

WORKSHEET FOR PREPARING A DISCUSSION FOR A BOOK CLUB

Educators work to stimulate children's imaginations by asking them to brainstorm. Your aim as a leader of a book discussion is to stimulate your participants imaginations by asking them the kind of open-ended questions that make them think creatively about the book.

The method this worksheet suggests is an adapted Great Books Foundation method. It assumes that in any discussion there are no persons who are greater authorities than others. The true authority is the book being discussed.

The best discussions come from choosing difficult books, ones that make people think hard and interpretively about them. Choose books rich enough that people will sense they need the help of the whole group in the discussion.

HOW TO MAKE UP THE QUESTIONS ON ANY ONE BOOK

1. Read the book pencil in hand and write down pages and questions as you go through.

2. Meet with your co-leader and brainstorm together what are the main issues and themes, what's important about the author's structure and aims, and how you want to approach the book.

3. Decide on your first group of questions, perhaps using one you have made notes on while reading. Write them down. Questions should be short, no more than 8 words if possible, and interpretive-- intended to get people's minds back into the book. They should not call for facts which people have to remember right. Anticipate with your co-leader some of the answers people might offer, and prepare other follow-up questions to fill out an entire cluster of questions concerning the issue you start with.

4. Move to other issues you choose to deal with and get clusters of questions about them. Remember particularly to focus on the aims and methods of the author rather than your own feelings about the book. Basically three types of questions work: a. Factual questions: what does the book say about...? b. Interpretive questions: what does it mean? a word, a passage, an act of a character? c. Evaluative questions: does it work for you? or what images did you find effective or memorable? or? Together brainstorm five or six clusters of questions, anticipating how to ask follow up questions, so that you go deeper into any one issue you choose to discuss.

- DO'S
1. Be genuinely, and speculatively interested in the answers people offer.
 2. Stay flexible. If someone brings up an issue way down on your list of questions, jump to it, and come back to your planned order later.
 3. Expect silence. When there's a pause, don't think you've failed as a leader. People need time to think.

- DONT'S:
1. Don't imply there is a right answer you expect.
 2. Don't offer your own opinions. Your role is to be a neutral facilitator.
 3. Don't give background as you ask a question. Ask the question as simply as you can.
 4. Don't romp down your questions as if they were a grocery list. Pause and explore each cluster.
 5. Don't answer questions directed at you. Redirect them to the group.

FLEXIBILITY AND DIGGING DEEPER

This is the aspect of discussion leading that takes more practice. It is important if you want a group to feel they have dug deep into the book.

Follow up questions are essential. For clarification. For example: someone says something that hits at what you think is important. The group needs time to absorb it. Ask, "What do you mean by that?" and get the person to express it in another way. For defense: Where does the book back that idea up? For implications: What does your statement imply about.....? For consistency: Is what you've said consistent with such and such in the book?

Facilitate the shy. Be gentle, don't ask a shy person anything tough, but you could say "Do you agree?"

Interrupt the monopolizer. Take something they say and make a question of it for the rest of the group.

Encourage the group to "keep their foot in the text." When someone reads from the text, encourage them by asking a spontaneous question about what they've read. Bring the group back to the text when they get too far astray.

Welcome additional information which someone brings, but don't dwell on it so long others feel left out. Your aim is to keep the role of facilitator, not authority, even if you have read the work more carefully and think the participants are all wet! Keep trying to ask the questions which will lead them to your sense of the work rather than declaring outright your sense of it. You may learn something.

Trust the group to illuminate the work for themselves through your apt questions. They will!

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