

Setting up and Conducting a Reading Group or Book Club



What is a reading group/book club?

A reading group/book club is a group of people who meet regularly to discuss books they have all been reading. Groups range from friends who know each other to organised groups set up in libraries and bookshops and, of course, U3A groups. Discussion about books U3A-style is not “high brow” or academic, it’s about sharing personal experiences about the book you have read, your favourite bits, how it made you feel, whether or not you liked the characters etc. It doesn’t even matter if you don’t manage to *quite* finish the book, just come along and hear what others have to say. It’s all about sharing ideas, relaxing and having fun.

How do I set up a reading group/book club?

The easiest way is to start with friends - tell-a-friend-to-tell-a-friend. Then of course there are family, colleagues and acquaintances. However, your local library will promote your group by displaying a poster and you could also try your local bookshop, cafes etc. By attracting people you don’t

know, you are likely to be introduced to books and authors that are new to you.

How many members should a group have?

The average reading group has 5 to 10 members. This allows for a really good discussion, from several different points of view, and should allow for everyone to be able to make a contribution. Also the size won't inhibit shy members.

Where to meet and when?

Your local library may be able to offer you meeting space. It has to be a venue that will be comfortable, accessible and relaxing for all members. Of course U3A groups are fortunate in having the help of that indispensable programme coordinator and his/her team of helpers!

If it is in people's homes, make sure there is enough room to accommodate everyone, and that everyone takes a turn with the hosting where possible, so that no one person has to cope with the catering and clearing up afterwards. (Hint – adopt the KISS principle - make the catering simple, you don't want it to become a burden on the host.)

Getting everyone together for an initial meeting is always difficult, but when assembling your group endeavour to gauge what day of the week and time of day suits the majority.

Organising your first meeting

Try to make that first meeting really relaxing and informal. (A glass of wine often helps). When everyone has had a chance to get to know each other use some of the "ice breaker" questions below to get discussion flowing.

- How often you want to meet? Every two weeks? Three weeks? Monthly? It has to be a pattern of meetings that will give everyone

a chance to get hold of the book you choose and read it. It all depends on the time people can devote to reading!

- What time of day do people want to meet?
- Where will you meet?
- How long will you meet for? On average groups meet for an hour and a half to two hours (the number of people in the group will affect this decision)
- Do you want to have refreshments?
- Who will lead the discussion? It's a good idea to have members take turns in doing this.
- What kind of group will you be? Will you just read specific genres - crime/fantasy/science fiction etc, or will you choose from a variety of genre?
- Will everyone in the group always read the same book, or will you discuss genres, themes, books by the same authors etc
- Who decides what book you will read for your next meeting? Try to choose something that is readily available from your library or bookshop.

“Ice breakers” – some things you can discuss at your first meeting, which is really a “getting-to-know-you” session.

- When and where do you like to read?
- What is your favourite book?
- What is your favourite character?
- Who do you talk to about what you've read?
- Do you ever read the last page before you've reached the end?
- Which book have you always meant to read, but never got round to?
- Do you ever sit up late to finish a book?
- Do you re-read old favourites?
- Do you read in public places?
- Do you have lots of books on the go at once?
- What books do you tend to avoid?
- What books do you remember from your childhood?

- What book would you take to a desert Island?

What your local library can do for you.

Your local library service can offer:

- Multiple copies of books
- Lists of books specifically available for Reading Groups
- Books for loan for 4 weeks
- Advice on stock availability
- Library staff advice and input to discussions where appropriate.

However, your group will need to:

- Think about the books you would like to read in advance, as unfortunately there may be waiting periods for popular titles.
- Decide if all the books are to be collected from the library by one person, or will each member collect their own copy?

Choosing books for discussion

Some groups/clubs select an entire year at a time. If you have a different member host the meeting, let the host select the title. If you want everyone to participate, have everyone bring a selection to the meeting and have a vote. It helps if every nominee has back up: what is the story about, who is the author, has it won any awards, etc.?

Regardless of how you choose a title, you need to make sure that the book is *affordable and accessible to everyone*.

Here are a few ideas.

