

Customizing discussion questions

There is no such thing as “official” discussion questions. The publisher provide the discussion guides online or in the books themselves to help you and give you ideas, not because they decree that these are the perfect topics. Groups love to criticize them as too high school essayish, too simplistic, too intellectual — but then complain when there are no guides for nonfiction, or for just-released hardcovers. We’re so demanding!

Still, the more you adapt the publishers’ questions to your own club, or find other sources that work for you, the more satisfying your club. Sometimes a character in a historical plot acts in an anachronistic way, but this would not necessarily be explored in the guides. But you can and should cite examples. And if the opposite is true — the author created a historical period convincingly — give credit and explore how he or she succeeded.

And save introductions for last. They function as a wonderful overview of the book you have just read — and a smashing source of discussion ideas.

Use the discussion questions as jumping-off points, but develop your own ideas about how the discussion might go. What would you most like to explore and don’t have a ready answer for? Consider these points:

- Do the questions approach the writing style, the point of view of the narrator, the way the characters grow, the language the author uses and why? If not, adapt.
- Are several discussion questions bunched together in one question? If so, break them up, simplify and choose only the ones relevant to your group.
- Are the questions getting at some of the less attractive — and hottest — elements of the book?
- Are the discussion questions dull, inscrutably worded and leading nowhere? If so, look for a helpful phrase or just move on.
- What are your own thoughts about the characters? Keep character trait lists so you can share your impressions with the group.
- If an author is writing about a historic period and tends to the anachronistic, do the questions draw your attention to this narrative pitfall?

Focus on a couple of aspects of the book that are meaningful to you, and most of all, listen to your fellow members. After all, their opinions count the most.