

# Reading and Discussion Program

## Scholar Responsibilities and Tips for Success

### Responsibilities

- 1) **Contract with the sponsor.** After being contacted by a Sponsor, the scholar will sign the program contract, keeping one copy for his or her records and returning the other to the sponsor. The scholar will notify the sponsor as soon as possible if he or she must reschedule or cancel the contract.
- 2) **Research and prepare.** The scholar will prepare for each session by reading the book and preparing background information on it, the author, and the context of the book within the series. The scholar will also prepare a list of discussion questions or starters rather than arriving at the discussion “cold.” The depth of the participants’ humanities experience is largely a function of the scholar’s enthusiasm and knowledge, and commitment to conveying both.
- 3) **Be timely, starting and ending.** The scholar will arrive at the discussion at least 15 minutes early, complete (approximately) a 90-minute program, and draw the program to a close in a summative and timely way.
- 4) **Credit the Council.** Our ability to raise funds depends upon the public’s clear understanding that these book discussions are Council programs. The scholar will verbally credit VHC at each session, and briefly describe the work of the Council if there are participants present who are unfamiliar with our programs. (Reviewing VHC’s mission statement and directing people to the web site are good ways to do this.) The scholar might also define the term “humanities” and explain the significance of the humanities to individuals and communities.
- 5) **Present and Facilitate.** The scholar will provide participants with 15-20 minutes of background information on the book, author, and context of the series, and then facilitate at least an hour-long discussion. The scholar will work to facilitate an animated discussion in which all participants who wish to speak have an opportunity to do so, no participants dominate the discussion, and the atmosphere is respectful of differences of opinion and viewpoint.
- 6) **Evaluate.** The scholar is responsible for returning his or her own evaluation form to VHC within three weeks after the discussion date in order to receive payment. Scholars must submit one evaluation form per discussion session.

## Tips for Success

*Beware of the man who won't be bothered with details.* – William Feather (1908-1976)  
*It's great fun. Let the fun part come through.* – R&D Scholar Jules Older

Okay, so you know the basics of being a VHC Scholar, but what about the nitty-gritty? What should you know before you accept a gig? What's the best way to begin and end the discussion? How do you keep the discussion flowing? What's the best way to manage “constant” talkers or silent types? Fortunately, you don't have to guess thanks to the wide-ranging experience of some of our longest serving scholars. Thanks go to them for many of these suggestions.

### Before Accepting the Assignment

*When the sponsor calls, your end of the conversation should entail more than a simple “yes” or “no.” Consider these points to ensure a quality experience for everyone involved.*

- **Say yes only about a book or series that peaks your interest.** For the most part, your decision-making will have occurred well before the sponsor calls, since VHC surveyed you to find out which series you were interested in. But even if a particular theme appeals to you, not every book in the series may strike your fancy. You don't have to love the book, but you do have to appreciate its value and relevance to the series (or, if you haven't read it before, be curious about defining those things) and be ready to express that to the group. (If you find you simply hate a particular book, and fail to see its worth, leading a discussion on it probably isn't a good idea.)
- **Specialists vs. Generalists.** Although expertise is appreciated, the Council does not require that scholars be experts. “It's great to be trained in the literature, but even if you're not, you probably can still handle the material as long as you're an attentive reader and a competent researcher,” says scholar Eric Bye. “Some of the most enlightening discussion experiences I've had involved works I had never read previously, and from cultures totally alien to my [background]. It's more important to ask the right kind of questions that to give definite answers.”
- **One book, two books... or the whole shebang?** Some sponsors like to use one scholar for the entire series; others like to use a variety. There are pros and cons to both ends of the spectrum. If you run all the sessions, you will get to know the group and provide continuity from one discussion to the next. On the other hand, variety is the spice of life. With several different scholars, the group will be exposed to a range of personalities and facilitating styles.

Bottom line: If the sponsor asks you to commit to the whole series and you'd prefer to run only one or two of the discussions, don't feel guilty. Commit only to what you feel comfortable and excited about doing. If you'd be willing to facilitate more than one session, be up front about that, too.

If there are other scholars leading discussions for the program, find out who they are. You might want to share information on group dynamics, book research, and discussion content with them. (Master scholar directories are available from VHC.)

