



SUGGESTIONS

JOIN, START OR RUN A CLUB

Interested in joining a book club? Your local bookstore or library is the best place to start. Many bookstores even offer discounts on bulk purchases for reading groups that register with their store, while libraries take advantage of the inter-library loan system to ensure that club members have access to book club selections. You can also check their bulletin boards for private groups looking for new members, post a listing online, or contact your local church, synagogue, alumni club, or professional association.

Starting a book club is easier than you think! All you really need are a few avid readers and a good book. You may find that smaller groups (4-12 members) provide the liveliest discussion. Quite often groups are formed by friends — try calling a few of yours who enjoy reading and suggesting that you all read the same book. Then meet informally over lunch or dinner to discuss it. Another option is to post a notice at work, in your church, or synagogue, place an ad in the paper, or contact the local branch of your college alumni club or professional organization.

SET UP THE MEETING

You've chosen your first selection, so now what? Here are a few simple things that will help your discussion run more smoothly:

- **Choose a discussion leader:** A leader is not necessary, but many groups find that having one provides focus to the discussion and helps to make transitions from one member's comment to another's. Often the person who suggests a book becomes the discussion leader, but your group can also rotate leaders, appoint a permanent group leader, or invite guest speakers to lead discussions.
- **Set a meeting time:** Most groups meet every 4 to 6 weeks, and discussion tends to last 2 or 3 hours. Finding a day and time that works for everyone may be difficult — you may want to consider setting regular meeting days and times to allow members to plan ahead.
- **Pick a place:** The most popular meeting place for most reading groups is a member's house. Often members take turns hosting the meeting to alleviate the pressure on one person. But there are plenty of other options. Your local bookstore or library may have a space you can reserve free of charge, as may your church, synagogue, community center, or workplace. If you are meeting people you don't know, you might want to choose an informal, public space, such as a restaurant or pub.

CHOOSE THE BOOKS

You can have each member of your group bring a "wish list" to your first meeting and vote on the suggestions. Or you may prefer to take turns choosing what to read —this way everyone gets to read a favourite. If you decide to have a discussion leader, you can leave it up to them to choose.

- **Focus:** You may find it useful to focus your group around a specific type of book, such as fiction or memoir, or a subject, such as current events or history. Themed discussions not only help you to choose your titles, but they provide natural points of comparison and discussion.
- **Out of Ideas?** Read the review sections in the weekend papers, or subscribe to a bookstore's newsletter. What books have your friends or family read recently that they enjoyed?
- **Timing:** Titles should be chosen well in advance, to allow all members to read the book and come up with questions for discussion. Some groups plan out their titles a year ahead; others simply plan a few weeks or months in advance. If it's your turn to lead the group, you may want to consider distributing some questions before the meeting as well, to allow members time to formulate their thoughts and opinions.

START THE DISCUSSION

Once you've taken care of the details, it's time to focus on the discussion itself.

- **Come prepared:** Many groups ask each member to bring a question to the meeting to help generate discussion. It can also help to ask members to mark up their books as they read — making notes of

favourite passages, key scenes, and their questions. Background information can be equally important to have at hand during your discussion — author biographies, interviews, etc. It is usually the group leader's responsibility to provide these materials, as well as a list of potential discussion questions.

- **Set the tone:** The atmosphere of your group meeting is entirely up to you. Does your group prefer to meet for a social hour before discussion starts? Or would you like to meet more casually, over dinner?

GET TALKING

There are many ways to begin a great discussion, with or without a reading guide. You'll find that with a bit of direction, the conversation will flow naturally. Here are some questions you can start off with.

- **Characters — Likes and Dislikes:** Talk about the characters and how they are rendered by the author. Do they seem real to you? Are they like anyone you know? Can you understand or identify with their motives? Did you like or dislike any of them?
- **Your Own Experience:** Are there events in the book which remind you of your own life? Does your own experience give you a different perspective? Does the book make you look at life differently, now?
- **How the Story was Told:** How does the voice of the book affect your reading? Was the book written in first person or narrated by an onlooker, and how do you think that makes a difference? Does the voice draw you in, or distance you from the story as you read?
- **Themes and subjects:** Is the book mainly about love, family, coming-of-age, or another topic? You may want to draw thematic comparisons between this book and another that your club has read. Do any of the themes relate to current events? Are there major conflicts in the book, and are they resolved convincingly?
- **Symbolism or imagery?** What imagery do you notice? Do these devices add to the overall effect of the book, or are they distracting, preventing you from enjoying the narrative?

