



How to Start a Book Group

Research conducted by [The Reading Agency](#) indicates that being in a reading group not only expands your reading but **enhances your sense of connectedness, enjoyment, and mental wellbeing**: 94% of book group members said they'd read more widely; 94% said they felt more connected to other people; 91% said they'd enjoyed reading more; and 90% said that they felt happier.

The suggestions below were developed in conversation with people who have experience of facilitating book groups in different kinds of settings. They're intended to offer guidance, but not to be prescriptive – please feel free to pick and choose the ideas that work best for your group. As one experienced facilitator reminded us, there's no fixed destination your group needs to arrive at, so it's ok to have a format that is quite open.

SETTING UP YOUR GROUP

What do you want (and not want) from your reading group?

A 'starter' question for you and potential members of your group to discuss together.

Where will you meet?

Your book group space might be a library or place of learning, a bookshop, a café or pub, someone's home, or maybe online like the [Afrori Books bookclub](#) in Brighton, UK. Your group might even meet outdoors.

Some resources and reference points for starting a reading group:

Starting a **community reading group**:

[Reading Group Toolkit](#)

[How to Set Up and Run Your Own Reading Group](#)

Starting a **prison reading group**:

[Starting a Reading Group in Prison](#) (nb. there are **useful tips for everyone** here!)

Starting a **reading group for schoolchildren**:

[Running a book club: how to have huge fun with books, develop a reading culture, and raise standards](#)

Establishing the space

Whatever your physical space is, a reading group is also a collective space. The discussions are likely to be most active when people feel safe and listened-to. How much effort it takes to achieve that might depend on whether you're bringing old friends together for a book group or a diverse group of people who are, initially at least, strangers.

You might open your first meeting with some general chat to build trust and familiarity; or with the joint activity of devising guidelines for making the group as hospitable as possible for everyone. We all have inconsiderate moments and get things wrong, but mutually agreed guidelines mean the group is on the same page regarding how it *intends* to operate.

Some sample group guidelines:

1. We all agree to do our best to read the book in advance (unless the group is read-aloud or has planned a different approach) so we can be part of the discussion and have something to say.
2. Disagreement is the lifeblood of a good group but we agree to make sure everyone's views are listened to and respected.
3. We agree to keep an eye on how much we're participating in the discussion and to make sure everyone gets a chance to speak and be heard.
4. We agree to avoid explaining other people's experience to them and to listen instead.
5. We agree to avoid interrupting or having side-conversations instead of listening.
6. We respect each other's physical and emotional boundaries.
7. We respect each other's identities and backgrounds, names and pronouns.
8. We agree not to assume or make judgments about anyone's gender identity, sexual preference, survivor status, health status, economic status, beliefs, etc.
9. There is a right to privacy. We agree not to push anyone to share, and not to repeat anyone's personal stories outside of the group.
10. Words can have unintended effects and we agree that other people's feelings are valid, regardless how a comment was intended.
11. We agree to assume positive intent. If someone does or says something that crosses a boundary, it is ok to gently let them know, but without assuming they intended harm. We all agree to take care of own safety. If anyone needs to step out, they should feel free to do so.

(Adapted from the Canadian Mental Health Commission's [Safer Space Guide](#), and from PRG's [ground rules](#))

How long will you meet for?

Some book groups operate for a fixed period; others are open-ended. It's important to remember that a group is a community, and when it ends the loss of that community can be felt deeply. That is a particularly urgent issue in closed settings (like prisons), where the end of a regular group activity can leave people with a difficult gap in their lives.

So it's important to plan ahead, if you know that a group is going to end, and be sure that it ends in a way that is manageable for everyone, with opportunities for reflection, closure and saying goodbye, and a look to where the experience gained in the group might take people in the future.

CHOOSING WHAT TO READ

Who decides and how?

Reading groups are an opportunity to connect with popular culture and engage with things that people are talking about; they can also introduce new things that might not be on everyone's radar. Depending on the purpose and character of your group, you might decide to focus on a particular genre (feminist writing, for example, or science fiction) or on a topic (such as work, or the environment) – or you might leave things open. It's usually a good idea to involve your group in the decision. As facilitator, you might decide to choose the first book or two and then ask the group for suggestions for later sessions. Alternatively, you could involve the group from the beginning and give each member the opportunity to pick a book or ask for suggestions and open it to a vote. There's also the option of making selections randomly, in the form of a lucky dip, or pulling author names or book titles out of a hat!

Things to bear in mind

Whichever method you decide on, it's worth thinking about the following things that might influence your choice of book:

- Is the book easy to get hold of? Can it be borrowed from a library, or will your members need to buy it themselves? What budget, if any, do your participants have for buying books?
- How accessible and how long is the book? Are there members in the group who have particular needs when it comes to language, for example, or members who are pressed for time?
- How can you all get to read something new, something you might not normally read – novels by minoritised or marginalised authors, for example, or books from other countries or translated from other languages?
- Do the books you are considering raise issues that might be challenging or upsetting for some group members? It might be a good idea to address this with the group or offer members the chance to raise concerns in private. You could include content warnings if the book(s) you choose do deal with difficult topics, so that participants can prepare themselves or decide not to attend the session in question.

Some resources for finding books for your group:

Browse the [novel profiles](#) on the CAPONEU platform for suggestions and downloadable summaries

Consult the guides recommended on [ReadingGroupGuides.com](https://www.readinggroupguides.com).

This site also has [month-by-month tips for selecting books](#)

You could add seasonal or community-related celebrations to this list e.g. **LGBT History Month (February)**, **Pride Month (June)** or **Black History Month (October)**.

