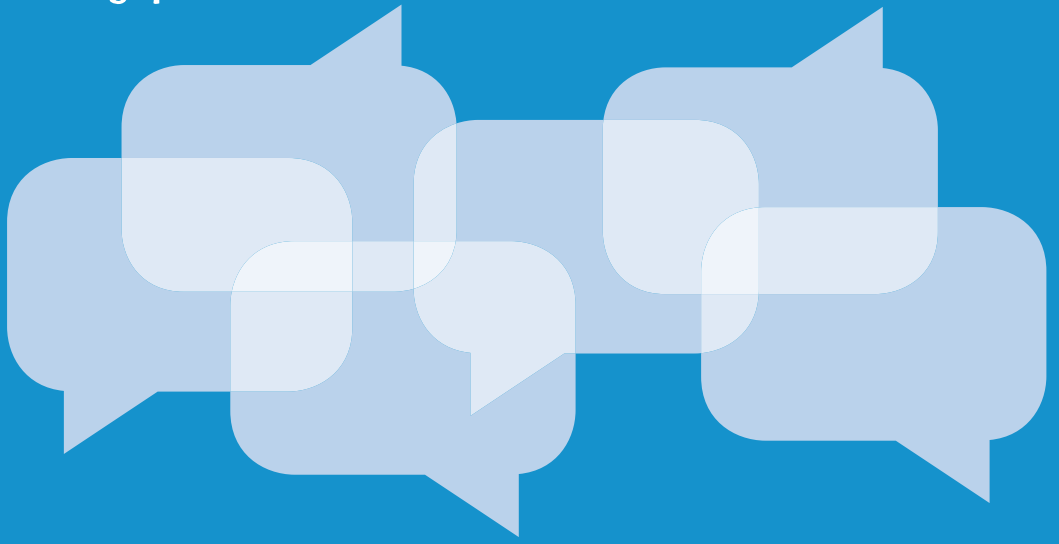


**READ!**  
*Singapore*



# BOOK CLUB GUIDE



librariesforlife

## READ! Singapore

The National Library Board Singapore launched its first ever nationwide reading initiative, READ! Singapore on 24 May 2005. Adapted from such highly successful international reading programmes as 'One Book, One City' in the USA and Australia, READ! Singapore was conceived to promote a culture of reading fiction, to highlight the joy of reading for leisure and to encourage community bonding.

The programme is presented in Singapore's four official languages and aims to nurture critical thinking skills, creative expression and appreciation for the literary arts whilst also providing opportunities for cross-cultural understanding and shared experiences by creating common topics of discussion and conversation.

READ! Singapore's audience now encompasses readers from the age of seven years through to senior citizens. The programme showcases novels, short stories cross-translated and available in the four official languages and poems. For the readers aged between 7 and 14 years, there are selected works in English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil.



5

### SIMPLE STEPS TO SETTING UP YOUR OWN BOOK CLUB

- 1 GETTING STARTED  
PG 4
- 2 DECIDING ON THE  
TYPE OF BOOK CLUB  
PG 6
- 3 THE PRACTICAL MATTERS  
PG 8
- 4 SELECTING THE BOOKS  
PG 10
- 5 DISCUSSING THE BOOKS  
PG 12

1

# GETTING STARTED



---

Reading groups or books clubs ideally need between **8-12** people to be successful. More often, they start from a core group of **3-4** friends or acquaintances, who ask around and find some others – friends of friends, workmates, friends of workmates, etc. It is important that you decide early on what you want to get out of a book club.

---

Do you want intensive discussion on each book or just enjoyable chat?

---

Do you want it to be literary, light or somewhere in between?

---

Do you want to focus on a particular type of book or genre, or cover a broad spectrum? For example - modern, literary, older classics, fiction or non-fiction, biographies, science fiction or a bit of everything?

---

Do you wish to 'experiment' by broadening your reading horizons or do all in your group have similar tastes in books and authors and want to stick to what you love?

