

How to set up and run your own Reading Group



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What is a Reading Group?

A Reading Group is a group of people who meet together regularly, specifically to talk about books and reading. Groups can be made up of friends who know each other already, or strangers. The main purpose of a Reading Group is to provide a social opportunity to talk about reading in an enjoyable and relaxed manner. They are not academic or exclusively highbrow. However, this does not mean that the discussions will not be serious, informative and inspirational!

Join an existing group or start your own?

Many libraries in Cumbria host Reading Groups. If you are interested in joining one and want to find out if a group meets in a library near you look on the library service website:

www.cumbria.gov.uk/libraries/readinggroups/readinggroups.asp

However, if you are thinking about setting a group up yourself, here are some prompts for things you need to think about, with some helpful tips and advice.

Who can join your group?

- Who would you like to invite?
- How are you going to publicise your group? Tell staff in your local library staff and ask them to tell readers; put posters/leaflets in your local library and bookshop and in other local venues- post office, churches etc.
- Where will you meet?
- How big should the group be? (10 -14 is the ideal size. Over 15 is too many, and fewer than 7 is likely to be too few)
- How often do you want to meet? Many groups meet monthly so they have enough time to read the book but you can choose how often, which day of the week / times to suit your group.

- What about refreshments? Will you take it in turns to host the meetings or provide refreshments?
- Whenever and wherever you meet you will need at least one and preferably two people to organise it so that all the organisation doesn't fall on one person, and also if you are ill, on holiday or can't make the meeting, it can still go ahead.

What to read?

- Do you all want to read the same book or read different books by one author? Or you could choose a particular type of book - like crime or non-fiction or poetry. Or perhaps consider other formats such as scripts, poetry, graphic novels etc.
- Many reading groups read the same book, with occasional meetings where they do something different. But you don't have to stick to this model.
- How are you going to select which books to read? Your library can make recommendations or you can see what's recommended on websites or newspapers. Or take it in turns to choose.

Cumbria Libraries provide sets of books for Reading Groups to borrow from a special Reading Group Loan Service. We offer a special reading group ticket, which gives you loans for longer than the normal loan period. Your group will need to elect a secretary who will be responsible for organising the loans and liaising with the Reading Group Loan Service. Contact Janet Bousie on **01228 227316**, or look online at **www.cumbria.gov.uk/libraries/readinggroups/default.asp**

You will also find a link on this webpage to our list of reading group set titles. For each title there is a picture of the book jacket, and a brief summary of the book, to help you make your selection.

The First Meeting

The first meeting should be a general meeting to decide how the group will run and find out what people's expectations are. Probably best not to have a book discussion at this meeting but use the time to set some ground rules and decide things like:

- What sort of discussions do you want to have? Is it going to be free-ranging or do you want a framework? You could have a loose structure to follow at every meeting e.g. What is the story about? Who are the main characters? What do you think of them? How does the book relate to your experience or to other books you have read?
- Is someone going to introduce the book or author at each meeting? Be careful that this doesn't become competitive. If you do this, set a guideline on how much time this should take.
- People should respect others' points of view, avoid offensive language and try not to interrupt.
- Everyone should have the opportunity to speak, but this may not need to be formal. Ask if they want to "go round the group" formally, or if they are happy for the discussion to range freely.

Talking about books

Here are some suggestions for things to talk about in response to reading something.

- How did your feelings change as you read or listened to the narrative? Did it make you angry, frightened, laugh, or cry?
- Which relationship was most interesting and why?
- Did you get off to a slow start or were you hooked straight away?
- What did you think of the ending? Was it what you expected? How did you feel when you'd finished?
- If you've read a true story, biography or autobiography, did you think it was well told? Did you find out more or less than you wanted about the subject? Have you changed your opinion of them now you've read their story?
- Who was your favourite / least favourite character? Were there any characters you could identify with?
- Did you find some parts of the story more enjoyable than others?
- If the story was set in another time or country, how did that affect you? Was it convincing? Would you want to live in that time or travel to that country / place?



