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Tips for Book Discussion Facilitators

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Abstract

These notes are meant to assist book discussion facilitators in hosting a successful book discussion. Mix and match these ideas to suit your needs, whether you are hosting a one-time-only discussion or a series of discussions about one or more texts.

Keywords

book discussion, facilitation, book club, discussion leader

Disciplines

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Tips for Book Discussion Facilitators

These notes are meant to assist book discussion facilitators in hosting a successful book discussion. Mix and match these ideas to suit your needs, whether you are hosting a one-time-only discussion or a series of discussions about one or more texts.

In addition to these tips, you may find this helpful: [The Facilitator's Handy List of Ground Rules, Guidelines and Everything Else](#) (by Kaite Stover, Kansas City Public Library)

Establish ground rules up front

- Discussion guidelines – We often use the ground rules from [#GBCTalks](#) – Share airtime, Speak honestly, Speak from your perspective (use “I” statements); Notice your own judgement of others, Respect confidentiality, Welcome discomfort. Feel free to use or alter these. If you will be having multiple sessions with the same group of people, participants can spend a little time generating their own ground rules (but it takes time).
- Establish a spoiler policy, if applicable.
- Discourage participants from talking about whether they “like” the book or not (or at least hold that judgement until the very end). Book discussions work better without the *liked/didn't like* duality.¹ (Note: this guideline conflicts with what KCPL's Stover recommends – there is more than one right way!)
- Ensure that everyone feels welcome to participate and conversation isn't dominated by a few.
- One book group* tries to do four things at every meeting:
 - Teach something to someone
 - Learn something from someone
 - Think hard
 - Laugh

Icebreaker and warmup activities

- Ask readers to share a 3-word summary about the book right now. It can be informative (“what is happening?”) or affective (“how do you feel about what's happening?”). This helps readers process their thinking and prepare to share. (This approach is based on Sam Sanders *It's Been a Minute* podcast, in which guests describe the news of the previous week using only 3 words.)
- Use free writing time as a warmup, even if it's just for one minute. You can use a prompt – like “what lingered in your mind after finishing this week's reading?” or “what event in this week's reading do you MOST want to talk about?” or “what theme looms largest for you right now?” etc. This could help introverts get ready to actively participate.

¹ Tips from 2-11-18 [Book Club Spotlight: Voyage Out](#) post on BookPeople blog. BookPeople is an independent bookstore in Austin, Texas.

Discussion questions – general thoughts

Some people want questions in advance, but these can be a lot of work to create (and in my experience, they often aren't used by readers when preparing, anyway). Some other options:

- If readers simply must have questions in advance, see if someone else created questions you can use. Search online for questions from the publisher, book clubs, teachers, etc.
- Alternatively, you could identify a topic/theme (or two) that readers should keep in mind while reading, and use that theme to jumpstart the discussion. Themes are bigger, broader, and easier to identify than specific questions.
- Try flipping this responsibility back to participants. Use the first 5 minutes of each discussion session collecting reader questions that focus on what they *want* to discuss. This could be done individually or as a group. You could use [Liberating Structures](#) to engage everyone in deciding how the discussion will proceed. A shorter variation on [25/10 Crowd Sourcing](#) might work, in which every reader writes a question on a card and cards are passed around and voted on. The questions with the most votes are first up for discussion.
- You could also write discussion questions as a closing activity – use the last 5 minutes to create questions to discuss next time. Ex: What topic did we not give enough attention to today that we should return to?
- Plenty of sample discussion questions are available on the American Library Association's [Book Discussion Groups Quick Start Guide](#).

