



Practical Tips for Starting a Book Club

Learn how you can organize your own group of literature lovers

By
Robin L. Flanigan and Christina Lanzito,

Members Only Access
Published April 24, 2024



A book club can be so many things — an academic exercise, a cozy haven for friends to catch up between book chatter, a way to meet people or an opportunity to encounter wonderful new reads. A club might be a mix of the above, and groups often evolve through the years as relationships tighten or members and interests change.

Many book club members say what gets read is only part of the draw. “A book club is more than just about reading books,” says Ellen Sevier, 53, a marketing director in Brentwood, Tennessee, who started a monthly book club six years ago with work colleagues so they could spend more time together off the clock.

“Before, we were just coworkers who liked each other,” Sevier says. “Now, we’re friends who are ingrained in each other’s lives and who love each other.”

If you’re itching to join a book club, you can look for an established group in your community — check your library or independent bookstore, which may host discussion groups.

Or why not start your own? Here's some practical advice to get the ball rolling:



AARP (GETTY IMAGES, 7)

Consider a theme

Some book clubs focus on a genre, such as memoirs, biographies or romance novels. Others narrow their focus even more: Curt Nehring Bliss, 56, an English professor in Middlesex, New York, 56, recently founded a quarterly club (Book Hang) focused on books tied to the shift of seasons. Their first selection was Peter Geye's 2016 novel, *Wintering*. "So it's sort of a ritual, not just a book club discussion," Nehring Bliss says. "It's a discussion with the goal of preparing us thematically for the next phase of the year."

Eileen Spillane, 55, of Jackson Hole, Wyoming, founded the Befriending Death Book Club, which focuses on works that cover practical ways of preparing for illness, mortality and grief. It began

after she decided to host a discussion group based on a course she was teaching on the subject, then it turned into a book club. The group bonded quickly over “this hard-to-talk-about topic,” she says, and “wanted to stay connected.”

“Every book club reflects the personalities of its readers and where they are in life,” says Jennie Pu, 49, director of the Hoboken Public Library in New Jersey. “When my kids were really young, I was in a book club, and we mostly read child development books.”

Pu wants to start a cookbook club; she says another library in the area hosts one where each member prepares a dish using a recipe from a cookbook and brings it to the meeting to share. You’re not just eating in this kind of club, she notes. “You’re talking about your dishes and the merits of the cookbook. Were the recipes easy to follow?”

Other unique book club themes/styles

- **Choose-your-own-book:** Everyone reads a book of their choice under an agreed-upon theme, then the group comes together to compare notes.
- **Quiet or silent clubs:** There’s no assigned book, just people assembling for an hour of reading to themselves.
- **Identity-focused:** Read books that explore gender, race, sexuality, religion, class or nationality.
- **Award-winners:** Focus on titles that have won major literary awards. Scan lists from the National Book Awards, the Booker Prizes and the National Book Critics Circle Awards, for instance.
- **Favorite authors:** Go through all the novels of a popular writer, whether it’s Stephen King, Jane Austen or Colleen

Hoover. When you get through their entire backlist, pick another author.

- **Author visits:** Choose books by authors who agree to visit virtually or in person to talk and answer questions about their writing. Spillane says some authors have accepted her club's invites to make virtual guest appearances, including Sallie Tisdale, who wrote *Advice for Future Corpses (and Those Who Love Them): A Practical Perspective on Death and Dying*.

Decide how you'll choose the books

You'll want to pick books that are readily available and, even if they're not lengthy, substantial enough to spark a good discussion.

The club organizer might take the lead on book picks: Spillane vets and chooses her club's books herself — aiming for broad appeal by choosing popular books that have earned at least four-star reviews.

Other clubs make the process democratic, taking suggestions for potential reads, then voting on the contenders. Or you can do the equivalent of a coin toss: Have each member pick a number, then roll some dice. The person whose number pops up gets to choose the next book.

Determine where to meet

Many book clubs meet at a member's home, often rotating hosts, who will serve snacks and wine or even dinner — or hold a potluck meal.

If that setting feels too intimate or you don't have the space for a comfortable gathering, consider holding meetings at your local library. One benefit to doing so: Many librarians are happy to work with book clubs and set aside enough copies for every member. Pu says the

Hoboken library hosts a mystery book club and a long-running science fiction/fantasy book discussion group, which began 10 years ago when a customer requested it. The librarians provide copies of the book — print or digital — for members.

Others gather at coffee shops or cafes. Book Hang's members meet in a second-floor event space at a restaurant, which provides a prepaid buffet spread for snacking.

Some clubs started meeting online during the pandemic, then kept their gatherings virtual. Others have been virtual from the get-go because members don't live near each other.