---

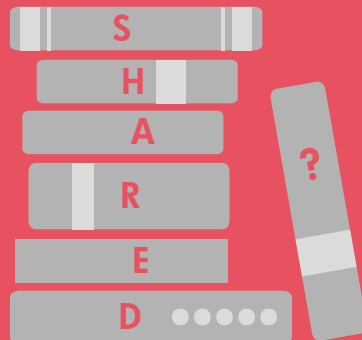
2

# DECIDING ON THE TYPE OF BOOK CLUB



ONE

OR



There are two broad groupings of types of book clubs:

## ONE BOOK AT A TIME

Book clubs that select and read one book and meet to discuss that book. Members borrow/buy their own copy of the agreed book.

This system works for readers that really want to get into intensive discussion of books. Reading guides or discussion questions can be used to help facilitate the discussion. Agreeing on the books to read is generally the biggest problem!

## A SHARED POOL OF BOOKS

Members contribute to a diverse pool of books that they each take home and read. Focus is on sharing books, and more casual discussion and opinions.

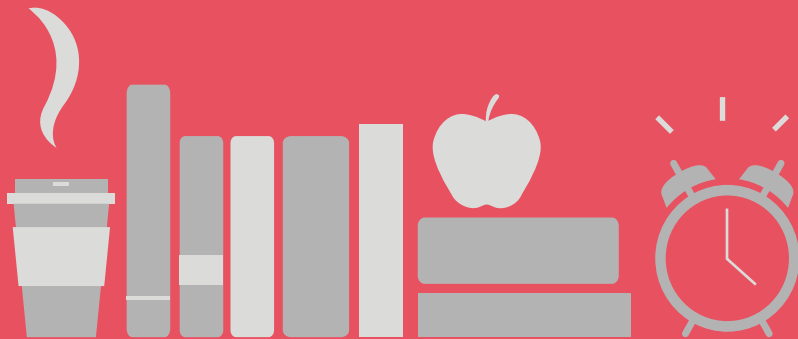
Generally the organiser/host for the month puts 2-3 new books into the selection. Each member returns the books they have read and talks briefly about whether they enjoyed them or not. Everybody then takes turns selecting the books they will take home.

The advantages are that you get a wide variety of books to read and you minimise the cost. The disadvantages are that you do not get in-depth discussion of each book because everybody has not read the book at the same time. Sometimes this can be frustrating when you are really itching to discuss an unexpected ending!

However, you don't have to stick to one system forever. You may want to try a combination of them both or change after a while. Some book clubs use a sharing system, and also discuss one book every now and then.

# 3

## THE PRACTICAL MATTERS



---

### WHEN?

Try and select a regular night or time that remains consistent and suits everybody. Decide a time frame i.e. finishes at 10:00pm and try to stick to it. Discussions tend to go on and on if you let them! You may wish to elect a co-ordinator or 'leader' to be a central point of contact for the group.

---

### WHERE?

Options include your nearest CC, library, café or restaurant. Friends of longer-standing may consider rotating turns at a different person's house – so if there are around 10 or so in your book club, you only have it at your house about once a year. Not too onerous.

---

### HOW?

Agree in advance about the level of food and refreshments expected and with the requirements/ restrictions of your selected venue. For home reading groups, you may prefer light nibbles and tea or coffee rather than a whole meal. Some groups have 'bring a plate' shared meals, even matching the food to the theme of the book.

---

# 4

## SELECTING THE BOOKS



Make sure you all agree in principle with how broad or narrow your selection criterion will be - i.e. modern, classics, particular genres, literary, etc. This can be a sensitive issue, if somebody suggests a personal favourite and it gets criticised by everybody else!

### ONE BOOK AT A TIME

If your book club is based on this arrangement, the system for selecting a book is imperative.

Some groups plan a whole year's books in advance at an initial meeting - everybody puts in 2-3 suggestions and takes a vote, a list is then drawn up for the 12 months and people can plan in advance how to get hold of a copy of that book.

