

Designing a Thematic Book Discussion Series

The practice of reading and discussing literature as a means of reflecting on questions central to life in your community and world is personally transformative and collectively empowering.

This simple practice can help people talk more comfortably about values, think more deeply about choices, and respond more imaginatively to the needs of their communities.

If you build it, they will come. If the series is designed with the interests and concerns of the community in mind and the location, time, and atmosphere is welcoming, people will join the reading discussion.

If it is hospitable, they will stay. Participants need to feel respected and welcome. "Hospitable space" includes a comfortable meeting place and a small group of people who are serious and curious about the topic and each other. It is strongly advised that some food be provided, whether it is cookies and coffee or pizza.

If it is not intimidating, they will participate. Readings are vital to serious conversation but must be chosen carefully, and the preparation and contribution of participants honored through thoughtful facilitation.

If it connects ideas to experience, they will find it useful. Powerful ideas are practical tools. They make sense of experience. Theme-driven book discussions work best when participants feel they have spent their time well, and enjoyed themselves. It is helpful to provide additional resources—books, websites, organizations, contacts—on the topics and issues explored so that participants can make practical connections after the series ends.

Things to consider:

If you would like to create a thematic book discussion series that provokes a dynamic and evolving conversation on a topic of interest, the Wisconsin Humanities Council has some tips.

- Determine who the audience for your program is and who you need to work with to reach that audience. You may want to form a small committee of people who either represent the goals of your organization/institution, or who represent the varied interests of your target audience.
- Select a topic, theme, or issue that matters to your community. This topic may be inspired by a particular book, or by some change causing controversy, or by an issue of shared importance and relevance. For example, perhaps you have read *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini and would like to create a series about Afghanistan or Islam. Alternately, perhaps your community has a growing number of new people moving from another country or another city and the community would like to talk openly about the change. Or, perhaps your community is considering what to do with historic buildings or a city park and would like to engage in informed civic reflection.
- Selecting the “perfect” books is the most difficult part. However, with a series, you have the opportunity to present multiple authors, viewpoints, and styles. Remember that

everyone has different taste when it comes to what is a “good” book. So try to vary the books, mixing genres, eras, and voices. Be sure to consider authors of color, female *and* male authors, international authors, and authors coming from minority or outsider perspectives.

- Ask for book suggestions from librarians, book sellers, and experts in your selected topic, theme, or issue. Books that make excellent choices for discussion groups are written in a way that is accessible and engaging. For works of fiction, strong plots, a distinct setting, and complex characters make for good discussion. For works of non-fiction, personal memoirs, oral histories, or journalistic reporting make for good discussion. Good books for discussion move the reader and stay in the mind long after the book is read.
- Read critically, marking pages and asking questions as you go to determine if the book will make for interesting conversation. Remember that just because you “don’t like” the book or the author does not necessarily mean it would not be good for discussion. Analyze the important themes of the book with respect to your chosen topic or issue. Consider what premise the author started with and be sure to choose books for your series that represent varying premises. Consider the characters in the book and judge them as people, with faults and motives. Again, be sure to include characters that represent a spectrum of qualities in your series.
- Often, one book will stand out as a natural fit. Finding additional books to compliment it and build the series can be challenging. Stay flexible, allowing the theme to evolve and take different turns. However, do not lose sight of your rationale for creating the series or goals for community conversation.
- Build a series that flows naturally. Consider the order the books will be read, and consider your audience. If you know your group loves history books, start with a book that provides historical background and an enticing entry into the topic. If your audience is more comfortable with fiction, start with a familiar author and engaging novel. More challenging or provocative books work better at the end of the series, once the group is comfortable with each other and has spent some time considering the topic or issue.
- Once the books are selected, it is extremely valuable to think ahead about questions to provoke discussion. In any book there will be many things to discuss. In order to highlight the topics and themes of your series, you’ll want to design questions that focus on the issues of importance. In designing questions, it may be useful to ask the same or similar questions for each of the books. If you want readers to start with a particular book and read the books in order, design questions that build a thread and connect the books.

Finding a discussion leader.

Discussion leaders should have two qualities:

- They should care about the topic or question. Good leaders will be genuinely interested, think it is important, and believe it is worthy of open discussion. Resist the temptation to bring in a popular teacher or expert facilitator who is not interested in reflective conversation about the topic.
- They should have both the time and the personal integrity to do the work thoroughly. Resist the temptation to cajole the "perfect" person to do this despite their protestations about lack of time.

Beyond these basic qualities, there is no perfect discussion leader. Text-based community conversations can be facilitated by a broad range of persons, from scholars to adult educators to persons who are part of the group or organization being convened. Each of these types of discussion leader—scholar, adult educator, member of the group—can bring a valuable kind of wisdom to the conversation.

A scholar can bring wisdom about readings and knowledge of a larger world of ideas to a conversation. This is especially valuable in selecting texts, contextualizing them for the group, and pushing the conversation beyond the group's own experience.

An adult educator (or professional facilitator, mediator, etc.) can bring wisdom about group process. This is especially valuable in creating hospitable space for reflection and easing people's fears about academic performance.

A member of the group can bring wisdom about the common work and concerns of participants. This kind of wisdom is especially valuable for connecting the reading to the experiences of participants and assuring that the conversation feels relevant and useful. A member of the group can also bring people to the event by virtue of his or her "cachet."

Perfect is the person who possesses all three kinds of wisdom—and perfectly impossible to find! Instead of seeking perfection, trust your own perception: What kind of wisdom would matter most to the participants in your group? What would most help them to come... stay... participate... go deep?

A good idea is to use two discussion leaders who balance these qualities. The presence of co-facilitators also guards against the tendency of professors to "profess" and of participants to become passive in the presence of a single expert.

This resource was informed in part by The Project on Civic Reflection, <http://www.civicreflection.org/>, and developed by the Wisconsin Humanities Council.