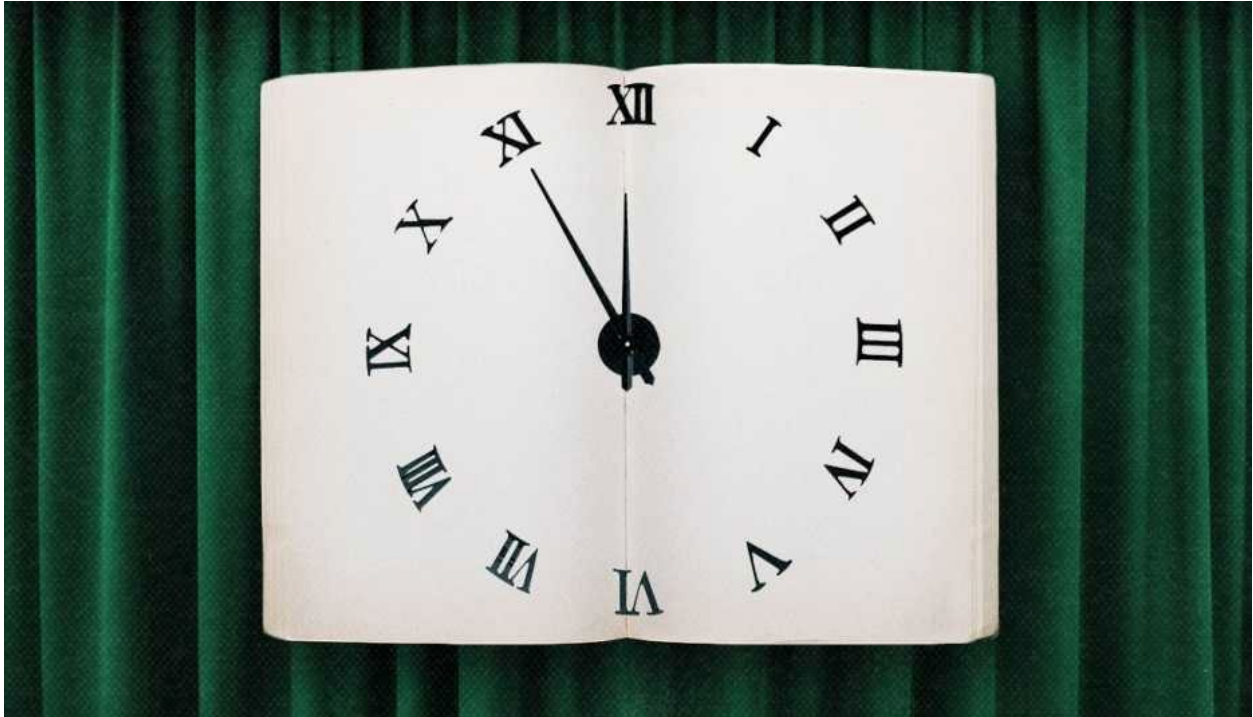
Consider who (if anyone) will lead discussions

Many book clubs have a group organizer or leader who may moderate discussions and suggest potential books, or members take turns moderating. Some clubs opt to keep discussions casual and unstructured.

Whichever way, it's helpful to keep in mind open-ended discussion questions. For example:

- Which character reminded you most of yourself?
- What was your favorite/least favorite part of the book?
- Is there a scene that has stuck with you?
- Do you appreciate the author's voice? Why/why not?
- How would you articulate the book's message?
- Did you come away from the book with any questions about the characters, plot or message?
- Who would be cast in the movie version of the book?

- If you could ask the author a question, what would it be?
- Do you have a favorite passage?
- Did the book challenge your opinion about something?
- Did you learn anything about yourself and/or the world?



AARP (GETTY IMAGES, 3)

Decide how long and how often you'll meet

Most important for a club's long-term success, Pu says, is consistency: "When you start, you have to be committed to meeting at least once a month. And if you can find a day that works for everyone, stick to that day."

Most clubs discuss a book for at least 40 minutes, and the longer that discussion lasts, the happier members tend to be, according to [BookBrowse](#), which offers a range of resources for clubs.

Spillane found that 90 minutes is a sweet spot for good discussions, although she recommends carving out at least two hours if combining the book talk with a meal.

As you consider how often to meet, be mindful that some months are going to be busier than others — and give yourself permission to take things slower at times. Sevier's club often skips a meeting one month during the summer but agrees to read a longer book. Shorter books are chosen during the often-frantic holiday season.

Some clubs are fine with members not reading every selected book before showing up to a meeting. Those people might get bored when the discussion starts, but that's not your problem — although a lack of participation can be a drag (sometimes it marks the beginning of a club's end).

You may find your club changing organically — the way stories and our lives do, Spillane says: "Why not evolve the book club as we evolve ourselves?"

Come up with a fun name

You don't need a name for your club, but lots of book clubbers have fun with it.

We asked members of [AARP's The Girlfriend Book Club](#), a private, lively Facebook group, for the names of their personal book clubs, and we received dozens of responses, including: Book Buffs, Reading Between the Wines, Bookies Who Brunch, Retired and Reading, and Bad Girls Book Club — bad, Lisa N., explains, "because half the group doesn't read the book, and the other half doesn't show up."

Helpful resources

- [Bookclubs.com](#) is a free app and website to help simplify book club management, offering organizational tips, reading recommendations and hundreds of discussion guides.
- The American Library Association's [I Love Libraries website](#) has a page on how to find books, structure a meeting, troubleshoot and more.
- [The Book Report Network](#) connects readers with books and authors.
- [BookBrowse](#) posts a weekly top 10 book club recommendations, interviews with clubs, advice and selection guides by genre, theme, setting and time period.
- [Sourcebooks](#) has an online reading community called Bookmarked for Book Clubs where you can browse best-selling book club reads, download discussion guides and author interviews, and get involved in a Facebook group that gives you access to virtual author events, giveaways and more.

Robin L. Flanigan is a contributing writer who covers mental health, education and human-interest stories for several national publications. A former reporter for several daily newspapers, her work has also appeared in People, USA Today and Education Week. She is the author of the children's book M is for Mindful.

Christina Lanzito covers scams and fraud, and is the books editor for aarp.org and AARP The Magazine. Also a longtime travel writer and editor, she received a 2020 Lowell Thomas Award for travel writing from the Society of American Travel Writers Foundation.