Another common method is that you plan who will be organiser/host for each month, then that person is responsible for choosing the book for that month.

They need to advise everyone on the selected book a month before the session, to allow people to get hold of and read the book. Ideally, try to plan 3-4 months ahead.

### A SHARED POOL OF BOOKS

Here everyone puts in a couple of books to initially get a starting selection. On-going, members agree to continue to contribute books of their own that they have bought and read and might want to share.

For a book club of around 10 people, the pool tends to end up at around forty to sixty books. Duplicating the occasional book is not a problem as this allows more members to read the same book in a shorter time frame.

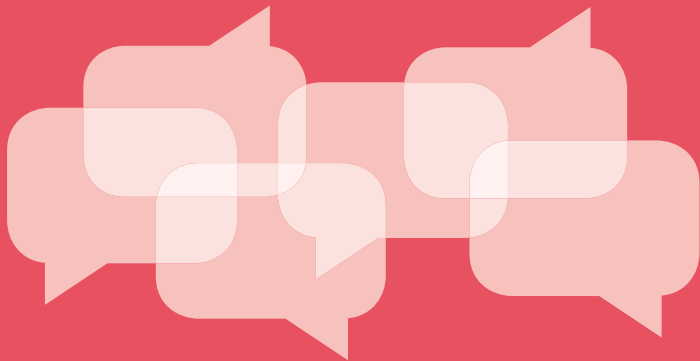
Have a clean-out of older books occasionally, either giving them back to the owner or donating them to charity etc. You need to agree in advance the type of books that you want to see in the pool, but the beauty of this system is that you can get a wide and diverse range. It is good to get some diversity and different authors that people might not ordinarily choose for themselves.

Do agree on what you don't want to see - i.e. thrillers, romance, obscure literary works, etc. If one member loves a particular genre and everybody else can't be bothered, it gets a bit tiresome if they insist on putting one in all the time.

Do try and set up a system (spreadsheet or notebook) to record who takes which book home and who is the original owner to avoid confusion further on.

# 5

## DISCUSSING THE BOOKS



---

Many times the discussion just flows naturally from your enjoyment of the book. But if you think you need extra input, you could:

### a. CHOOSE A CONVERSATION LEADER

This could be the organiser/host for the month, or perhaps another rotating member. The leader needs to be aware of each member's different styles of discussing – some people have no problem giving their opinions and find it hard to hold themselves back while others, need to be encouraged!

If the leader spots a conversation hoarder, he should interject with a compliment or distraction to break the flow. Acknowledge that a good point has been made and say things like, "That's an interesting perspective. I never thought about it this way before. What do the rest of us think?" When a quiet member decides to share, the leader may offer positive feedback such as, "That's an interesting perspective. What gave you this idea? Can you tell me more?"

The leader could also have a friendly chat with the members before the session begins, to learn some of their interests and viewpoints which may help the discussion process later.

### b. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/READING GUIDES

We have provided some suggested questions in this guide. For international works, you can often get discussion ideas from the internet. Remember that the questions are only meant to be conversation starters and to help focus your group's thinking about a book. It should not feel as if you are all in a literary exam!

Do avoid alienating members – everybody's opinion is valid. If there is misunderstanding, a group leader should help to clarify the points raised.

It is especially important to intervene when a debate becomes aggressive and personal. Anyone who interrupts should be stopped politely, only inviting him to speak when the other member is finished.

---

**c. LEADER/FACILITATOR SETS DISCUSSION TOPICS**

The leader/facilitator (the host or the person who chose the particular book) could choose some favourite passages in the book to start the discussion and have some basic discussion questions ready to get going. A bit of research about the author or background to the book helps.

Emailing the others beforehand with some question starters is a good idea, or ask members to prepare their own list of questions.

