves, so that you gently encourage those who may be shy or reticent and tactfully restrain the extrovert members who may be loud and inhibit other members. This also prevents the book discussion being sidetracked by members keen to share exciting personal news with others.
- If there are some members who have not finished the book – either from lack of time or interest – then focus discussion on initial reactions to the book and characters. While there is an expectation for all members to read the books assigned, remember that reading groups are meant to be fun, not a test, and to make allowances occasionally. If several members are struggling to finish the book, then you might need to reassess the time between meetings or even look at the type of books assigned.

WEB SITES

- www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/arts/bookclub
- http://bestsellers.suite101.com/article.cfm/planning_and_starting_a_book_club#ixzz0AxroEDQX
- www.bookgroup.info
- www.newbooksmag.com
- www.readinggroups.co.uk
- www.bookmovement.com
- www.readinggroupguides.com

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Fiction

The following general questions can be applied to any novel, and they provide a good starting point for creating your own discussion questions for a given work.

- What was unique about the setting of the book and how did it enhance or take away from the story?
- Was the author focused on particular themes? How did the author highlight them?
- Were they successful in getting these themes across to the reader?
- Do you agree with the author's views?
- Did the themes blend well together and arise naturally out of the story or did the author seem to be labouring a particular point?
- What was different or unique about the story's setting and did it enhance or detract from the story?
- Could you relate to the characters?
- Did you empathise with them and their plight?
- How do the characters evolve or change in the course of the novel?
- Were the changes believable?
- Did the book affect you in a personal way, such as offending you or making you uncomfortable?

- Did you reassess your views on certain topics because of the novel?
- Do you have a better or new understanding of certain aspects or a new awareness of something you'd never thought of before?
- Are the characters or circumstances familiar to you?
- Did the author do a good job of making the characters believable? E.g. do they speak in the right voice for their age group or the time period of the novel?
- How do you feel about the author's style?
- Is it lyrical, descriptive, objective, minimalist?
- Would the story have been told better if it was in the first person or third person? Or told from multiple view points?
- If it employed flashbacks?
- Did the author use imagery and symbolism?
- Do you think that any literary devices used enhanced the book or were they just distracting?
- If the book belongs to a 'genre', does it challenge stereotypes in any way? Does it break the mould?
- If the story is set in a historical time period, how do you feel about the image of the past? How would you have behaved in that time and faced with those issues? If the story is set in the future, was the vision of the future credible? Is it a future you would hope to happen or one that you fear?

- If the book was written some time in the past, do you feel that it was dated well? Have things changed drastically since then?
- How does the story reflect the author's own life? Are there obvious influences? Is the story autobiographical? Is the book better because the author was able to draw on his own experiences?
- What did you personally like or dislike about the book? What kind of person would you recommend this book to?
- Is it possible to find a book interesting without actually really enjoying it? Were there any changes that would have enabled you to enjoy it more?
- Is this book a "keeper"? Would you read it again?
- Do you agree with the reviews of the book? Did it live up to positive reviews?
- How well do the book's cover and synopsis represent the book? Do they suit the story? Do it justice?
- If you were writing a sequel, what would you plan for the characters? If the book did have a sequel, did things turn out as you expected? Were you disappointed?
- Compare and contrast this book with others you have read – either by the same author or in the same genre or with similar themes or set in the same time period.

Non fiction

While many book clubs choose to only read novels and other works of fiction, there are many fascinating works of non fiction that make for excellent discussion. Biographies, memoirs, essays, and historical accounts can all be very good reads, with topics ranging from politics and religion to science and technology. The following questions should help provide some ideas for discussion.

- Is this a subject area you knew anything about before? If so, were you surprised by any facts introduced in this book? If not, were you surprised by how interested you were in it?
- Has the book changed your opinion of a particular topic or certain person?
- How do you think the author treated the subject? Was the material presented in an interesting and thought-provoking way? How did the author achieve this?
- If the book is about a controversial topic, do you think the author gave a fair and balanced account of the subject? Did they consider all sides to the debate? Or were they particularly biased?

Many books now come with reading group guides and these will cover many of the points mentioned above. However, there is no reason not to make up your own discussion guides or to simply apply these types of questions to any book, whether it has an official guide or not.

ENJOY



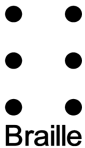
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