- Library reading group lists
- Librarian's choice
- Group members' choice
- Books that have won prizes eg: Booker, Miles Franklin
- Themed book discussions eg; novels based on childhood, travel etc.
- Two book by the same author to enable comparison

- Look at newspaper book reviews e.g. *Sydney Morning Herald* (Saturday issue)
- What movies are coming out? Find out if any are based on books. Read the book and after your discussion see the film - an opportunity for a fun excursion. Then meet again to compare the book and film.

NOTE: When reading the book set for discussion it's a good idea to keep a note pad and pen handy and jot down any issues that arise. For instance if there is a point in the book which has you spluttering with disbelief, laughter or tears, make a note of the page number.

Leading discussion

Successful discussion needs a leader. The discussion leader's role is to make sure discussion flows, not too much time is spent on any one topic, and that all members get a chance to speak.

Some discussion leaders research interesting, lesser-known facts about the author and/or the book's setting, time period, etc., and share with the group. Most author biographies can be found on publishers' web sites. (If you don't have access to the Internet, ask your local librarian for help.) Many groups/clubs appoint a different leader for each session. When it's *your* turn to conduct the session you'll need to have prepared some questions to stimulate discussion.

Make notes of features such as:

Characters: The characters and personalities in the book make good discussion material. The stronger the character the more there is to talk about. These needn't be the main characters; often the minor characters can make a meaningful contribution to the plot and warrant further exploration.

Relationships: How the characters in the book interact is an important part of the book and it is often the formation or breaking down of a relationship that progresses the plot. These form a good basis for discussions; for instance, how did the break down of the relationship between X and Y alter the course of the book.

Location/Setting: Discussing the importance of a particular location/setting can lead to interesting discussions. For example, would the story work as well if the book was set in small town A instead of city B?

Writing style: If the author used a different or unusual writing style then an interesting question would be how this influenced the understanding and enjoyment of the book. For instance, did the fact that the author wrote the book using flashbacks add to your understanding or enjoyment of the book or did you find it irritating or confusing?

Overall feelings about the book. After reading the book how do you feel? Are there any immediate thoughts that come to mind or scenes you keep replaying to yourself? Again, your immediate thoughts on finishing a book will isolate some of the important points in the story. For instance if you are left wondering '*well how did that happen*' or '*I wonder what happened to...*' the chances are someone else will be thinking the same and discussion can follow.

General Questions: In addition to specific questions such as those above, some more general questions are useful to encourage discussion. These might include the very basic "What *aspect of the book did you enjoy the most/least?*" or more specific questions such whether a particular event influenced the outcome of the book.

There is a golden rule for such questions – **keep them open-ended**, i.e. they should stimulate the person responding to *think*. Open-ended questions require a detailed answer; they can't be answered yes or no. For example don't ask "Did you enjoy the book?" but rather "*Tell us why you enjoyed (or didn't enjoy) the book?*"

Some other questions *might be* "Why did character X behave in that way while character Y didn't? For which character do you have the most sympathy and why? Why do you think the author chose this particular setting?" What was the problem with...? What could have happened if.....?

Remember there are no rights or wrongs to running a reading group. It's *your* group, and it should be an enjoyable experience!

Now – you're ready to go. Good luck and happy reading!



BOOKS for HIRE

One of the problems faced by many Book Clubs/Reading Groups is gaining access to multiple copies of one book. Below are directions to a service which offers multiple copies of a book for hire.

BOOKS FOR HIRE – contact:

Mary Dwyer

18 Dorset Road

Northbridge NSW 2063

Phone: (02) 9958 4571

Email: dwyereng1@optusnet.com.au

- Books are available for hire in sets of up to 10
- There is no time limit on their use
- Basic cost per book is \$2.50 plus postage, which is \$2.50 within the Sydney Metropolitan area. Postage outside this area varies according to distance.

A list of books available will be provided on request. They are listed under the following headings:

- Australian literature (84 titles)
- Later 20th century literature (90 titles)
- Travel (9 titles)
- Classic English & American Literature (59 titles)
- Literature in translation (11 titles)

There are also a significant number of individual titles available, many of them relating to drama, general English literature, philosophy and history. If you have a particular title in mind but it doesn't appear in a list, it's worth asking Mary anyway.

PLEASE NOTE:

The Resource Library is in this case providing **contact details only** and will not in any way be involved in the hiring process. For this you will deal with Mary Dwyer directly.