**d. INDIVIDUAL PREPARATION**

As preparation, each individual chooses a favourite passage, a question about something they didn't understand, or something about the book or author to add to the conversation. Take turns to talk about each person's response to the book. Preparation shouldn't become too much like homework though!

**e. COMFORT AND MOTIVATION**

A book club should create a welcoming atmosphere to allow members to feel comfortable and to want to return.

Keep a notebook to jot down the following information about new members:

- Contact details
- Reading preference
- Hobbies

The 'leader' or host should introduce any newcomers to the group and encourage members to engage them. A little attention goes a long way.

Remember readers' favourite books, discover interesting angles that are stimulating to discuss, draw comments from quieter members, build excitement for next month's book and thank the members for coming. This will build up energy and motivate members to remain positive and upbeat.

---

**f. GENERAL GUIDELINES**

Bear in mind these are very general – each book will have specific issues that will leap out at you.

It is better to let the discussion flow from what you think of the book. Often the best books for the discussion are the ones that polarise opinions – half the group loves the book and the others hate it, and nobody can understand how they can!

---

**SUBJECT**

- What is the book about?
- Why did the author choose this?

---

**PLOT**

- Does it work?
- Too simple or complicated?
- Resolved or unresolved?
- Time frame?
- Is the ending satisfying?
- Why/why not?

---

**CHARACTERS**

- Single or many?
- Well developed or simple?
- How did you feel about the characters?
- How does the author use the characters to tell the story?

---

**POINT OF VIEW**

- How was the story told?
  - One voice or many?
  - Is the first person – "I" – or distant narrator's voice?
  - How did the voice influence the tone of the story?
-



---

### SETTING

- Where and when? Is the setting important to the story? Is it evoked well?
- Realistic? Or not? Does it matter?

---

### THEMES

- What are the major themes the author is trying to explore?

---

### STYLE

- What is the author's style of writing? i.e. descriptive, lyrical, forceful, emotive, spare, blunt, wordy? Does the style work for you or not?

---

### REVIEWS

- Find some critics' opinions of the books and discuss whether you agree or disagree.

---

### AUTHOR

- Compare with other books. What is the author trying to achieve with the writing?
- What works for you or doesn't?
- Will you try and read another one by this author?

---

### ENJOYMENT

- Was reading this book enjoyable or hard work? Why?
  - What do you think the author wanted you to feel or think?
- 

---

## g. OTHER IDEAS

Whatever format works for your group is up to you but you can still change and adapt it as long as you go along. It is often a good idea to do something different or totally creative occasionally.

- **Have a theme night**

Pick a theme (Indian, Italian, medieval, etc). Choose the books around the theme, more than one maybe, and organise the food, music, etc to match the theme.

- **Have an author night**

Choose one author and each member reads a different book and reports back briefly. Compare main themes or issues.

- **Have your book club somewhere different occasionally**

A cafe, a restaurant, the library, on a boat, or attend an author event.

- **Go to the movies**

See the movie version of a book you have read – often deeply disappointing but makes for great conversation!

- **Have a kids' book night**

Share and discuss your kids' favourites or if you do not have children, share your favourite book from childhood.

---

- **Have your own literary awards**

Read the latest winners of major literary awards and give your verdicts.

- **Props**

You may wish to have some of these to help set the right environment for a comfortable discussion:

- **Table**

Having a large round or rectangular table is good if members are expected to do some writing, or if they are to talk over light refreshments.

- **Name tags**

Useful for new groups and for role-playing as characters from the book during discussion.

- **Post-it notes**

Great for quiet members. They can use it to jot down their thoughts or interesting quotes and paste them on the wall.

- **Other commentaries**

Showcase video clips of reviews - YouTube has a plethora of these! - or extracts of news articles.

---

## h. **BEYOND READING**

Try some creative writing. Members can come up with a short story related to the character, plot or setting of the book. For example, they might choose to write the ending of the novel differently or write about which character from the book they would like to be and why.

