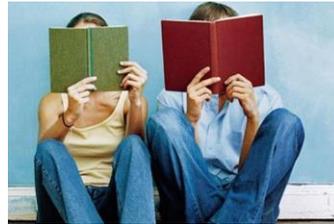


# BOOK CLUB BASICS

## Getting Started



**SAN  
RAFAEL**  
PUBLIC LIBRARY  
415-485-3321  
www.srpubliclibrary.org

Before you start recruiting folks, take a moment to think about what you want out of a book group. If you are interested in reading books deeply or want to focus on a particular type of book (such as non-fiction), be upfront during recruitment to forewarn folks who really just want to read “fun” books and have a friendly get-together over wine and snacks. Other considerations:

- **When, where, and how often will the group meet?** Monthly is the norm. Some take turns at member’s homes, others meet in cafes. Most groups meet for 2 to 2½ hours.
- **Who will lead, or will you even have a leader?** Some groups take turns leading; some don’t have a discussion leader, but do have someone in charge of reminder emails.
- **How many people?** Five to eight members is ideal. More than 10 on a regular basis makes inclusive discussions harder, four relies on committed attendance.
- **How will books be chosen?** Methods for choosing books vary. It is important that everyone in the group agree on the process for selection, even if they don’t always agree on what gets selected. See the following section on *Picking Titles* for more.
- **Refreshments, anyone?** Will snacks be served? Potluck style, or will the host be responsible? Light snacks or desserts are simple and lend a cozy atmosphere.

## Leader Norms

Some groups get along just fine without a leader, some rotate leadership, while others find it works best to have specific people assigned to specific duties. If your group rotates discussion leadership, hosting, and choosing titles, make sure that no one is ever assigned to more than one duty per month.

Discussion Leaders are usually tasked with opening the discussion and using prepared questions to keep the discussion on track. They diplomatically intervene when a discussion deteriorates, being firm but respectful when necessary.

Librarian Becky Spratford in her article, “Book Discussion First Aid,” shares her group’s norms, which are revisited once a year:

### Leader Norms:

- Read the entire book
- Gather information to help enhance the discussion
- Be prepared to offer counter opinions – even if they differ from your own
- Be prepared to begin new lines of discussion when necessary
- Do not let one person monopolize the discussion
- Be willing and prepared to take control of the group, firmly but respectfully

### Group Norms:

- Make your best effort to complete the book
- Come ready to both share AND listen
- Be ready to back up your opinions with the "Why"
- Self-censor
- Have a great time — if you stop enjoying it, let the leader know

## Picking Titles

The library has tons of book lists in print and online ([www.srpubliclibrary.org/booklovers](http://www.srpubliclibrary.org/booklovers)), including [Book Club Favorites](#). In general, books with unique choices in character, plot, and style make for the heartiest discussions. Controversial topics, unclear endings, and unreliable narrators may turn some folks off, but are certain to give people something to talk about. Be resigned to the fact that sometimes the group will pick a stinker that nobody likes; just let it go and look forward to the next month!

**Plan Ahead or Play it Fast and Loose?** Some groups select titles for a whole year, which lets members plan ahead, but it doesn't allow for timely choices (like a book by an author who just passed away). Other groups choose their next book at the end of each meeting, or go for a middle ground and pick three months ahead. Do whatever works best for your members' lifestyles.

**Rotate or Vote?** Generally, groups either vote on suggestions or take turns picking titles. A hybrid approach has the scheduled chooser bringing two or three suggested titles and then the whole group voting. If your group will rotate choosing titles, create a schedule so that folks have time to prepare.

