



Discussion basics

- **Minimal requirements:** At the beginning of the club, you will offer a brief summary of the book, which you will make intriguing and concise. You may include a short roundup of the critical response and a fascinating, highlights-only author biography that puts him or her in a specific time, place, literary school, or on the best-seller list.
- **Preparation:** The more you put into the discussion before you get to the club, the more you and the group will get out of it. Discussion questions prepared by the publisher but tailored by you, quotes from the book including sparkling dialogue, notes from the introductions, critical responses — it will all be appreciated more than you will ever know. You may not get to all of it, but ideas never expire.
- **Maps for everyone:** Don't scurry around at the last minute looking for an atlas. Have one right in front of you or make sure everyone has access to copies of the Region in Question. Even a map you might consider obvious, such as the position of West Egg and East Egg in many editions of *The great Gatsby*, should be copied and distributed. A visual prompt is never wrong.
- **The spirit of exploration:** You don't have all the answers, nor should you. Your discussion should be viewed as a voyage of discovery. Attention know-it-alls, popinjays, quidnuncs and pontificators: You may not know who you are, but the rest of the group does. Put on that pith helmet and join the group. After all, you will have to face the same people next month.
- **If you chose the book, show up:** Nothing annoys members more than the person who nominates the book and then goes AWOL. Open the discussion with why you chose the book and what you think of it now that you have read it.
- **When antlers lock:** Some clubs live for the moment when there is a truly divided room. Only when the discussion gets personal and everyone is having those annoying side conversations does it digress into an unworkable morass. If you are hosting, step up and stop the side conversations and get everyone back on track.
- **Maintain your defense while going it alone:** Book clubs are social groups that naturally want to arrive at a consensus. You can see the members switching sides mid-club. You don't have to change your mind just because everyone but you loved/hated the book. Keep fighting the good fight with even better reasons. You are not crazy.
- **Best mid-defense-of-book-plea:** "Leap with me".
- **Best in-summary line for the entire room:** What is your abiding memory of this book?
- **Shrinking violets:** If the club's violets are being trampled by the more aggressive plant species, institute a roundtable discussion format where each member has a chance to speak in turn. This is

especially effective in the beginning of the meeting.

- **Reading aloud:** In order to dissect, it is best to hear the author's words as he or she intended them, often in spoken dialogue. There are usually one or two wonderful readers in a group. Call on them if they are not volunteering, though they usually do.
- **Appalling expressions and epithets in classic fiction:** Wishing them away never works. Adapt the sangfroid of NPR's Diane Rehm and incorporate the vile things into your discussion. And consider this: What might be considered offensive to book clubs in the year 2525 or in a galaxy far away?
- **Personal responses:** It's very much okay to relate a book to your personal experience — books and their meaning to you is what the club is all about. Every discussion is unique to every club. But watch digressions into unrelated subjects or boasts ("I *invented* Women's Studies ...") that stop the discussion dead.
- **Club killer:** Many book clubs disband because the meetings have moved so far away from discussing the book. Remember why you chose to form a book club in the first place.
- **Continue the conversation online:** If you have further thoughts on last night's discussion, send an email to the group or the individuals you know have an interest in literary topics. Avoid gossiping at all costs, especially on email.
- **Leave your club with these thoughts:** It was an exhilarating meeting and I am leaving wanting more even though it is so late . . . Everyone made such good points and participated . . . I have a feeling of friendship sustained . . . I can't wait to read next month's book . . . Each book is a winner . . . The controversy was impassioned but somehow inspiring . . . There were different points of view but it was enjoyable to hear each club member present her arguments . . . What shall I serve next?

— From *The book group companion*, p. 19