

Arizona Humanities Council

Participating in a Successful AHC Book-Discussion Group Tips for Discussion Participants

This guide was adapted from a book discussion guide developed by the California Council for the Humanities.

Why participate in a book discussion group?

Book discussion groups enrich our enjoyment of reading literature by providing an opportunity to articulate and share our impressions and hear other peoples' opinions. They also strengthen the role of cultural institutions and help build community by providing forums for individuals to discuss ideas and interests, and to share experiences. Further, they provide a means for participants to strengthen ties with friends and neighbors as well as form new connections – and for everyone to feel part of a community of interests.

Some tips for participants

Ultimately, the success of a book group depends on the participants. Here are a few suggestions to make your discussions more enjoyable, productive and meaningful:

- **Speak up.** Group discussion is a conversation in which everyone takes part. Don't expect to be called on to speak; enter into the discussion with your comments of agreement or disagreement.
- **Share your viewpoint and experience.** When you find yourself disagreeing with other people's interpretations or opinions, say so and tell why, in a friendly way.
- **Listen thoughtfully to others.** Try to understand the other person's point of view. Remember, there are several points of view possible on every question. Be respectful, but also be critical: don't accept ideas that don't have a sound basis.
- **Be brief.** Share the discussion with others. Speak for only a few minutes at a time. Make your point in as a few words as possible. Be ready to let someone else speak. A good discussion includes everyone in the conversation.
- **This is a discussion, not a class or a debate.** Each speaker should respond to what the person before him/her said. Don't prepare speeches; there should be a spontaneous exchange of ideas and opinions.
- **Come with your own questions in mind.** As you read the selection, make note of the points on which you'd like to hear the comments of group members. If the questions asked don't address your concerns, raise your own!

Suggestions for reading critically

The very best stories are those that connect to your experience. They reveal an important truth or provide a profound sense of kinship between reader and writer. Searching for, identifying and discussing these truths deepen the reader's appreciation of the story.

Asking questions, reading carefully, imagining yourself in the story, analyzing style and structure, and searching for personal meaning in a work of literature all enhance the work's value and the discussion potential for your group.

- Take notes and make note of pages as you go.

Reading for a book discussion – whether you are the leader or simply a participant – differs somewhat from reading purely for pleasure. As you read a book in preparation for a discussion, ask questions of yourself and write down pages you might want to refer back to. Take notes like, “Is this significant?” or “Why does the author include this?” Taking notes as you go slows down your reading but saves you the time of searching out important passages later. [Please take notes on a separate piece of paper rather than writing in one of AHC's library copies.]

- Ask tough questions of yourself and the book.

Obviously, asking questions of yourself as you read means you don't know the answer yet, and sometimes you never will discover the answers. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions because often the author is presenting difficult issues for that very purpose. Look for questions that may lead to in-depth conversations with your group and make the readings more meaningful.

- Pay attention to the authors' messages.

As with any skill, critical reading improves with practice. Remember that a good author uses every word in a text deliberately. Try to be aware of what the authors are revealing about themselves and what they want you to learn about life from their perspectives.

- Analyze themes.

Try to analyze the important themes of a story and to consider the premises the author started with. Imagine an author mulling over the beginnings of the story, asking herself, “what if” questions.

- Get to know the characters.

When you meet the characters in the book, place yourself at the scene. Think of them as you do the people around you. Judge them. Think about their faults and

their motives. What would it be like to interact with them? Are the tone and style of their dialogue authentic? Read portions aloud to get to know the voices of the characters.

- Notice the structure of the stories as well as the organization of the entire book. Sometimes the structure of the book illustrates an important concept or helps to create a mood. Notice how the editor structured the book. How do the stories relate to each other? How are the individual stories and selections structured? Who are the narrators? How do the sequence of events unfold to create the mood of the story? Is it written in flashbacks? Does the sequence of actions make sense to you?

- Make comparisons to other stories and works. Compare the book and the stories to others that have a similar theme or style. Often, themes run through an author's works that are more fully realized by comparison. Comparing one author's work to another's can help you solidify your opinions as well as define for you qualities you may otherwise miss.

- Think about what the author doesn't say as well as what they do say. During a book discussion, what you're really talking about is everything that the author hasn't said – all those white spaces on the printed page. (Incidentally, this "everything that the author hasn't said" idea is why poetry makes such a rich topic for discussion.)