- **Get a read on the sponsor and the group.** “Getting to know an organizer on first contact is extremely valuable,” says scholar Kati Dana. “The sponsor is critical in formulating the group.” Ask how long she or he has been running the program, and what the experience has been like. Scholar Bob Johnson recommends asking “about the nature of the group and its expectations.” What’s the age range typically like? Are these strong, highly analytical readers, more reluctant readers, or a mix?

Although the Council has a standard guideline of 10-15 minutes of introduction or scholar presentation, and another hour or so for discussion, some groups like a different mix. Many libraries prefer the bare minimum by way of introduction and want to plunge right into discussion. But one library that regularly draws 40-50 participants for a reading series wants scholars to talk for as much as hour before opening the floor up to participants. Discussing the dynamics and expectations of the group early means you’ll know what to expect when the discussion date arrives.

- **Logistics.** Ask for directions to the discussion site, and arrange where and when to meet the sponsor. Discuss seating arrangements with the sponsor – will participants be able to sit in a circle, which more conducive to discussion? Ask if participants will expect to break during the discussion. If it’s wintertime, arrange for alternate discussion dates. Call to confirm the discussion a few days before the scheduled date.

### **Prior to the Discussion**

*Preparation means more than reading the book. Consider these helpful pointers when getting ready for the discussion.*

- **The Sum is Greater than the Parts.** If you’re facilitating only one or two discussions in a multiple-session series, remember that your book discussions are not happening in a vacuum. You may not attend the other discussions, but the participants will and will expect connections to be drawn to the series as a whole. Give this some thought before heading into the discussion. Know the titles of the other books in the series, even if you haven’t read them. If it’s unclear how your book fits into the series, ask VHC or another scholar.
- **Do your homework.** Allow plenty of time to prepare. Read the book at least once and take notes, including references to specific passages. Prepare 10-15 minutes worth of background information – about the publication history of the book and its critical reception, about the larger context (historical period, genre, etc.), and about the author’s life, reputation, and other works. Scholar Jules Older even recommends digging up “gossipy items about the author,” though be certain to check facts.

Participants are “sharp and insightful,” says Eric Bye. “They come to the program with well-informed viewpoints and high expectations. The more preparation you do, the better equipped you’ll be to direct a fruitful discussion.”

Heading off to the library to do research is great, but using the web will cut down your time considerably. Much of what you need – from biographical information to book reviews – is there. Your first stop should be the publisher’s web site. Here you’ll find biographical

information on the author and increasingly, a list of book-group discussion questions. But be sure to then check out independent reviews and analysis for less biased information.

- **Questions/Discussion Starters are key.** You can know the book backward and forward, but if you don't prepare a list of questions and other discussion starters, you might be caught off guard. You may get lucky and have such a dynamic group that you never need your list. On the other hand, you may find yourself with a quieter, less forthright group who expects you to constantly direct the discussion.

Questions such as "How did you like the book?" are fine, but alone, are not substantive enough to carry off an hour or more of thoughtful discussion. (If you do use that kind of question, be sure to get people to support their responses with specific textual details.) Questions and discussion starters should be probing, open-ended, non-directive (i.e. avoid "leading" questions), and not easily answerable with a "yes" or "no." Consider questions/starters that:

- quote a passage and invite the group to analyze what the author means
- explore a character's motivation
- examine the literary form or writing style, analyzing its advantages and disadvantages
- ask participants to draw parallels to their own lives
- connect the themes in the book to current events (local, national, or global)
- investigate metaphors and other figurative language in the text
- analyze the author's motivation for writing the work

Depending on the amount of time you have, you may want to consider drawing up a list of "thought questions" to provide to participants (via the coordinator) *before* the discussion. Many readers like a little direction as they venture into a new book, especially a complex one.

### **Off to a Good Start**

*Sometimes getting started is the hardest part. These steps should make it easier.*

- **Designate a Clock-Watcher.** Someone should keep an eye on the clock so you don't have to. If the coordinator is attending the discussion, she/he is the ideal candidate.
- **Begin with thanks.** "I always start my presentation by thanking the local library (or other organization), VHC, and the eager readers for making our meetings possible," says scholar Eric Bye. A general message of thanks will be a warm welcome to all, especially in this day and age of busy lives. (So will a smile, eye contact, and relaxed body language.)
- **Introduce the Council.** Some participants may not be familiar with VHC. Others may assume that the program is being put on solely by the library or other host organization. We rely, therefore, on our ambassadors, like you and the coordinator, to put the Council front and center. Good points to cover:
  - VHC is an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and was established in 1974.

