

# How To Start and Sustain a Book Club

The Basics of Starting a Book Club and Ways to Keep It Going



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## How to Start and Sustain a Book Club

Being in a book discussion group can be a fun and rewarding way to enjoy reading and socializing with others who enjoy reading. Anyone who is a regular reader has read books that they would love to talk about with someone who has also read the book. Getting other people's thoughts and opinions can make you think about a book in a new way or validate your own impressions.

### Getting Started

**What?** If you are putting this club together yourself, you can decide several things before you begin to organize, or make them part of your organizational meeting.

- The time slot (day or evening of the month or more often)
- What type of books you want to read (general fiction, non-fiction, genre fiction - mystery, romance, historical, etc.)

**Who?** You want to find people who are interested in being in a book club and will make the commitment to read the books and attend the meetings. The key word is commitment. Many book clubs fail because potential members like the idea, but are not truly committed to the process. The best place to look for book club members is with the friends, family or acquaintances you already have. Other ways to find members include:

- Messages on bulletin boards at your office, church or gym
- Your local library will be happy to host your book club and could help you find members. Some book stores also offer this service
- Communicate with existing book clubs. Sometimes they grow too large or some members may be interested in attending a genre book club.

Once you have some interested people, schedule an organizational meeting.

**Where?** Where you hold your meetings has a lot to do with the atmosphere you desire. If you want a serious, academic book discussion, consider meeting outside the home, such as at your local library. If you are looking for a more social, bonding experience, meeting in homes is best. But it is strongly recommended that you make it clear that the social aspects are separate from the book discussion. For example, make the first (or last) half hour for coffee, dessert and socializing with the book discussion beginning at a specified time. You can have your meeting at the library, then move to a nearby café for refreshments and socializing.

**Ground Rules?** Book club members should all agree that everyone is expected to completely and thoughtfully read the selected book before the meeting. At your organizational meeting, you need to talk about how the group wants to handle permitting attendance and/or participation by those who, for whatever reason, have not read the book. If you forbid those who haven't read, or haven't finished, the book from attending, you risk having many meetings with low attendance. With most groups, those who haven't read the book feel guilty and will only participate when the discussion is centered on universal themes, rather than specifics. However, chronic non-finishers can be a distraction, so you should discuss how, or if, this problem should be addressed.

**What to Read?** Develop a title selection method. Some examples:

- All or several members suggest titles, the group discusses them briefly, then votes on one. This method can be time-consuming, taking up valuable book discussion time.
- At the organizational meeting, vote on a list of books to go for several meetings. This method takes time only once, and gives fast readers the chance to read ahead, if they want.
- If the club moves from one member's house to another, the next hostess picks the book or go around the group alphabetically by last name. The value to these two methods is that the person who picks the book already has enthusiasm for it and can be designated as the facilitator for the discussion.
- Ask at your local library, especially if your group is going to read from a certain genre, such as mysteries or biographies. The library has Reader's Advisory services to help you choose what to read next.

Of course, you're not bound to any one method. You can try different ones until you find what works for your group.

**Facilitated or Free Form?** Although you can have a book club without a leader, a book club with no designated discussion facilitator for each meeting will usually fall apart because there is no one to help stimulate discussion and keep the members on track. If there are one or more people who really enjoy the research involved in coming up with discussion questions and topics, let them do it every time, but most groups thrive when everyone gets a turn to be the leader, especially when it is tied to who selects the next book. But remember that the discussion will be most successful when the members talk more than the facilitator. A facilitator's job is to stimulate and guide the discussion, not lecture. Here are some tips for facilitators:

- Be prepared. In your planning session, you will decide on the basics of what the facilitator should do as far as preparing questions, getting background information on the book and/or author, etc. In some groups, the facilitator takes on all these duties. In others, they are shared and the facilitator is just the person who keeps the discussion going and on track.
- Look at the person who is speaking and concentrate on what they are saying.
- Fight the tendency to interrupt, but gently redirect the speaker if they get off the topic.
- Make sure everyone gets a chance to contribute.
- Be in charge of when the meeting starts and ends.

**Keeping the discussion on track can sometimes be difficult. Here are some of the ways the facilitator can intervene to make sure everyone has a chance to talk, no one person dominates or interrupts and all points of view are given respect.**

*"We're all talking at once. Let's let each person have her say. Beth, you start..."*

*"Debra's been waiting to talk. Let's hear what she has to say..."*

*"Pat, that's very interesting. Let's hear what some of the others have to say..."*

*"Just a minute. I'd like to hear John finish what he was saying."*

**Why?** The purpose of having a Book Club is to get more out of reading, so you should choose books that make you think - stretch your mind a bit. These are the books that make for good discussion. The latest mainstream “escape” fiction tends to be formula-driven and doesn’t inspire much in-depth discussion. While these kinds of books are often on *The New York Times* and *Essence* bestseller lists, these lists also have books, or authors, that have won prestigious literary prizes such as the Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award, National Book Critics Circle Award or the Hugo Award (science fiction).

