

## FACILITATING A BOOK GROUP DISCUSSION

One of the most enjoyable experiences you can have is the lively, stimulating experience of coming together to discuss a book, whether poetry, fiction or non-fiction.

The recommendations and tips you'll find here are based on the **shared inquiry** method, developed in the United States in the 1940s (see [www.greatbooks.org](http://www.greatbooks.org)). Everything old is new again! The text-centered shared inquiry approach works well because it brings together **the reader** and **the text**. It does not require knowledge of anything outside of the assigned reading – historical context, biography, critical terminology, special vocabulary or special expertise. It allows group members of varying levels of sophistication and education to come to the discussion as equals.

### Four simple rules

1. **Only those who have read the selection may take part in the discussion.**  
This rule is based on the idea that one cannot support an opinion without evidence from the text. Similarly, one cannot base one's ideas/arguments on the opinions of other group members.
2. **Discussion is restricted to the selection that everyone has read.**
3. **The opinions of 'outside authorities' may only be introduced when they can be restated in the participants' own words, and supported by evidence from the text.**
4. **Group facilitators may only ask questions—they may not answer them.**  
This discourages the 'classroom approach' and encourages participants to give answers independent of the facilitator's thinking. You are not the teacher. You are the facilitator.

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The essential tools for discussion leadership:  
**DEVELOPING QUESTIONS, LISTENING and FOLLOWING UP**

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### QUESTIONS: your most important tool

The shared inquiry method describes three kinds of questions:

- Questions of **interpretation** that ask the group member to explain, in their own words, possible meanings of the ideas or situations presented in the reading.
- Questions of **fact** that ask the group member to recall something in the text. This can be done either using the author's words (referring to the page or line so that all can examine together), or by restating the facts in their own words. Questions of fact are not generally used to open a discussion but to establish accuracy when a group member is not clear on what the author said, is presenting interpretations that are based on incorrect facts, or is not supporting an argument with sufficient documentation from the text.

- Questions of **evaluation** that require group members to make judgments about the truth or application of ideas from the reading. Because questions of evaluation call on knowledge, experience and values they can easily lead to a discussion of group members' life experiences, likes and dislikes and to judgments based on gut instincts rather than text-based evidence. So, the facilitator must be prepared to follow-up carefully to keep the discussion on track. It is best not to open with a question of evaluation.

*So, where do I begin?* Begin with a basic question to get the author's main ideas expressed and examined.

- Generate different or opposing opinions, *and/or* help to develop the main ideas in the reading
- Use basic questions when the discussion goes off-track, becomes repetitive, or has been exhausted
- Don't abandon the discussion generated by the original question if you are getting superficial responses or if participants are avoiding answering because the question is difficult and probing. Use re-phrasing, redirection and follow-up to develop a discussion of substance.

### Develop clear and effective opening and follow-up questions

- Forget most of the questions you were asked in school exams – don't ask people to 'compare and contrast', 'explain', 'comment on', 'define', or 'list'.
- Always remember that people are *listening* to, not *reading* your question.
- The group won't remember the beginning of a too-long question by the time you get to the end.
- Don't ask leading questions, questions that begin, 'don't you think...?' *Your question should not contain any part of the answer.* Remember that you are the facilitator, not a member of the group.
- Write the questions down as they occur to you and get back to them for refinement.
- Keep track of what page or passage in the text inspired the question so that, if you don't (as sometimes happens) understand your own question when you return to it, you can go back to the source. Do this with all of questions and issues as they occur.

### ASK YOURSELF:

- Do I *care* about this question? Does it interest me? Do I already know 'the answer', or **DOES IT MAKE ME THINK?**
- Is this a question that can be answered from **DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW?**
  - Is the question **CLEAR?**
  - Is the question specific or at least **PERTINENT TO THE READING?**

**The big silence: what if you ask a question and nobody answers?** Prepare yourself for when you ask a question and are met with what seems like an interminable silence. *In a perfect world* you'd ask the ideal question and the discussion would roll along. *In the real world*, people often have to hear your



question— and hear it again. They need to relate it to their thoughts about the reading. If, however, a reasonable amount of time goes by and no one has spoken up, it's probably time to quickly consider whether your question was clear and direct and stripped of jargon.

**If the basic question was good but nothing's happening: rephrase!** But resist the temptation to rephrase the question into a leading one.

