

Welcome to the Reading Group Pack

Whether you'd like to explore the world of contemporary fiction or rediscover the classics, being a member of a reading group introduces you to new authors, new genres and new people.

In this pack you will find ideas and information to help set up and run a reading group as well as ideas for choosing books, suggested topics for discussion and other useful resources.

How to use the Reading Group Service

- Nominate a member of your group to be the library contact and register for your free Reading Group card.
- The library contact can then request book sets by completing a book order form either online or at the library.
- The library will get in touch with the library contact when the books have arrived.

Starting a reading group

A Reading Group is a group of people meeting to discuss what they have been reading. Its purpose is not to decide if a book is good or bad, rather it is a place where readers share their experience of a book and it does not need an expert to guide it.

Running a Reading Group

Choosing Books

You may want to start by having a general discussion about your reading tastes and habits. What authors do the group like? What authors/genres do they want to try? This will give you a better idea of what kind of books will appeal to the group.

A reading group is the ideal place to take a chance and read books that you wouldn't normally try.

A few ideas for choosing books include:

- Take it in turns, with each member of the group suggesting a different title
- Each member of the group select a book they would love to read, a book they would consider a challenge and a book they would hate to read. Put them all in hat and pick out the winners.

- Link together a series of meetings by reading first novels, prizewinners, women writers or memoirs. This will allow your discussions to grow and you to compare titles.
- Choose a theme. Food, travel, war, love....
- Read newspaper reviews, also check out the list at the end of this pack for websites that can help you find a good read.
- Flick through the Book List, close your eyes and read whichever book your finger lands on.

Every so often you may want to try something completely different. You could give over a whole meeting to short stories or poetry. Or you could choose a book that has been adapted into a film. Read the book, watch the film and then discuss the different experiences gained from each one.

Topics for discussion

Begin by thinking about what in particular you liked or disliked about the book. What did the other members of your group think? Consider choosing a few favourite passages that illustrate your point to get the discussion going. You can further develop your ideas by focusing on the main aspects of the book, which can be divided into the following general categories.

- **Subject:** What is the book about? Why might the author have chosen this subject?
- **Plot:** What happens? Is the plot simple or complicated? Does the story have a happy outcome, or the opposite? Were there major conflicts in the book, and were they resolved in a convincing manner?
- **Characters:** Does the book focus on a single main character, a few characters, or a large array of characters? Which characters are the most important? How fully does the author develop the characters' external and internal lives? Did you leave the book wanting to know more about them? What sort of personality traits has the author used to define each character?
- **Point of View:** Think about the way the story was told. How did the narrator's voice in the book affect your reading of it? Was it written in the first person (related by a main character in the book) or third person (related by an independent and objective observer)? Did the voice draw you in, or did it distance you from the story? How did the narrative point of view influence the tone of the story?
- **Setting:** Where and when does the story take place? How important is the physical setting to the story being told? Does the novel project a strong sense of place or evoke a specific time period?
- **Themes:** Are there one or more general themes that are established in the book? What major issues and ideas is the author trying to convey and explore? Love? Coming-of-age? Disillusionment? Can you draw any thematic comparisons between this book and another that your group has read? Do any of the themes relate to topics or events in the news?
- **Style:** How would you describe the author's writing style? Is it spare, lyrical, descriptive, objective, or ironic? Does the author make use of

symbolism and imagery? Do these devices add power to the overall effect of the book, or are they distracting or forced?

- **Also consider:** Does the book appeal more to your emotions or your intellect? How and why? Did you find the book funny or serious? What makes you laugh in this novel? What makes you feel uncomfortable? Did the author make choices that you strongly disagree with? How satisfying is the novel's ending?

Discussing Non-fiction

Reading non-fiction is a great way for readers to expand their knowledge and to gain familiarity with a wide array of subjects.

