

# Creating Your Own Discussion Guide

## What to Do If You Cannot Find a Discussion Guide for a Particular Book

Most online reading guides are created by the publishers (or sometimes by the authors). Publishers are beginning to catch on to the market for reader's guides. However, they're still relatively few and far between and often not available until the book is published in paperback. Also, they can be hard to find for books more than a few years old.

So, what do you do if you really want to discuss a particular book but there's no reading guide available; or if you take a look at the reading guide and it doesn't seem to meet the needs of you or your group? Simple – you create your own guide!

The following are suggested starting points for writing your own guide. As a general point, start with broad questions and look for where the interest of the group lies, and then focus in on specific issues. Use the ideas below as triggers for creating questions relevant to the particular book you're studying – aim for about 5-10 key discussion points that will generate conversation – and if everyone is happy discussing one particular aspect, don't feel the need to rush the group on to another topic.

- Start by asking the basic who/why/what type questions. For example:
  - Who wrote the book?
  - What do we know about him or her?
  - Who are the key characters?
  - What do the characters do?
  - What is the book about?
  - When was the book written?
  - When does it take place?
  - Where does it take place?
  - What did you like or dislike and why?
  - What are the key themes of the book?
  - How did the book affect you?
  
- Focus in on individual characters and discuss aspects. For example:
  - What do their actions reveal about them?
  - Why did they act that way?
  - Are they believable?
  - Do you relate to them?
  - How would you have reacted in that situation?
  - How do the characters grow during the book?
  
- Discuss the style that the book's written in.
  - Is it written in the first person, third person or both?
  - Is the story told from one point of view or many?
  - Is one 'voice' more believable than the others?

- Project into the future ... discuss what you think would happen to the characters next.
- Compare and contrast with other books by the same author or other books you have read.
  - How does the book relate to current events and your lives?
  - Are the book's themes familiar to you from other books?
  - *Be careful that conversations that compare and contrast with other authors or books stay focused on the specific book in question, otherwise the majority of members can find themselves out of the loop listening to two members discussing the relative merits of a book that the rest haven't read.*

Source for this document: <http://www.bookbrowse.com/bookclubfun/page7.cfm>

## What To Do When There's No Guide Available

While we have hundreds of reading guides available, and we're adding more all the time, it occasionally happens that no guide is available for the book your group has chosen to read. It can be intimidating when it's your turn to lead the discussion and enjoyment of your group's choices, our editor, Liz Keuffer, has prepared the following questions that can be used for those books that have no reading guides.

These questions are meant to be used with works of fiction. It is likely that you won't get to all of them during your meeting. Choose the questions that you think are most appropriate to your group and the book you've read, and feel free to modify them any way you need to.

1. For the person who chose this book: What made you want to read it? What made you suggest it to the group for discussion? Did it live up to your expectations? Why or why not? Are you sorry/glad that you suggested it to the group (ask again after the discussion)?
2. Did you think the characters and their problems/decisions/relationships were believable or realistic? If not, was the author trying to make them realistic, and why did he or she fail? Did the male/female author draw realistic male and female characters? Which character could you relate to best and why? Talk about the secondary characters. Were they important to the story? Did any stand out for you?
3. How was the book structured? Did the author use any structural or narrative devices like flashbacks or multiple voices in telling the story? How did this affect the story and your appreciation of the book? Do you think the author did a good job with it? Whose voice was the story told in (from whose point of view is the story told)? How do you think it might have been different if another character was telling the story?
4. Talk about the author's use of language/writing style. Have each member read their favorite couple of passages out loud. (You might want to warn them ahead of time that they'll be doing this so they'll be prepared.) Was the language appropriate to the story? Was it more poetic or vernacular? Did it stand in the way of your appreciation of the story, or enhance your enjoyment of the book? If poetic, did the characters speak in vernacular language, or in the poetic language of the author? Was the dialogue realistic sounding? Was there a rhythm to the author's style, or anything else that might be considered unique about it?
5. Was the author fairly descriptive? Was he or she better at describing the concrete or the abstract? Was the author clear about what he or she was trying to say, or were you confused by some of what you read? How did this affect your reading of the book?
6. Talk about the plot. What was more important, the characters or the plot? Was the plot moved forward by decisions of the characters, or were the characters at the mercy of the plot? Was the action believable? What events in the story stand out for you as memorable? Was the story chronological? Was there foreshadowing and suspense or did the author give things away at the beginning of the book? Was this effective? How did it affect your enjoyment of the book?

7. What were some of the major themes of the book? Are they relevant in your life? Did the author effectively develop these themes? If so, how? If not, why not? Was there redemption in the book? For any of the characters? Is this important to you when reading a book? Did you think the story was funny, sad, touching, disturbing, and moving? Why or why not?
8. Compare this book to others your group has read. Is it similar to any of them? Did you like it more or less than other books you've read? What do you think will be your lasting impression of the book? What will be your most vivid memories of it a year from now? Or will it just leave a vague impression, and what will that be? Or will you not think of it at all in a year's time?
9. Talk about the location. Was it important to the story? Was the author's description of the landscape/community a good one? Talk about the time period of the story (if appropriate). Was it important to the story? Did the author convey the era well? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the events in the story? Why or why not for all of the above? Was pertinent information lumped altogether, or integrated into the story? How did this affect your appreciation of the book?
10. Finally, what else struck you about the book as good or bad? What did you like or dislike about it that we haven't discussed already? Were you glad you read this book? Would you recommend it to a friend? Did this book make you want to read more works by this author?

If you need further assistance in leading your discussions, keep the following in mind:

Questions that allow your members to express their opinions work better than those that simply have them pull answers from the book (like a high school exam). Ask your group to back up their comments with specific examples from the book. Sometimes it might even help to play devil's advocate with the group. Take a stance that's different from the consensus of the group (if there is one) and force the members of your group to defend their opinions of the book.

Another option is to go through the book, chapter by chapter, pointing out scenes or passages that were especially touching/memorable/interesting to you, and then asking the group what their reaction to these selections are. And don't be afraid to let the discussion go where it will – if one particular aspect of the book really captures your group member's attention, allow them to stay on this theme, rather than rushing them through all the questions you have prepared.

Finally, if all else fails, you may want to ask each member to bring a couple of questions of their own to the discussion