



## A Guide to... setting up a reading group

There could be as many as 500,000 people in reading groups in the UK. Their popularity has spread to all walks of life, age, ethnicity and groups from the visually impaired to lads and dads. This just shows how the idea can be used by different people to fit their own situations and interests.

### WHAT IS A READING GROUP?

At its simplest it can be just a few friends meeting up in a café or in someone's home to discuss a book or books. Libraries are also an excellent venue where you can meet a wider range of people and some even have multiple copies of books for just this purpose. But they also take place in bookshops, hospitals, pubs, at faith groups and even in the workplace. Some are general but others focus on a particular type of writing such as crime, women writers, poetry or the classics.

### WHAT'S THE POINT?

Apart from the social aspect of getting together with others over a cuppa or a drink it's natural to want to discuss a book which might have moved or inspired you. Reading groups encourage you to think a bit more about a book and hear different points of view. Most of all they can open up a whole variety of authors and types of literature you may never have thought of reading before.

### HOW DO I FIND A GROUP NEAR ME?

If you want to join an existing group there are a number of ways of finding out where to go:

- Your local library
- Web sites such as [www.bookgroup.info](http://www.bookgroup.info), and [www.readinggroups.peoplenetwork.gov.uk](http://www.readinggroups.peoplenetwork.gov.uk)
- Voluntary organisations and care groups.

There are also lots of online reading groups run by magazines and other organisations such as 'book army' ([www.bookarmy.com](http://www.bookarmy.com)), publishers like Penguin Books (<http://readers.penguin.co.uk>) and of course TV and Radio stations notably Radio 4 (Open Book and Book Club) and The TV Book Club ([www.tvbookclub.co.uk](http://www.tvbookclub.co.uk)).

### HOW DO I SET UP ONE UP?

How you go about it depends on what you want to get out of the group. They can be as formal or casual as you want them to be. Ask a few friends or people you see at any of your other local groups or clubs to see if they want to join in. You just need to agree the venue (and it doesn't always have to be the same), time and how often you want to meet up. Once a month is a popular timescale.

### HOW DO WE DECIDE WHAT TO READ?

It is usual to select a book a month with each member of the group suggesting one in turn. However, some groups prefer to read different books and then go along and chat about what they are reading and hear about others' choices. It is up to you but if you do all want to read and share views on the same book there are a number of ways of getting ideas:

- By theme such as the Classics, holiday reading, short stories or books from your youth

- From contemporary fiction lists at your local library, book shop or bestseller lists in newspapers or online
- From book reviews in newspapers and magazines
- From shortlists for literary prizes such as the Orange Prize or Costa Prize which are usually mentioned in the press.

It doesn't have to be books either. To start things off it could be magazine or newspaper articles, short stories or something from the internet.

## WHAT DO WE TALK ABOUT?

That is up to you really. You might just want to see where the discussion leads you. To get things going you might want to talk around your emotional response to the book, the characters and how believable they are, the main messages or themes, the most memorable parts and why and the strengths and weaknesses.

## WON'T IT COST A LOT TO KEEP BUYING BOOKS?

If you all read the same book at the same time it means you will have to buy them. That is why a lot of groups focus on paperbacks and it is a good idea to look out for offers in bookshops and online. Also some high street and online retailers offer good discounts for multiple purchases. Ask at your local library which books they have multiple copies of and ask to reserve them at the right time.

An option is to discuss two books each time and then swap over so you are only buying one every two months (or whatever timescale) rather than every month. They could be by the same author for example or on the same theme so in the second session you can compare and contrast the books.

## ARE THERE ANY GOLDEN RULES FOR RUNNING A READING GROUP?

A lot is written on this subject and some useful organisations and book titles are shown below. But it all depends on how seriously you want to take it. It is advisable to appoint a leader for the purposes of organisation and sparking off the debate.

Some groups are run along regimented lines but many are just free-flowing conversations for fun. Some people suggest keeping notes of key points along the way so that you can come back to them or simply remember what was said but you don't have to unless you want to continue discussing the same book at the next session.

It is worth bearing in mind a couple of points however, like making sure that everyone:

- gets a turn at choosing what to read,
- gets a chance to be heard in the discussion and
- is mindful of others' feelings and circumstances.

## BOOKS AND ORGANISATIONS

The Reading Agency

National Literacy Trust

BBC Raw

Bookgroup.info

*Reading Groups* by Jenny Hartley, Sarah Turvey

*The Reading Group* by Liz Noble

*The Reading Group Handbook* by Rachel W Jacobsohn