Discussion questions for fiction ([from ALA](#))

1. How did you **experience the book**? Were you immediately drawn into the story--or did it take you a while? Did the book intrigue, amuse, disturb, alienate, irritate, or frighten you?
2. Do you find the **characters convincing**? Are they believable? Compelling? Are they fully developed as complex, emotional human beings--or are they one-dimensional?
3. Which characters do you particularly **admire or dislike**? What are their primary characteristics?
4. What **motivates** a given character's actions? Do you think those actions are justified or ethical?
5. Do any characters **grow or change** during the course of the novel? If so, in what way?
6. Who in this book would you most **like to meet**? What would you ask—or say?
7. If you could **insert yourself** as a character in the book, what role would you play? You might be a new character or take the place of an existing one.
8. Is the **plot well-developed**? Is it believable? Do you feel manipulated along the way, or do plot events unfold naturally, organically?
9. Is the story **plot or character driven**? In other words, do events unfold quickly? Or is more time spent developing characters' inner lives? Does it make a difference to your enjoyment?
10. Consider **the ending**. Did you expect it or were you surprised? Was it manipulative? Was it forced? Was it neatly wrapped up--too neatly? Or was the story unresolved, ending on an ambiguous note?
11. If you could **rewrite the ending**, would you? In other words, did you find the ending satisfying? Why or why not.

12. Can you ***pick out a passage*** that strikes you as particularly profound or interesting--or perhaps something that sums up the central dilemma of the book?
13. Does the book remind you of ***your own life***? An event or situation? A person--a friend, family member, boss, co-worker?
14. If you were to ***talk with the author***, what would you want to know? (Many authors enjoy talking with book clubs. Contact the publisher to see if you can set up a phone chat.)
15. Have you read the ***author's other books***? Can you discern a similarity—in theme, writing style, structure—between them? Or are they completely different?

Discussion questions for non-fiction ([from ALA](#))

1. If your book is a ***cultural portrait*** --of life in another country, or different region of your own country-- start with these questions first:
 - What does the author ***celebrate or criticize*** in the culture? Consider family traditions, economic and political structures, the arts, language, food, religious beliefs.
 - Does the author wish to ***preserve or reform*** the culture? If reform, what and how? Either way—by instigating change or by maintaining the status quo—what would be gained or what would be at risk?
 - How does the culture ***differ*** from yours? What was most surprising, intriguing, difficult to understand? After reading the book, have you gained a new perspective—or did the book affirm your prior views?
2. Does the book offer a ***central idea or premise***? What are the problems or issues raised? Are they personal, spiritual, societal, global, political, economic, medical, scientific?
3. Do the issues ***affect your life***? How so—directly, on a daily basis, or more generally? Now or sometime in the future?
4. What ***evidence*** does the author give to support the book's ideas? Does he/she use personal observations and assessments? Facts? Statistics? Opinions? Historical documents? Scientific research? Quotations from authorities?
5. Is the evidence ***convincing***? Is it relevant or logical? Does it come from authoritative sources? (Is the author an authority?) Is the evidence speculative...how speculative?
6. Some authors make ***assertions***, only to walk away from them—without offering explanations. It's maddening. Does the author use such unsupported claims?
7. What kind of ***language*** does the author use? Is it objective and dispassionate? Or passionate and earnest? Is it polemical, inflammatory, sarcastic? Does the language help or undercut the author's premise?
8. Does the author—or can you—***draw implications*** for the future? Are there long- or short-term consequences to the problems or issues raised in the book? If so, are they positive or negative? Affirming or frightening?
9. Does the author—or can you—***offer solutions*** to the problems or issues raised in the book? Who would implement those solutions? How probable is success?
10. Does the author make a ***call to action*** to readers—individually or collectively? Is that call realistic? Idealistic? Achievable? Would readers be able to affect the desired outcome?
11. Are the book's issues ***controversial***? How so? And who is aligned on which sides of the issues? Where do you fall in that line-up?
12. Can you point to ***specific passages*** that struck you personally—as interesting, profound, silly or shallow, incomprehensible, illuminating?

13. Did you ***learn something new*** reading this book? Did it broaden your perspective about a difficult personal issue? Or a societal issue? About another culture in another country... or about an ethnic / regional culture in your own country?