You can also do research to help your discussions along. Look for reviews and interviews at the library or online, and see if the author provides additional insights into the book. Does any of it seem autobiographical? There may also be cultural or historical aspects that you can research to supplement the discussion. When you find reviews, you may want to bring them in and discuss whether you agree with the reviewer's assessment.

If members want to do their own research, you can involve everyone in the discussion by having them bring a query or favourite passage to the meeting. If you like, you can spend some time going around the room and discussing each one.

DISCUSSION GROUPS

TIPS FOR A GREAT DISCUSSION: Focus on an author

Consider focusing on one author's books--for one meeting or a series of meetings. You can trace his or her progression as an author, the changing themes in the various works, and the effects of biographical events on the writing. You may want to include a biography as part of your reading list, to provide your group with a better understanding of the author's life and times.

TIPS FOR A GREAT DISCUSSION: Read on a theme

Reading on a specific theme, such as memoir, or a subject, such as current events or history, is a great way to generate lively discussion. Have each group member read a different title and compare notes, or focus on a specific subject or historical figure. You may find, for instance, that two biographies on the same person reveal very different aspects of that person's life.

TIPS FOR A GREAT DISCUSSION: Explore a different culture

One of the most rewarding aspects of reading is the exposure to different places, cultures, and times. Can you bring some of the cultural aspects of the book to your meeting? Consider the music, food, and customs described in the book and try to re-create some of that for your group. If your book is full of references to a certain artist or composer, bring a sample of that person's work and share it with your group. Experiment with new kinds of foods, or sample a restaurant that specializes in the cuisine of your chosen culture. Visit www.randomhouse.ca/recipes to get ideas!

TIPS FOR A GREAT DISCUSSION: Attend a reading

An easy way to enrich your experience of a book is to attend a public reading, often held in a bookstore. Many stores will even arrange for the author to meet personally with groups registered with the store. To keep up-to-date on author tours, visit [Email Central](#) to read the latest author event bulletins and sign up for them.

TIPS FOR A GREAT DISCUSSION: Go on the road

Many reading groups enjoy combining their reading with travel — from day-trips to local museums or historical sites, to extended and exotic vacations for foreign countries! It's up to you to set your limits and be creative. Are you reading a book that's set in the Renaissance? You could take a trip to your local art museum to view their collection of Renaissance masters. You could even could organize a trip to Florence to get a first-hand look!

TIPS FOR A GREAT DISCUSSION: Movie and theatre tie-ins

You may want to try the "Read the book and see the movie" approach to discussion. It's a popular choice for reading groups because it provides instant comparisons — and lively debate! Now consider taking this concept even further. One group says they like to read screenplays before seeing plays together. Are there upcoming movie or theatrical events in your area — on or off-screen — that will add to your understanding and discussion of the book?

TIPS FOR A GREAT DISCUSSION: Read poetry

Poetry lovers may want to devote their discussion to poetry for a month, or focus on it as part of the reading over several meetings. You could try a "poet focus," where you choose one poet and have your group read a selection of his or her work. Discuss major themes or patterns that recur in the poems. Do you see a development or change from the poet's early work to the later poems? Or you might want to read some poems in conjunction with a biography of the poet. You may be able to tie a particular theme or tone to significant events in the poet's life. If you're reading a novel, you may find the author has written poetry as well. Comparing a poem by the same author, you may find similar themes and interesting similarities.

If you want to read a number of poets, why not read the work of a particular group or period — such as the Romantics or the Beats? Do you prefer the work of one particular poet to that of the others in the group? Are there any groups you prefer over others?

You might also simply share your favourite poems or poets. Devote a few minutes at the beginning or end of each meeting to poetry, and have a different member read from a favourite work each month. You may find some new favourites to read for your own pleasure.

PLAN AHEAD:**Plan Ahead and Choose Books**

Planning ahead for future selections? Get a sneak peek at what's coming in paperback this year so you can keep up to date on new releases.

All the book clubs we know plan their book lists ahead of time — sometimes six months in advance! After all, it takes time to read a book. Here are some of the new reading guides, hot off the presses!