

Choosing Your Books

Finding Good Titles for Discussions

There are a variety of resources a book group can use to track down books that will make good discussion titles.

Browsing the titles on a source like [Reading Group Guides](#), [Book Browse](#), or the [Fiction L booklists](#) at [can be a great place to start](#). (For a longer list of suggested resources, see our [Resources for Reading Groups](#) page.)

Lists of "recommended" books at your local library or bookstore can also be great resources, as can looking at the titles selected by libraries for their book group collections!

In addition to our ever-expanding [Book Club Kit](#) selections, the Highland Park Public Library provides quite a few booklists by theme or subject, including a collection of [Recommended Reads lists](#) that goes all the way back to 1992! In addition, we write book reviews of our own personal reading and post them online at our [Bibliofiles blog](#). And, of course, you can always come over to the Readers' Advisors' desk and ask one of us in person—there's nothing we enjoy more than talking about books, after all!

Making the Final Selection

When it comes down to the nitty-gritty of making the actual final selection for a discussion title, groups go about it in different ways. Some ask each member to bring a book choice to each meeting and a vote is taken as to which book the group will read the next time. Others ask the group or discussion leader to provide a small selection of 3 or 4 possible titles, and, again, majority vote rules the day. In other groups, the discussion leader picks the book with little to no input from members. Some groups set aside one or two meetings a year solely for discussing and choosing the next few months' worth of books. Whatever works for you, there are some important things to consider when choosing your books.

Themes

Some book clubs are entirely centered on a particular theme, genre, or author. There are book clubs that only read non-fiction, book clubs that only read fiction about women's lives, book clubs that only read science fiction, and even book clubs that only read Jane Austen! If your group's members have a particular interest in a fairly narrow area, a theme could be a great choice!

But even if you want a bit more diversity in your discussions, your group could still use a theme structure to help pick your titles. Perhaps a rotating theme arrangement would be more to your tastes—a few books in one area, then a few in another, and so on!

Themes that could help your discussion get moving might include such things as books about a certain country or part of the world; genres such as science fiction or mystery; award winners; books set during a particular period of history; or books by a particular prolific author such as Jodi Picoult or Joyce Carol Oates.

In addition to helping you narrow down your book selection further, a theme can also provide more opportunities for fun during your group meeting! Perhaps you're reading fiction set in China—why not try out some Chinese recipes for your meeting snacks? Reading books about art, or gardening? Consider moving your meeting to a café at or near your local art museum or botanic garden and taking a walk around after your discussion ends! The possibilities are endless.

Discussion Potential

You want to have a good discussion about your book, right? Picking a book with a controversial subject, a surprising twist, or a complex subject is usually your best bet. Frothy, light-weight books are definitely fun to read, but hard to talk about later! Not everyone has to enjoy the book you pick; in fact, a difference in opinion often makes for a more satisfying discussion!

Book reviews can be a good way to get a sense of the discussion potential of a book. [Bookmarks magazine](#) provides concise overviews and excerpts from other reviews so you can get a sense of what people are saying. Other good sources of reviews are [Bookpage magazine](#), newspaper book sections, and the fiction database NoveList, which can be accessed via the Library's [databases page](#). (You will need a valid Highland Park library card number to access this resource.) And remember: be adventurous! Book clubs at their best aren't only about reading just the books members enjoy the most; they're also about being exposed to a wider range of topics, opinions, and experiences than one would get reading on one's own!

Availability of the Book

Newer books are usually only available in hardcover, which can be expensive if you're planning to buy the books each time. Bestsellers, meanwhile, often have very long waiting lists at public libraries! So if the group wants to pick a relatively new bestseller, you'll either have to wait a while until the library's waiting lists clear out, or you'll have to resign yourselves to buying hardcover copies!

Popular older books, meanwhile, are usually available relatively cheaply in paperback copies...if they're still in print! An easy way to check on whether a book is still in print is to look up the book at an online retailer such as [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). If the site has "new" copies in stock, the book is in print and can probably be obtained fairly easily, but if they are out of stock and direct you away to used book sellers, it's a good bet that the book is out of print and will be hard for your members to obtain in time for the meeting. Libraries often only have one or two copies of older books regardless of whether or not the book is in print or not, but may have no copy at all if theirs was damaged or lost after the book went out of print.

If you don't want to buy your books, a good idea is to check your local library and a few other nearby libraries to see how many copies they own and whether any of them are available **before** choosing the book. It will be frustrating to the group if there are few or no copies available!

Keep in mind that if you pick the books far enough in advance, members can share copies amongst themselves!

Book Discussion Guides

And finally, you might want to consider whether or not there is a book discussion guide available for the title. Many publishers these days are providing book discussion guides and/or questions for their titles. Sometimes these are in the back of the book itself, but often they are available online at either the publisher's website or the author's website. Some websites, such as [Reading Group Guides](#) and [Book Browse](#), provide discussion questions for a wide variety of titles. In addition, many libraries, including Highland Park Public Library, buy multiple copies of books that would be good for discussions and create book discussion guides to go along with the titles. Highland Park Public Library's [book discussion kits](#) provide biographical information on the author, discussion questions customized to the book, an interview with the author, a book synopsis, and any other material that might be of use to a group.

Some groups love the convenience of having information pulled together for them; others prefer to create their own questions and run the discussion their own way. Whatever your preference, knowing the availability of such resources can be an important factor in picking a title.

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