### Other Considerations:

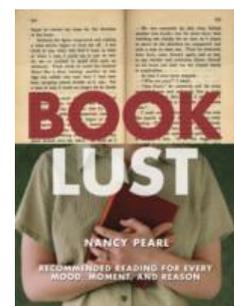
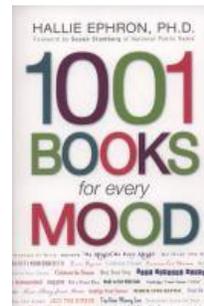
- Some require that a title already be read by one member. While this may disappoint some who want to read the latest best-seller, it can reduce the likelihood of dud choices and some find re-reading quite rewarding.
- Be careful with favorites. Feelings may get hurt when someone recommends their "absolute favorite book ever" and everyone hates it!
- If you pick monthly, think about once and a while choosing a longer or more complex book and giving folks two months' notice.
- Don't forget older titles! Everyone loves picking hot best-sellers (which inevitably have over 100 holds at the library) but there are tons of great older books to try.
- Do you allow any member to veto a pick, or does simple majority rule?
- Mix it up: Once a year, try something new, like a poetry, play or genre book.
- Planning Parties: Some groups have (semi-)annual sessions where they do not have a focused book discussion, but instead pitch titles and vote on their upcoming selections. Planning sessions are also a good time to revisit your club's processes/norms and ensure that everyone is on board.

### Online Resources

[Goodreads.com](http://Goodreads.com)      [ReadingGroupChoices.com](http://ReadingGroupChoices.com)  
[LitLovers.com](http://LitLovers.com)      [ReadingGroupGuides.com](http://ReadingGroupGuides.com)  
[NationalReadingGroupMonth.org](http://NationalReadingGroupMonth.org) (Great Group Reads)

### Print Resources

[\*1001 Books for Every Mood\*](#), by Hallie Ephron  
[\*Book Lust\*](#), by Nancy Pearl  
[\*The New Lifetime Reading Plan\*](#), by Clifton Fadiman  
[\*The Novel Cure\*](#), by Ella Berthoud



## Reading Closely

Reading for a book group is different than reading for pleasure. You'll want to be a bit more aware of the book's style and other devices that distinguish the work. Here are some tips from [Good Books Lately](#).



- **Take Notes:** Use sticky notes or have a notepad handy to mark favorite passages or things you may want to bring to the group for a response. Ambiguous moments can bring up questions and are often ripe for debate.
- **Big Six Considerations:** Any book worth its salt will have something to say about at least one of these aspects— Style, Narrator, Character, Plot, Setting, Theme
- **Character List:** Sometimes it helps to write down the major characters. Make note of each character's motivations.
- **Chapter Headings:** Take a look at any chapter headings (titles, quotes). Do they add to the theme?
- **Gut reactions:** At the end of the book (or each chapter/section) write down your initial response to the plot, characters, or language. Don't overthink, just a quick impression.
- **Re-reading:** Before your meeting, re-read your notes. If you have time, re-read the first and last chapters.

**Print Resources:** [13 Ways of Looking at a Novel](#), by Jane Smiley; [How to Read a Book](#), by Mortimer J. Adler; [Reading Like a Writer](#), by Francine Prose; and don't forget our tons of Cliffs Notes!

## Discussing Books

Whether you have one person in charge of providing questions or each member bringing a few questions, here are some general thoughts:

- Instead of "Did you like it," try asking "How did the book make you feel and why?"
- Support your views with examples/passages from the text.
- Who suggested the book, and why did they recommend it?
- If only one person provides questions, consider sending the list of questions out to members before the meeting.
- Bring your copy of the book! It's amazing how differently folks can interpret the exact same thing, and having the text to refer back to helps clarify (or settle) things.
- Some groups like to start (or end) with an around-the-table quick assessment (1-4 star ratings or a one word/phrase summing up their experience of the book, e.g., disturbing, amusing, compelling).
- Copy someone else's questions! Many publishers create reading guides that you can find online. Check [LitLovers](#), [Reading Group Choices](#), [Reading Group Guides](#), [NovelList](#) (a library database), or simply do an internet search on the title plus "discussion questions."
- Some groups go beyond the book to the greater context of the author and his/her era, culture, genre (See the library database [Literary Reference Center](#) for author bios and critical reviews, available at [www.srpubliclibrary.org/research](http://www.srpubliclibrary.org/research)).

