

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR FACILITATING A READING GROUP

We appreciate your interest in being a facilitator for a *The Grapes of Wrath* discussion during The Big Read in Ridgefield this fall. We trust it will be an enjoyable experience for all involved. While some of you have lead similar groups before, others may be neophytes in this particular venue. These guidelines offer general advice about running a book discussion group with the caveat that there are no set rules on how to do so. Don't feel constrained by these guidelines, but use them to help create the discussion atmosphere you and your group are most comfortable with. In preparing these suggestions, I have drawn heavily from a number of "classics" about book groups (see bibliography below).

First of all, we expect you to facilitate your group, which does not mean you have to lead it or give a lecture. Your role is to get the discussion rolling, and to keep it going. Secondly, rest assured that while we hope this book will generate a lively discussion in every group, we know that some groups will be more enthusiastic than others. We have provided a list of possible questions and some background material on the book and the author. In case you want to explore any aspect of the book in more depth, we have provided a list of additional reference materials about *The Grapes of Wrath* that are available in the Ridgefield Library or online.

General tasks of a facilitator:

- Initiate the discussion – we have provided a list of possible questions to get you started. You may choose, for example, to go around the room and allow each person a brief period to make an "opening statement" before going on to in-depth discussion of specific questions or topics. This will also give you a sense of what the members of the group think is important or interesting.
- Make sure all members of the group have the chance to speak (some may not want to say much, but all should be afforded the opportunity).
- Curtail lengthy digressions; some digressions may arise naturally and even add to the discussion, but make sure they don't lead the group too far astray. The object is to concentrate primarily on the shared material at hand, i.e. the book.
- Interject questions when the discussion is running out of steam. Some groups may practically self-lead once the conversation gets rolling; others may need impetus along the way.
- If necessary, make it clear that in a book discussion group everyone "agrees to disagree."
- Customize the discussion to your group – a children's group will have different needs than an adults-only one.

Optional tasks of a facilitator:

Please note that we will be happy to help you identify the needs and interests of the group to which you are assigned and to assist you in determining your role in the group.

- Take on more of a teaching role. Present reviews, provide background information about the author, and the social/historical context of the book. Again, we have provided you with much of the material necessary for this approach. Some groups may want to be more “casual” while some may want a more “academic” bent. In some, the discussion may be so animated that supplementary material falls to the wayside, while in others it is the key to get the discussion rolling or back on track.
- Deciding on whether snacks/food will be offered or provided for the group.

Some common “glitches” that may arise:

- One person dominates the group and doesn't let other people speak. An effective way to deal with this situation can be to recognize everyone who has something to say and then assign an order in which they can speak. When a reasonable amount of time has passed, point out that it is now the next person's turn.
- One strong personality dictates the tenor of the discussion. Make regular reminders, starting at the beginning of the session, that differences of opinion make for lively discussion and that the object is not to develop consensus but to share a variety of viewpoints. You may want, after a particularly strong statement by a dominant personality, to ask if anyone has a counter opinion to offer.
- Multiple discussions develop at the same time, especially in larger groups. Set out ground rules at the beginning about having only one conversation going on at the same time. If necessary, you can even ask people to raise their hands and be recognized before speaking. You may need to play the “heavy” from time to time and actually stop ancillary conversations. It isn't fun, but it will lead to a better experience for everyone in the long run.
- Conversation diverts too far off track. Try to interject another question, or mention that while the point is interesting, you need to steer the conversation back towards the book because of time limitations.
- Discussion lags. Now is the time to go back to your list of prepared questions or to interject some of your supplementary material.

Some general suggestions/ topics that can be used to stimulate a discussion (if you need additional ideas):

- Read passages out loud to emphasize a point, get the flavor of the style, language
- For groups that have come together specifically for this purpose and don't necessarily know each other, start with a simple icebreaker like “When did first

- read this book?” With this title, you may get answers that range over many decades and will get a glimpse into the background of the participants.
- Formulate questions that do not have yes or no answers
 - Discuss how the book relates to contemporary world/culture
 - Credibility of story – does the author’s request to suspend disbelief work?
 - Resolution – does the plot ending satisfy?
 - Discussion of style, language, diction; the structure of this book
 - Setting –detail, effectiveness of descriptions of the setting(s)
 - Characters – favorites, how much of what happens to them is fate and how much to do they control
 - Have each person describe a particular character you select with a single adjective or phrase.
 - Extend and deepen discussion by following up participants’ statements by asking “How?” or “Why?” or asking for specific examples from the text.
 - Ask for a show of hands in response to a simple question, and then ask individuals to elaborate. For example, in this case, you might ask, “How many think that the preacher is a bad man?”
 - Ask if they would recommend the book and, if so, to whom and why.

Resources (all available at the Ridgefield Library)

Rachel W. Jacobsohn. *The Reading Group Handbook*. New York: Hyperion, 1998.

David Laskin and Holly Hughes. *The Reading Group Book: The Complete Guide to Starting and Sustaining a Reading Group, with Annotated Lists of 250 Titles for Provocative Discussion*. New York: Plume Books, 1995.

Diana Loevy. *The Book Group Companion: A Comprehensive Guide to the Reading Group Experience*. New York: Berkley Books, 2006.