

Starting a Reading Group

It seems you can hardly open a book these days without someone mentioning to you that they've read that title in a reading group. From small groups that gather in living rooms and libraries to the millions who tune in to find out Oprah's picks each month, reading groups are everywhere! So now you think you'd like to start your own reading group, but aren't quite sure how to begin.

The easiest way to start a reading group is to phone a friend! Call or e-mail one or two friends who share your love of books and suggest you read one together. Pick a book you think you'll all enjoy and set up a date to discuss it. If each of you brings a friend to the next meeting, soon you'll have a regular group going!

If you can't find friends who are interested in a reading group, try suggesting it to coworkers or other parents at your child's school. You could also put up a notice on the bulletin board at your church or gym. Online reading groups often grow out of chat room groups, bulletin board posters, or members of an e-mail mailing list. Anywhere that people meet and talk is a place to consider looking for reading group members.

Another idea is to check with your local library or bookstores to see if they sponsor their own reading groups. These groups often have a book list already made out and they often provide a meeting space. Another advantage to these groups is that you don't generally have to feel guilty if you can't make it! You can choose to attend only for those books you'd like to discuss.

Attendance can be an issue with some reading groups. You'll want to choose members who are able to commit to reading the books and coming to the meetings. Make sure your members are dedicated to the idea of a reading group, and aren't just looking at it as a social opportunity. You'll need to decide ahead of time if members who haven't read the book are still welcome to attend--knowing they may not have a lot to add to your discussions.

The ideal group size is between 8 and 12 members. While commitment is important, not everyone will be able to make it to every meeting. Fewer than 8, and some days you might not have enough for a good discussion. More than 12, and you risk not allowing everyone to be heard. While some groups tend to be homogenous--mothers of preschoolers or coworkers who meet over lunch--other groups are mixtures of various ages and sexes. You'll have to decide how open you want to make your group and what your process for inviting or accepting new members will be.

Once you've gotten your group going, you'll want to lay down any ground rules for your group, discuss how you'll be organized, and consider how you'll make your book selections. Some groups specialize in certain types of reading--nonfiction, mysteries, foreign authors. It might be a good idea to appoint a secretary who keeps track of your book lists (both what you've read and what you plan to read), sends out reminders about your meetings and host or snack schedules, and contacts a local bookstore about getting enough copies of the book for your group.

People join reading groups for many reasons: the reading of good books and the discussions they inspire, exposure to new ideas and differing viewpoints, and an opportunity to socialize with other book lovers. Whatever your reasons for starting one or joining one, as long as you remember to keep it fun and keep the focus on books, you're sure to find your reading group a rewarding experience!