## General Questions

- How did you experience the book? Were you drawn into the book or did it take a while?
- What were the great strengths (or weaknesses) of the book?
- **Style:** Were there striking word choices or turns of phrase you'd like to share? Was the writing filled with rhythm, repetition, or irony?
- **Narrator:** Why do you think the author chose the particular point of view? Is the narrator reliable (are they telling the *whole* story: think *Lolita* or *Gone Girl*)?
- **Character:** How believable, sympathetic, complex are the characters, and why? What motivates them? Did you identify with or admire any of them, and why? In what ways do any of the characters change?
- **Plot:** If there was an unusual structure (flashbacks, shifting time periods, etc.), why do you think the author chose this structure and do you feel it helped or detracted from the story? Did the plot unfold naturally, or did you feel manipulated? What loose ends, if any, did the author leave? Talk about your thoughts on the ending. If you could rewrite it, would you?
- **Setting:** How essential was the setting? If the book had a particular mood/atmosphere, how did the author achieve it?
- **Theme:** Would you say the book had a moral, or driving idea; if so, what is it? Were there recurring symbols, words, objects that you noticed?

## General Questions for Non-fiction Books

- Has the book changed/enhanced your view of the subject?
- Has the book changed/enhanced the way you live your life or look at the world?
- How relevant/popular do you think this book will be in ten years?
- What was most surprising, intriguing, or difficult about the book?
- How convincing was the book, and why?

## We Need Help!

**Interruptions:** Here's where having a leader helps. Ideally, a leader can firmly, but politely intervene when people start to talk over one another. "Wait, wait. Let's take turns." "Hold on, one conversation at a time, please." The leader can choose who goes first.

**Off Topic Talk:** Groups have different tolerance levels for off topic interludes. Make sure you have built in time for socializing before or after the main book discussions. Hopefully since you are a book club, the offender should not feel offended when the leader, or any member who feels like the discussion is going astray, tries to bring the conversation back to the book by proposing a new question or making a book-related observation.

**Domineering or Overly Negative Members:** This is a tough problem, and one that many clubs encounter. Use your judgment on whether someone (or two of you) should talk to the individual personally to explain the problem and agree on a solution. If you have group norms that speak to group behavior, refer back to them. Hopefully the individual will adjust or decide to move on, though some groups have had to drop members from their list.

**Tension** is not all bad, however. A respectful difference of opinion is healthy and can actually lead to some of your most exciting discussions. Strive to create a friendly atmosphere where folks feel safe to disagree and can argue in a nonjudgmental way. Asking people to back up their opinions with references to the text helps frame disagreements as intellectual and not personal.

**Don't worry about silences**, and don't always rush to fill them. Sometimes people need time to let something sink in, or to think of what they want to say next.

**Is it you, or is it bigger than you?** What is the source of your disappointment in the group? Is it ongoing or isolated? What would you like to see instead? Is it something you can change with your own behavior, or do you want to bring it up with another member or the group as a whole? Be aware that sometimes the only way for you to get the kind of book group you want is to go off and start your own!

## Book Group Sparks

Is your book group feeling tired and too similar from month to month? Mix it up! Here are some strategies to jump-start your meetings:



- **Add New Members:** A fresh perspective can make a big difference.
- **Book Pairings:** Compare/contrast two books (assign two months ahead). Try related books— *The Hours*, by Michael Cunningham and *Mrs. Dalloway*, by Virginia Woolf; or books on a theme, i.e. Dystopian Fiction— *Handmaid's Tale*, by Margaret Atwood and *1984*, by George Orwell; or books of a specific genre or format, i.e. Graphic Novels (these two are also Biographies)— *Persepolis*, by Marjane Satrapi and *Fun Home*, by Alison Bechdel
- **Book Themes:** Assign a theme to a month and let each member pick the book they want to read. See the following section on *Thematic Book Groups*.
- **Discussion Prompts:** Have each member bring in a question/observation they'd like to discuss and put the questions in a bowl or put them up on a board, then either refer to these prompts when the discussion lags, or purposely use them to drive the conversation.
- **Diversify:** Consciously mix up the formats and genres that you read: Nonfiction, Biography, Classic/Award-Winner, Books in Translation, Short Stories, Southern Fiction, etc. Check out our [Adult Book Lists](http://www.srpubliclibrary.org/booklovers/adult-book-lists) page (www.srpubliclibrary.org/booklovers/adult-book-lists) for ideas
- **Pick Good Books:** I'm not being snarky; good books don't always make good *Book Club* books. Keep an eye out for books on controversial topics, that change your perceptions of a time/place/person, or that ask more questions than they answer. Unclear endings, for instance, can spur lots of opinions on what really happened or what will happen next.
- **Reading Aloud:** Try beginning a meeting by reading aloud the first paragraph or page of the book. Or have members read their favorite (or most striking) passage from the book. Listening can bring up different reactions than simply reading quietly.
- **Shorter Books:** Over the holidays or busy summers, pick a short book (less than 250 pages), or even a poetry collection or play. Short story collections offer a nice change of pace, too.
- **Speakers:** Local authors, professors, or resident experts often are more than happy to talk about their work to an eager group of listeners. Check museums, universities, or author websites to find contact information. Or you can simply have your group take a field trip to an author talk in your community.
- **Watch and Discuss a Movie:** You can see a movie of a book you have discussed previously, or you can both read, watch, and discuss the movie the same month.

## Thematic Book Groups

If your group is having trouble agreeing on what books to read, try doing a thematic group instead! The group picks themes for each meeting and members choose their own titles. The group can come up with a list of related books to choose from. At the meetings, each member does a brief talk about their book (no spoilers!), with time equally divided between the members.

### Pros of Thematic Groups:

- Allows more freedom of choice
- Feels more social and less academic
- Different tastes co-exist peacefully
- Get tons of reading recommendations
- No worries about limited copies
- Complainers have only themselves to blame for a lousy read
- Less chance of awkward disagreements
- Can accommodate larger groups

### Cons of Thematic Groups:

- Feels more social and less academic
- Less depth of discussion
- Feels like public speaking, not discussion
- Loss of the shared reading experience
- Some folks like being told what to read
- Difficult to find good themes (not too broad or too narrow)

**Sample Types of Themes:** Authors (e.g., works by one author or Authors of a certain ethnicity), Awards (Man Booker, Pulitzer), Genres (mystery, noir), Historical eras (either as subject or when the book was written), Geographic areas (either as setting or author's origin), Formats (plays, poetry)

### About Book Talks:

- Tease, don't spoil. Don't recap the entire plot and don't give the ending away. Strive for an enticing taste that has them wanting more. Broadly speak of the basic conflict/situation, the characters, and any unusual aspects of the book.
- Bring the book. We still do judge a book by its cover.
- Explain your reaction to the book. Why did you love or hate it? Who might like it, even if you didn't?
- Do warn folks if the book has elements some in your group may want to avoid (graphic sex or violence, illness, politics)
- Keep it short, and don't talk too fast.

## Last But Not Least

- Discounts! If your club will be buying books (in addition to using the library, of course!), ask your local book store if they offer discounts to book clubs.
- Keep a Reading Log. It can be as simple as the title and the date you read it, or you can annotate it with a quick rating or a one-word review
- Have an Annual Party: It doesn't have to be around holiday time, but it's nice to celebrate together once a year with festive food, a book swap, or a special guest speaker. Some groups revisit the group norms and/or pick upcoming books.
- Name Your Group! It's fun, and it helps define the group and clarify your mission.
- Don't forget, your friendly local librarians are always around to help you find books. Just ask!