- How well does the author relate the content of the book? Does the author provide enough background material on the subject to allow readers to get involved? How is the book organised? Is it chronological, thematic, topical, or arranged in some other format?
- If you are reading a history, a biography, or a travel book, how vividly does the author re-create an historical period, a life, or a journey? What draws you in? What, if anything, seems too dry or unnecessarily detailed?
- Think about non-fiction and its relationship to truth. Does the non-fiction writer have an obligation to be truthful above all, or is bias acceptable in certain cases? Is the book objective and balanced or deeply personal and strongly biased?
- Does the book attempt to change or shape public opinion? How does it change the way you think about a person or event? Does it give you new perspective on a historical event or topic of interest?
- What is the author's attitude toward his subject? What is the author trying to persuade you to think or do? How do you think the author was changed by the experience of writing the book?
- What is original about this book? How does it distinguish itself from other books you have read on a similar topic?

Discussing Memoirs

Sometimes harrowing and heartbreaking but always enlightening, memoirs are books that lend themselves to great discussion on a variety of topics.

- What is most compelling about memoirs? Are true-life stories potentially more powerful than fictional ones? Why or why not?
- Memoirs and fiction can be quite similar. How are the choices a writer makes in writing autobiography different from those made in writing fiction? Do writers turn themselves into characters, exactly as they would create a character in a work of fiction? How important to the reading experience is the idea that this really happened?
- Consider the structure of the memoir. What decisions has the author made in shaping the story of his life? What is emphasised? What is left out? What is the relationship between the past and the present of the writer's life, and does the structure of the book depend upon moving between past and present?

- Do you find the writer's voice appealing or unappealing? Which aspects of the writer's character do you identify with most and least? How does your reaction to the writer affect your experience of the book?
- How does the author approach his own story? With a sense of irony, sympathy, distance, comedy, or something else entirely?
- How much does the central character change over the course of the memoir?
- What is the story's impact on you? How does the memoir you have just read change the way you think about your own life story?

Discussing Poetry

Great poetry can be just as thought provoking as great novels or biographies, and it can be an excellent choice for reading groups as well.

- Consider choosing one poet and have your group read a selection of their work. Discuss major recurrent themes and stylistic devices. Can you see a clear progression or change in style or tone from the poet's early work to the later poems?
- Consider reading a book of poetry in conjunction with a biography of the poet. Can you tie a particular theme or tone to any significant events in the poet's life?
- If you prefer to focus on a variety of poets, choose a group from a particular period or country - the Romantics, the Beat poets, American poets, Irish poets - and read a selection of verse from that group. What are the stylistic or thematic similarities and differences? By which characteristics can you classify the group as a whole? Do you prefer the work of one poet to that of others in the group? Why?
- If discussing entire works of poetry does not appeal to your group, consider having interested group members read a favourite poem each month at the beginning or end of each meeting. You may find that those who are hesitant to read poetry will discover how accessible it is.

Useful websites

There are a wide range of websites to help you with your reading choices.

www.thereadingclub.co.uk/

The Reading Club – everything you need to know about reading groups

www.readinggroups.org/

Reading Groups for Everyone – celebrating all the great things that reading groups, writing groups and book clubs offer.

www.fantasticfiction.co.uk

Bibliographies for over 30,000 authors and information on over 350,000 books. Useful to find the order of books in a series.

www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/arts/bookclub

The Radio 4 book club featuring Book of the Month plus previous and upcoming reads.

www.whichbook.net

A unique way for readers to find their ideal read with book choices tailored to their individual tastes.

www.bookcrossing.com

Book-crossers read a book and then leave it in a public place for another reader to find and enjoy. Log on to find out if there are any books near you.

www.guardian.co.uk/books

Book news, reviews and author interviews

www.you-reading-group.co.uk

The Mail on Sunday's reading group page with Book of the Month and an archive list of previous choices.

www.amazon.co.uk/books

You don't have to buy, just make use of the customer reviews. You can also see if the front cover appeals.

www.penguin.co.uk/readers

Book of the month, lots of reviews and special promotions for reading groups.

www.richardandjudy.whsmith.co.uk/

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