NOTES ON FACILITATING A READING GROUP DISCUSSION

If you are planning to facilitate a book club or reading group discussion, here are a few ideas to help your discussion go smoothly:

PREPARATION

• Put together a list of questions about the reading that you can use to get the discussion started, or to prompt the group if discussion starts to lag. These should be open-ended questions rather than yes/no or fact-based. (For examples, see the end of this document.)
• Read a few reviews of the book before the first discussion takes place, to give yourself some inspiration for things to talk about.
• Look up some background on the context (geographical/temporal/cultural/historical) of the book.
• You can prepare participants for the discussion by asking them each to bring a significant passage from the text, or an open-ended question that occurred to them while reading. (It’s also a good idea for you to prepare your own list of significant passages from the book.)

SETTING THE TONE

• At the beginning of the first discussion, it’s a good idea to emphasize that whatever is said in the discussion should stay within the group (i.e. maintain confidentiality). This will help people feel a little more at ease if discussion heads in a controversial or personal direction.
• It’s also important to remind people that different opinions are welcome (and encouraged--the idea isn’t to achieve consensus!) and that group members will treat others’ contributions with respect.
• Before you start, you should set some ground rules about side conversations--especially in a larger group, people can break off into smaller conversations, but this can fragment the group and make group discussion less effective. Let the participants know you'll gently remind them if they start breaking off into side conversations, in order to make the discussion experience better for everyone.
STARTING THE DISCUSSION

• If there are people in the group who don't know each other yet, it's a good idea to devote some time to introductions at the beginning of the first meeting. You might want to have a few suggestions of what people can say about themselves if they aren't sure how to introduce themselves: for example, where they're from, what kinds of things they usually like to read, why they wanted to be part of the reading group.

• A good way to start discussion is a round robin, to encourage everyone to speak. Some people are more hesitant to jump in to a discussion, so it reduces the stress of having to just "jump in" if you open with a round robin where each member makes a statement about their reflections on the book/reading. Ideas:

  1. use one of the questions you've prepared
  2. start with something as simple as, "Did you like the book? Why or why not?"
  3. ask participants to share the most surprising thing they came across in the reading
  4. ask people to read out the significant quotes/questions they prepared ahead of discussion

CHALLENGES

Here are some potential challenges and ways to mitigate them:

• Monopolizers: Keep an eye on the group in case one or two members start monopolizing the discussion. If this happens, it's your responsibility as facilitator to break in and allow room for others to speak. One script you can use is, "Thanks ___________--those are some interesting points. I'd like to hear from others; does anyone else have comments on this?"

• Digressions: Watch for digressions. If discussion gets off track for too long (and you'll need to decide what that entails), you will have to steer it back on track.

• A lull in the discussion: If the discussion goes dead, it's a good time for you as facilitator to pull out your list of questions and put one out to the group.
SAMPLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/QUESTION STEMS

• Why do you think ________________________________?
• Do you think things would have been different for the protagonist/main character if ____________________?
• What do you think were some significant factors in _________________________?
• Was there anything that could have changed ________________________?
• How do you think ___________________________ affected the protagonist's outlook/experiences/outcomes?
• Were there any points in the narrative you could relate to?
• Were there any points in the narrative you couldn't relate to?
• What were some of the things that made the protagonist or other characters sympathetic [or unsympathetic] to you?
• Have you ever known anyone like the protagonist or other characters in the narrative?
• What did you think of the structure of the narrative? Was it effective for you as a reader?
• What did you think of the author's writing style? Did it appeal to you or alienate you as a reader?
• Did this book make you question or reconfirm any of your attitudes or beliefs? If so, what?
• Was there anything you were left wondering about after you read the book?
• Would you recommend this book to other people? Why or why not? If you would, to whom would you recommend it and why?