



Go Big Read

UW–Madison Common Book Program

Book Discussion Guidelines

For Book Discussion Facilitators

1. Find a location that will be comfortable and conducive to discussion. Try to have enough space for the anticipated group for people to sit in a circle, or at least facing each other as much as possible. Arrive enough ahead of time to rearrange chairs as needed.
2. About 12-15 people is optimal for a book discussion.
3. Feel free to use the discussion questions posted on this site, and bring some of your own too. When developing your own questions, remember to avoid “yes” or “no” questions.
4. You may want to generate discussion questions that appeal to your particular group of participants. For instance, if they are students, do they share a major which will likely increase their interest in certain aspects of the book?
5. Be prepared with an icebreaker. A lighthearted question such as, “Where would you take the author in Madison?” or a very open question such as, “What did you find most compelling about the book?” might help get the conversation started.
6. Begin by asking participants to introduce themselves. Have paper handy so that participants can make name tents.
7. Next, mention some goals of the Go Big Read program, particularly those that relate to book discussions. For example, the Go Big Read web site states, “This shared reading experience is designed to engage the campus community and beyond in an academically focused reading experience [and] generate vigorous discussions and exchanges of diverse ideas.” The complete list of goals may be found at <http://www.gobigread.wisc.edu/about.html>.
8. Ask participants to say what they liked about the book. Beginning with the “negatives” might stifle some people who liked the very things others did not. You could go around in a circle so everyone has a chance to speak.

9. Your role is to foster discussion and include everyone who wants to participate. Unless asked to facilitate as an “expert,” don’t let your personal views influence how you handle the discussion. If something is said that seems untrue or upsetting, you can ask the group, “What do others think about that?”
10. Introduce some quotes from a book review that was negative (or that held an opinion not expressed in the group) to stimulate discussion. Ask for thoughts about the quotes.
11. Keep the discussion on track. Many people will naturally want to relate the book experience to their own lives. This can enrich the discussion, but if it goes on too long, you may need to say, “Let’s return to the book” or ask a new question that is directly about the book.
12. One person may dominate the discussion: take advantage of pauses to move to another participant (break eye contact when the speaker has paused and call on someone who is waiting). Or, you can try saying, “Let’s hear from others who haven’t spoken.”
13. Be comfortable with the fact that some participants will speak more than others, and others will not speak at all. Some come mostly to listen, and that is fine, of course.
14. It’s OK if the discussion continues and your guidance is not needed.
15. Don’t worry if there is silence: a silence of three or four seconds may feel like a long time, but the break may elicit thoughtful comments.
16. Choose a way to end the discussion. If you’ve set a stopping time and it’s getting close, you may mention there are only __ minutes left and find out if anyone has any burning issues that weren’t addressed. If the conversation has lulled, or if it seems most people are “done” with the exception of a few, you can help end the official discussion by saying, “Well, thank you all for coming—it was a great discussion,” and standing up. Those who want to will exit, and those who want to chat informally will still be able to do so as they go.

Guidelines were developed by UW-Madison and Madison Public Library. Some guidelines were adapted from CCBC Book Discussion Guidelines (by Ginny Moore Kruse and Kathleen T. Horning).

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