



Los Angeles Unified School District
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Non-fiction Book Discussions (from the American Library Association)

How to Structure a Meeting

Basic Ground Rules

1. **Members who haven't read the book.** Come anyway. Not everyone can finish every book, but non-readers may still have valuable insights.
2. **Disagreements about the book.** Be gracious! There is no one way to experience or interpret a book. In fact, differing opinions are good.
3. **Members who prefer to socialize.** Be gentle but firm. Insist that discussion time be limited to the book. Some clubs hold book discussions first and invite "social members" to join afterward.
4. **Dominating personalities.** Never easy. "Let's hear from some others" is one approach. Some clubs pass an object around the room; you talk only when you hold the object. If the person continues to dominate, a friendly phone call (no e-mail) might work. If all fails, well...sometimes they've just got to go—for the good of the club.

Holding the Discussion

1. **With a leader**
 - Appoint a club member—whoever selected the book or the person who is hosting. Some clubs have one member who enjoys leading all discussions.
 - Invite an outside facilitator (English teacher or librarian), paid or unpaid.
2. **Without a leader**
 - Take turns going around the room, allowing each member to talk about his or her experience reading the book.
 - Hand out index cards. Ask everyone to write a question or observation; then select one or more to discuss.

How to Hold a Book Discussion

If you're **leading** a book discussion

1. **Choose one question** at a time and toss it out to the group. (See Generic Discussion Questions below.)
2. **Select a number of questions**, write each on an index card, and pass them out. Each member (or a team of 2 or 3) takes a card and answers the question.
3. **Use a prop** (or object) related to the story. It can help stimulate members' thinking about some aspect of the story. It's adult show & tell!
 - •maps, photographs, paintings, food, apparel, a music recording, a film sequence
4. **Pick out a specific passage** from the book description, an idea, a line of dialogue—and ask members to comment on it.
 - How does the passage reflect a character...or the work's central meaning...or members' lives or personal beliefs?
5. **Choose a primary character** and ask members to comment on him or her. Consider:
 - character traits, motivations, how he/she affects the story's events and characters.



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6. **Play a literary game.** Use an [icebreaker](#) activity to loosen you up and get your discussion off to an enthusiastic start.
7. **Distribute hand-outs** to everyone in order to refresh memories or use as talking points. Identify the primary characters and summarize the plot.

If you're **taking part** in a book discussion

1. **Avoid "like" or "dislike."** Those terms aren't very helpful for moving discussions forward, and they can make others feel defensive. Instead, talk about your experience, how you felt as you read the book.
2. **Support your views.** Use specific passages from the book as evidence for your ideas. This is a literary analysis technique called "close reading."
3. **Take notes as you read.** Jot down particularly interesting passages: something that strikes you or, maybe, that you don't understand. Take your notes to the meeting.

<http://www.ala.org/tools/atoz/book-discussion-grps>

Guidelines for Discussion

- Speak when you have something to say – do not raise your hand.
- Talk to each other, not to the discussion leader.
- Refer directly to the text (page and location) whenever possible.
- Look at whoever is speaking.
- Build on the comments of others by referring to the participant.
- Stay focused on the current conversation. Make notes if something unrelated comes up so that it can be discussed later.

Other Thoughts:

- **Community Building:** Book groups will need time to become comfortable as a group. Perhaps time can be set aside at the beginning of each session for a short "ice breaker".
- **Norms:** It might be helpful to have a list of suggested norms for groups, such as:
 - Listen with the intent of understanding.
 - One person talks at a time. Everyone contributes during every discussion.
 - Watch your air time.
 - Read the assigned passage before meeting.
- **Ground Rules:** It is essential to have basic ground rules (see above). Groups will need to establish these first session.
- **Roles:** Each group should have a discussion facilitator. When first meeting, groups should identify whether they will have one facilitator for the semester or take turns.