- VHC is a non-profit organization providing educational and lifelong learning opportunities in the humanities.
- The term “humanities” refers to disciplines such as literature and languages, history, cultural heritage, philosophy, archaeology, comparative religion, ethics, history and theories of the arts, and, sometimes, the social sciences.
- We rely heavily on individuals and foundations for support. Our funding breaks down as follows: Individual and Foundations (50%), NEH (36%), State of Vermont (11%), Program Revenue (3%).
- The majority of our programs are open to the public; all are free to participants.
- The Council’s mission and vision. These statements can be found in the Reading and Discussion Scholar Sheet and Application document, available on our Web site.

If participants want more information, encourage them to visit our Web site for more a description of all our programs and a calendar of statewide humanities events (updated monthly).

- **Introduce yourself.** No need to launch into your life history, but do give participants an idea of your background, your history with the Council, your interest in this series/book, etc. Even if you’ve facilitated discussions at the site before, there are likely to be new faces in the group. Scholar Jules Older makes a point to welcome newcomers one-on-one before the session begins.
- **Ground Rules.** While this isn’t meant to be as structured as a high school classroom, facilitated group discussions work best with some basic parameters in place. Explain that, above all, the Council values the free exchange of ideas – and the questioning of those ideas – and expects participants to treat one another with respect as this process takes place. Assure people that they needn’t give up their own perspective in order to consider other perspectives.
- **Facilitate Group Introductions.** Ask everyone to introduce her- or himself. Introductions can range from the simple – name and town – to more complex. Scholar Elayne Clift invites participants to talk about why they were interested in the program, and what they expect to get out of it. Jim Schley suggests participants “mention a ‘burning question’ they would like to be sure we address.” Patricia Norton combines the introduction process with a “question that touches on each person’s connection with the book.” (For the West by Southwest series, she invited participants to say whether they had any connection with the West. For a discussion on Robert Frost, she asked, “Do you remember the first time you heard a Robert Frost poem?”) Memories being what they are, consider jotting down a few notes while people talk. Scholar Bob Johnson even makes a seating chart as people say their names.
- **Introductory Remarks.** Your remarks – roughly 10-15 minutes worth – should not be exhaustive. Supply biographical context. Highlight essential humanities themes. But please do not present a detailed analysis of the book – or, frankly, even a summation. Participants come to these discussions eager to work out the complexities of the book for themselves.

- **Discussion Starters.** “Sometimes I don’t even need to seed the clouds, for the discussion begins spontaneously, and that’s fine with me whether or not I have finished delivering my prepared comments,” says scholar Eric Bye. But when the clouds do require seeding, fall back on that list of questions you’ve prepared. Start with a particularly provocative question, or one that invites participants to make a personal connection to the book.

Scholar Elayne Clift likes to begin with three questions: “What was the author feeling when she/he wrote the book? What did you feel reading the piece? What is the ‘gift’ of the piece? Participants tend to go straight to number two, and it takes off from there!”

Scholar Sally Wheeler follows the reader-response model. She asks each participant to offer a brief response to the book, allowing no reaction from other members until everyone has had a chance to speak. “Then I return to a comment to start conversation, or often a person will react to someone else’s comment and the discussion starts.”

More often than not, discussions do take on a life of their own. As long as the discussion doesn’t veer too far from the subject or dissipate into social chatter, let it go where it will. “I am most happy,” says Bob Johnson, “when a direct exchange develops between the participants and I only have to spur it on once in a while.”

### **Management Issues**

*Chances are, your discussion will run smoothly. Occasionally, however, there may be bumps along the way. Consider these tips for managing them, or avoiding them altogether.*

- **Unruly Participants or Constant Talkers.** Participants who dominate the discussion do everyone, including themselves, a disservice. Often, they are well meaning, articulate people whose enthusiasm simply gets the better of them. Others are chronic “repeaters” or “wanderers” who may not be aware they are pulling the discussion out of focus. How do you deal with them?