## Sustaining Interest

**How?** This is the biggest question any book club has. How to keep people interested, committed and the club vital. Here are a few suggestions:

- Use the book club as an opportunity to *learn*. Even if you’re reading popular fiction, there are ways to gain new knowledge. One of the best aids in finding them is your local library. A librarian can show you where to get author information, critical reviews and other information. These can be a big help in generating discussion. A little research on details can also be fun, such as the meaning of the title or details on the acknowledgments or dedication. Librarians can also help you find additional reading through their Reader’s Advisory service. If you liked the book you read in book club, you may want to read more in a similar vein, either with the club or on your own.
- Have some questions planned for the meeting, but let the discussion be spontaneous. The facilitator should make sure everyone has an opportunity to talk, but encourage everyone to listen, too. Research some listening skills and go over them at your planning session.
- Remember that there are no right or wrong opinions. Big egos don’t do well in book clubs. While opinions should be based on details from the text, they are still interpretations and someone else may have a different view. No one is there to teach anyone else – you’re all there to learn through group exploration.

## Try something different every now and then.

- If the book is available on tape, especially if it is read by the author, play some it rather than having members read passages.
- Have everyone write down questions or comments on cards and draw them out of a hat for discussion.
- Recap. At the end of the discussion, ask everyone to sum up the book in an unusual way, such as in six one-syllable words, or in a simile, “*this book was like...*”, or finish the sentence, “*This book made me think about [one thing].*”

## Avoiding Discussion Lapses. Some suggestions:

- Each member should have three questions or select three passages to discuss.
- Read passages out loud to get the feel for the voices. This can be very helpful in gaining new insights.
- Don’t use questions that have yes or no answers or overly simple questions such as “Did you like the book?” A better approach is something like “How did this book strike you?”
- Go for the “why.” Questioning characters’ motivations is always a great way to get several options for discussion.
- Try to bring everyone into the discussion with something like, “*Bob’s idea is similar to what Brenda said earlier. Does anyone want to respond to that?*”
- Keep a list of keywords representing the elements of a book to refer to when formulating questions on the spot:
  - Plot
  - Characters
  - Themes
  - Subplots
  - Pacing
  - Structure
  - Narrative Manner
  - Motivation
  - Conflict
  - Dialogue
  - Resolution

## What to talk about?

Talking about a book is a wonderful way to add to the enjoyment of a good book. As your Book Club goes on, you will find what works best for the group, but here are some ideas on how to get started.

- Either the facilitator or some other designated person can start the discussion with some biographical information on the author. Your local library can help with finding this information, including some other works by the author that are not being discussed. Some historical background may be presented at the start, if it is needed to better understand the book. This should only take 10 minutes at the most, so you have plenty of time for group discussion.
- Use overview questions to begin. The classic ones are (1) What did the author say?, (2) What did he/she mean?, (3) How true is it?
- Gradually get more specific:
  - What were the major themes and how were they reflected in the plot?
  - Were there subplots? Did they enhance or distract from the main plot?
  - Was there enough detail? Too much?
  - How was the setting important to the story? Could it have taken place anywhere else?
  - What gave you insight into the characters?
  - Did you relate to any of the characters? Why?
  - Did the author's writing style make the book more enjoyable, less enjoyable or were you so caught up in the plot that the writing didn't matter? Why?
- Pick a passage to read aloud. This can be done by the facilitator, or any member. Discussion possibilities include
  - Why is this passage significant to the story?
  - Were these words pivotal to your understanding of the characters or the story?
  - How is this passage representative of the author's style?
- Have some fun.
  - If you were casting this book as a movie, who would play the major roles?
  - How would you have written this book differently?
  - What would have made a better title for this book?
  - How would the story have been different if it had been set in a different time period?

## Resources

Books, available at your local library

- *The Reading Group Handbook: Everything You Need to Know to Start Your Own Book Club, Revised Edition* by Rachel W. Jacobsohn
- *The Book Group Book: A Thoughtful Guide to Forming and Enjoying a Stimulating Book Discussion Group* by Ellen Slezak

Websites & Blogs

For book reviews, best seller lists and advice on what to read next:

- [www.memphislibrary.org](http://www.memphislibrary.org) Click on "Two Thumbs Up (Review Page)"  
Check out: *BookLetters*, an e-newsletter with suggested books  
*What Do I Read Next?* With 100, recommended titles

For further help starting and sustaining a book club:

- [www.book-clubs-resource.com](http://www.book-clubs-resource.com)
- [www.bookmuse.com](http://www.bookmuse.com)
- [www.bookreporter.com](http://www.bookreporter.com)
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Publisher/author contacts:

- [www.harpercollins.com/invitetheauthor](http://www.harpercollins.com/invitetheauthor) Enter Harper Collins program "Invite the Author" where authors participate via telephone with a select number of book groups chosen in random drawings.
- [www.randomhouse.com](http://www.randomhouse.com) Free Reading Resource Guides available for a wide variety of titles, with information about the author and discussion questions.

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