Other Creative Writing Activities: (10-30 minutes each)

### **A. Use a picture to stimulate creative writing**

- Give everyone the same picture and get them to write a short story on it.
- Pick a few of them to share their stories to show how people can come up with totally different ideas based on one picture.

### **B. Crazy headlines**

- Give everyone a random wacky headline from a newspaper.
- Ask them to think of an incident that might be reported in the newspaper based on that wacky headline. Get them to be creative, should preferably not be based on what is usually reported in newspapers.

### **C. Dictionary exercise**

- Get participants to select 10 random words from a dictionary. They can pick random words by flipping to a random page and picking the first word that catches their eye.
- Use these words to come up with a character, a setting and a problem. Put the character into a situation where the problem is not easily overcome and write a short story.

---

#### D. Nonsensical proverbs

- Ideas might come more easily when strange words are strung together. Ask them to write a paragraph based on a 'nonsensical proverb' such as one of these:
  - *Smelliness is the best medicine.*
  - *Tomato makes the heart grow fonder.*
  - *Strike while the milk is spilled.*
  - *Uneasy lies the chicken that crossed the road.*
  - *A penny is the mother of invention.*

#### E. Reinventing Dead Similes

- Be creative and avoid overused lines such as "big as an elephant", "quiet as a mouse" and "quick as lightning", make a list of the beginning of similes and have participants complete the phrases with new comparisons that help lift the prose.
  - *As brave as* .....
  - *As clear as* .....
  - *White like a* .....
- Get them to use all the similes they created in a short story.

---

#### F. Bag of mystery

- Prepare a bag with several different random items inside (e.g. a paintbrush, a pear, a earring, etc) and each participant picks 3 items.
- Ask them to write a story based on their random items.

#### G. Scavenger hunt

If you're feeling up for a scavenger hunt:

- Hide some objects around the room and put a label/marker on each hidden object so participants will know that it is a scavenger hunt. Inform participants that these objects will be used in their creative writing activity later- so that the more they collect the more ideas they will have for their stories.
- Start the game; give everybody one minute to explore and search for as many objects as possible.
- When the game ends, seat them down and build a story around the objects they have gathered. Can be done individually or in groups/pairs so all would have objects to write about in their story.

---

## H. Turn a poem into a short story

- This might be good because they would not require the precise skills to write within a poetic structure, and the poem provides ideas for a short story.
- Prepare a poem or a few different poems and organise the participants into groups or pairs
- Ask group members to create a character, a setting, a situation and a character goal from the poem and write a short story.
- Shorter poems will generally be better to leave more room for imagination

## I. Films

- Screen a short segment from a film that nobody has seen before.
- After the short screening, get participants to come up with several ideas on the ending of the film, and then write the ending based on their ideas
- Screen the rest or the ending of the film to let them compare the endings that they have written with the film's ending if time permits. Be mindful of the fact that films cannot be screened in public spaces without the requisite permits.

Sources:

<http://www.brucevanpatter.com/funstuff.html>

<http://www.be-a-better-writer.com/creative-writing-activities.html>

If you have any comments, questions or suggestions about this publication, please direct them to:

**READ! Singapore**  
**Reading Initiatives**  
278 Marine Parade Road, #B1-01  
Marine Parade Community Building  
Singapore 449282

**Tel: +65 6332 3255**  
**Email: [readsingapore@nlb.gov.sg](mailto:readsingapore@nlb.gov.sg)**  
**Website: [www.readsingapore.sg](http://www.readsingapore.sg)**  
**Facebook: [www.facebook.com/READSingapore](http://www.facebook.com/READSingapore)**

All rights reserved. The National Library Singapore disclaims all liability and responsibility for any loss caused to any person by any act or omission, due to the material contained in this publication. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without prior permission of the publisher, the National Library Board Singapore. Whilst the National Library Board Singapore has used reasonable endeavours to ensure that the information provided in the publication is accurate and up to date as at the time of issue, it reserves the right to make correction and does not warrant that it is complete. Printed in January 2013.