If a group member asks, "What do you mean by X?" you'll have a clue as to what you need to define or clarify. If you do that and the discussion gets going—great! If not, take heart. A good question for one group may not be a good question for another. A good question for one moment may not be a good question for another.

**Go on to another basic opening question that does get the discussion going. If the unanswered question addressed an important issue, you will want to revisit it in some way when the discussion of the 'answerable' question is spent.**

## LISTENING and FOLLOWING UP: your other most important tools

Facilitators of group discussion have no leeway when it comes to paying close attention. You've done a close reading of the text. Now you have to do a 'close hearing' of the discussion. You may have anticipated many of the follow-up subjects as you read and composed your questions. If that's the case, someone will answer your question and the discussion will flow from there. But following up is also a seat-of-the-pants operation.

### Some basic rules for when and how to follow up:

- **Keep an eye on the group for the body language response**  
Before you ask a follow-up question of the group, be sure that you've done a visual scan of the group to make sure that everyone who has something to say has said it. Some group members will use body language to indicate they have a thought to share.
- **Follow up when a follow-up question is called for**  
Ask one that is formulated out of the answers to your basic questions. You may need to:

*elicit more information* – the question for this might begin with 'tell us more about...'

*clarify a point* – the questions for this might begin with 'what do you mean by', or 'where in the text...?', or with a restating of the point as you understand it – 'do I understand you to mean that...' or 'are you saying that...?'

*highlight opposing viewpoints* – the question for this might begin with 'does everyone agree with...', or (restating) 'does everyone agree that...?'

*extract what you believe to be the most important idea in an extended answer*

The question for this might begin with 'What you said about X is interesting. Could you (or anyone else in the group) comment further on...?'

*encourage further reflection on an idea, by the participant who offers it or by the others*

The question for this is similar to our previous question, except you want to ask the participant if they would 'comment further (specifically) on what you just said', or, directed to the group, 'let's think more deeply about what X just said' and then pose a specific follow-up question

*bring the discussion back to the text or basic question*

You may have to insert yourself into the discussion at some appropriate moment, say, 'Let's get back to our original discussion of...' and re-state the question.



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Bringing the discussion back to the text or the basic question, along with the other techniques for following up, are essentials in making the difference between a shapely and a runaway discussion.

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## THE RULES OF GROUP ETIQUETTE – and why you must share them

There's a basic etiquette for participation in a discussion group. If you let your group members in on it and encourage them along these lines, your life as a facilitator, and the discussion, will be so much better. Here are some of the rules:

- Group members should **direct their comments to one another**, not to the facilitator. The facilitator should be considered more or less invisible when not facilitating. There's no need to look to the facilitator for approval (or disapproval which, of course, you won't show anyway). It isn't school! It's a conversation in which all present, (except the facilitator), take part. Each member, in turn, builds their case on, (or in polite disagreement to), the previous comment.
- Group members should **listen to one another's point of view** with an open mind and heart. They must try to understand from where the other person's point of view is derived. If they don't agree, they must present the basis for *their* opinion. **Often, a question will have many sound answers.** And it's fine for a second member of the group to speak in confirmation of the previously stated opinion, perhaps building on it. Sometimes a second stating, even when apparently in agreement, brings something fresh to the conversation.
- Group members, when disagreeing, should **disagree with the idea rather than the person** expressing it. 'Are you crazy?' is not an acceptable preface to expressing a contrasting opinion.
- Group members should try to answer **only the question on the table**.
- Group members should answer **thoughtfully but briefly** in order to give others a chance to participate.

There's much more to learn about discussion leadership, but if you master what's here you're on your way to enjoyment and success. Whether discussing poetry or other genres, what you have here will serve you well. Practice makes... you know! And it's as true in leadership as in anything else.

Relax, have fun and enjoy your group experience!

### Marsha Howard

**Marsha Howard** taught leadership of book discussion groups as part of a 30-plus year career at The New York Public Library. In 2002, she was given the Margaret E. Monroe Award for Excellence in Adult Services by the Reference and Users Association (RUSA) of the American Library Association. She currently works at Poets House in New York City, where, among many other things, she trains librarians in techniques for leading group discussions of poetry.

The material for this manual has been adapted from *The Art of Shapely Discussion: A Guide to Scholar-Facilitation* (c2006), written by Marsha Howard for The New York Council for the Humanities.