Reading Groups for Everyone recommends books that have won or been shortlisted for literary prizes and offers [themed books lists](#)

GUIDING THE DISCUSSION

Who should lead?

Decide if you want one person to lead the discussion and whether the same person will lead each time or whether you want to rotate among different members (perhaps the person who suggested the book you're discussing could lead that particular session). Your group might even decide against having a leader, as such, and prefer to simply go around the room so that everyone can contribute their thoughts and experiences of reading the book.

How do we get started?

Following the suggestions above for setting up a collective space will help you and your group create a welcoming atmosphere where discussion can flow freely. Think about seating arrangements: sitting in a circle and/or in a relaxed and comfortable formation can help the conversation. Not everyone who takes the plunge to attend a reading group feels confident to speak, especially if the book you've read has sensitive or politically charged content.

If you're looking to prompt a discussion, it's important to ask questions everyone feels included in. [Prison Reading Groups UK](#) recommends kicking off with a **round of quick responses** to the book so that **everyone is involved and heard** from the start.

Some **simple icebreakers** to get you going might include:

- What did everyone think of the book?
- Would you recommend the book to others? Why/why not?
- What was the best single moment in the book?
- Which passage would you choose to give someone who hasn't read it a flavour of the book?

(Adapted from Prison Reading Groups UK and Reading Groups for Everyone/The Book Club Hub).

You can find a longer list of icebreakers at [The Reading Agency](#). More questions to support your group as the discussion develops are available in the CAPONEU [Questions for Reading Groups](#) downloadable document. They include suggestions for opening questions and further sets of questions which you might use as the discussion progresses.

Ideas for structuring and prompting a discussion

Once the discussion has begun, there are different ways to proceed: you might just throw one question at a time out to the group, or another option is to write a few questions on index cards and hand them around so each member has a particular question to respond to. You could also ask members to comment on a specific line or passage from the book.

Direct questions aren't the only way, though: [ilovelibraries](#) suggests bringing a prop or an object (e.g. maps, photos, paintings, food, or an audio-visual clip) to stimulate ideas on a particular aspect of the book. Or what about the book as an object itself? The cover design or the blurbs and comments printed on the back and inside covers might also offer different entry points or move the discussion in different directions.

The CAPONEU digital platform has a [map](#) that you could explore with your group to think about connections between novels written at different times and places.

What if things get tense?

Disagreement is the lifeblood of a good group, as Prison Reading Groups say. But there might be situations when more serious or deeper conflicts develop, suddenly or over time. In these cases, it might be enough to remind each other of the ground rules you agreed on at the start. In cases where that isn't enough, consider the following tips and resources:

It's in the nature of novels and memoirs (as the kind of books you're likely to be reading) to evoke experiences that some members might find too close to home, or others too strange and unfamiliar: either response might lead to people feeling upset. Some topics are surrounded by polemical or polarised attitudes in public discussions; in these cases, it's a good idea to ask members to consider whether they can use language or examples that avoid feeding into that kind of polarisation.

ilovelibraries.org offers ideas on [trouble-shooting a book club](#) that revolve around knowing your group, going with the flow, clarifying your interests, reevaluating your methods, building in more social time, learning to signpost, taking the reins, talking it out, and getting formal.

The Center for Professional Education of Teachers blog includes a piece on [recognising and resolving book club conflicts](#). This presents a particular scenario when a book club member felt hurt during a discussion and then raised their concerns in an email to the facilitator and the whole group afterwards.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Ideas and inspiration:

The Reading Agency's 'Book Club Hub' is the UK's largest reading group network: <https://bookclubhub.co.uk/>

ilovelibraries, an initiative of the American Library Association (tips on starting, leading, and troubleshooting books clubs): <https://ilovelibraries.org/for-book-lovers/bookclubs/>

LitLovers online community: <https://www.litlovers.com/run-a-book-club>

Getting started:

A helpful overview from The Reading Agency's Book Club Hub: https://tra-resources.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/uploads/entries/document/12875/Book_Club_Hub_-_How_to_start_a_Book_Club.pdf

Planning a Book Club Checklist (Penguin Random House): <https://assets.penguinrandomhouse.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/26101554/Book-Club-Checklist.pdf>



Setting up an online book club: <https://www.penguin.co.uk/discover/articles/online-book-club-set-up>

Guides to individual books (to help you choose):

CAPONEU's [novel profiles](#)

Reading Group Guides: <https://www.readinggroupguides.com/>

Tips for book clubs (month-by-month ideas for your group)
<https://www.readinggroupguides.com/tips-for-book-clubs>

For schools:

The Book Trust, UK: <https://www.booktrust.org.uk/what-we-do/programmes-and-campaigns/for-primary-schools/reading-for-pleasure-resources/running-a-book-club/>

National Literacy Trust (UK) resources for all age groups:
<https://literacytrust.org.uk/resources/>

For community book groups:

How to Set Up and Run Your Own Reading Group (Cumbria County Council UK)
<https://cumbria.gov.uk/elibrary/Content/Internet/542/827/41296102237.PDF>

Reading Groups Toolkit (Kent Libraries, UK): https://www.kent.gov.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0018/204237/Reading-groups-toolkit.pdf

For prison book groups:

Prison Reading Groups (UK) <https://prisonreadinggroups.org.uk>

On safer spaces:

https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/wp-content/uploads/drupal/2019-03/safer_space_guidelines_mar_2019_eng.pdf

Recognizing and resolving conflicts: <https://cpet.tc.columbia.edu/one-book-book-club/book-club-recognizing-resolving-conflicts#:~:text=Each%20person%20in%20the%20book,to%20listen%20and%20be%20heard.>

(Image: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bookstack.svg>)