- Is this a book you would recommend and, if so, why? Would you read another title by this author?
- Did you like the cover / look of the book? Would you have chosen to read it and why (or why not)?
- Did you skip the boring bits or just read the end? If you gave up on the book, can you say why?
- If it was made into a film / TV series, which actors would play the main parts?
- Did it remind you of any other books you have read? Can you think of any other stories with similar ideas, characters or settings?

One of the things people are most nervous about in reading groups is what to talk about. Or what happens if the conversation dries up?

For many reading groups this is not an issue. But it can help to have a few ideas up your sleeve if things do go a bit quiet, and if you run the group it can help you feel more confident. Here are some suggestions:

Favourite books

Ask each person to talk about a book, story or poem they've particularly enjoyed. It could be brand new or an old favourite. If you meet in the library, have a look around to find a book you would recommend to someone else.

First lines

Take the first few lines from several books, and discuss them. Do they make you want to read more? Or do they put you off completely? Why?

Desert Island books

Which book would you take with you if marooned on a desert island? Would it be fiction / fantasy to help you cope with the situation, or practical books which could help you survive? Discuss with the person sitting next to you.

Books on screen

How well do books adapt to the cinema? Is it better to read the book before seeing the film or do you do it the other way round? Can the film ever be as good as the book? Do some film or TV versions make you go and read the book?

In the news / best sellers

Which books are in the news at the moment? Have you seen any advertised in newspapers, or in shops and libraries? Have you read any best sellers, or prize winning books lately? Do you read books about or by celebrities, sports men / women, or other famous people?

Children's favourites

What did you like to read or listen to when you were young? Can you remember any special books from your childhood? If you have children or grandchildren, do you share stories or books with them?

Holiday escapes

Recommend a book to others in the group which would be good to take on holiday. You could suggest books to match different types of holiday / places: beach reads, city breaks, adventure holidays. Is reading a good book like taking a holiday? What would you put in your travel bag?

Room 101 / Books you love to hate

Which three books would you banish to Room 101 and why?

Reading Groups for Everyone

Once your group has been set up you might like to register it on the Reading Groups for Everyone website. Reading Groups for Everyone is run by The Reading Agency the independent charity with a mission to get more people reading more, in partnership with the Society of Chief Librarians.

If you register your group on the website it is a good way to recruit new members and you benefit from being able to take advantage of offers and promotions too.

Explore the site by going to:
www.readinggroups.org/



Most major publishing houses e.g. Penguin, Random House, Bloomsbury, have reading group guides and resources on their websites. Some good ones are:

www.readersplace.co.uk/ (run by The Random House publishing group)

www.bloomsbury.com/readingclub

Bloomsbury also publish several useful lists of books. E.g. 100 Must-Read Life-Changing Books by Nick Rennison (2008)

Useful websites

www.whichbook.net

Allows readers to choose by mood, length, tone, setting

www.amazon.co.uk

useful for reviews and synopsis, as well as purchase. Particularly useful are their recommendations Customers who bought this also bought...

www.readinggroupguides.com

An American site which offers lots of support and advice about running groups

www.bookgroup.info

a UK based virtual reading group, also providing advice & support to other groups. Includes offers to registered groups and publicity for special activities

www.librarything.com

Where readers list and describe their book collections. Useful for finding readers with similar tastes to your own

www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/features/book-club/archives/

Looking for ideas to inspire your reading group? Check out the Radio 4 Bookclub archive. It has podcasts of all the Bookclub broadcasts ever aired organised alphabetically by the author featured. A rich resource of material and author interviews.

Acknowledgements

This guide has been put together with information extracted or adapted from the Reading Groups for Everyone website and also the Time To Read Readers' Group Toolkit: Readers' Groups Made Simple.

Cumbria Libraries are indebted to both organisations.



www.readinggroups.org/



www.time-to-read.co.uk/Toolkits/readers_groups_made_simple/intro.asp

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