“Kindly, but firmly,” says Jules Older. You might start by making a general statement encouraging participants to stick to the subject at hand. Scholar Peter Burns finds a time to interrupt the participant gently with the question, “What does everyone else think?” Or try, “Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t had a chance to comment yet,” says Jim Schley. For chronic repeaters, try summarizing their point for them and redirecting the discussion. To diffuse wanderers, rely on the book. Find a spot to interrupt and refocused the discussion back to the specifics of the text.

Sometimes participants dominate because they are used to being in positions of authority. One scholar had a retired judge in her group who wanted to run the show. Although he had interesting things to say, he drowned everyone else out. At the coffee break, the scholar took him aside and told him about discussion “tails.” “Tails are the little spaces many people leave at the end of their comments to allow others to catch on and join in,” she explains. “He was astounded as we discussed different [types of] discourse and realized that he had been used to delivering verdicts and had no knack for discussion per se.” Happily, “he genuinely and intelligently tried to accommodate other participants thereafter.”

Rarely, you may encounter participants with an agenda, or those who are downright rude or offensive. One scholar encountered an “argumentative woman who threatened to derail an otherwise fruitful discussion. She made preposterous and offensive, politically motivated claims that caused many people’s eyes to roll. I could not let her statements pass without comment, so I briefly reacted and pivoted back to the work by saying, ‘Our time is short and we have lots to focus on in this book, so let’s get back on track. Anyone who wants to continue that line of thought can do so after we are done.’”

If all else fails, the coordinator should talk privately with the person at a break or after the program.

- **Silent Types.** Even though this is Reading and *Discussion*, no one should be made to discuss if they prefer to sit silently and observe. But some people are just naturally shy and may want the facilitator to enable them to participate. There are several painless ways to involve the more reluctant members of the group.
  - Try a “sweep.” Start at one end of the circle and ask everyone to answer a question related to the reading. Jules Older tells participants, “If I call on you and you’ve got nothing to say, just say ‘Pass.’ I’ll leave you alone.” Some scholars regularly use sweeps as their discussion starter and/or as a way of drawing the discussion to a close.
  - “Pay close attention to body language, which can indicate when someone is agitated or interested by the train of conversation. Pick up on that and invite the person to speak,” says scholar Patricia Norton.
  - If you’ve remembered (or jotted down) everyone’s name at beginning, you can invite shy types to speak in a more direct way. Most people appreciate this personal attention.
  - Don’t discount your own non-verbal communication skills. “I make eye contact with everyone. This pulls them in without intimidating anyone,” says scholar Jim Hogue.
  - Scholar Mark Pendergrast finds ways for participants “to relate the topic to their personal experiences so they can talk about their own lives.”
  - With particularly large groups, break them into units and give them a task to accomplish, then bring them back to the full group and invite each unit to report. Silent types often feel more comfortable talking in smaller groups.

Finally, don’t be afraid of silence. As scholar Jim Schley says, “letting the quiet ‘steep’ for a while can allow insights to arise, and can permit someone who is hesitant to voice an opinion.” Be flexible, adaptable, and ready to rescue the discussion when necessary, but don’t feel you need to pounce on every pause.

- **Established Groups, New Scholars.** If you are new to a well-established group or one that has been used to the facilitation style of another scholar, take the pulse of the group early on. The participants will likely have certain expectations that may be different than yours. Don’t radically alter your way of doing things, but do be flexible. Scholar Sherry Olson remembers working with a long-standing group that “practically led themselves. The trick was to know when to try to direct the conversation. I asked questions from time to time and started with an introduction, but mostly I let them go. They were very respectful of one another and picked up on the themes I wanted to discuss mostly on their own.”

- **A Few Don'ts.** Unless the group specifically requests it, don't extend your introductory remarks beyond 20 minutes. Don't deliver your remarks as if presenting an essay to students in a lecture hall. Don't talk excessively about yourself. Don't read long paragraphs of the book out loud. And "don't talk at length about something 'sort of' related to the book instead of dealing with the book itself, or its author," says scholar Patricia Stuart.
- **"I Hate this Book!"** What happens when the group roundly dislikes a particular book? One of two things: either the discussion goes nowhere, or, more likely, it's one of the most spirited discussions you'll ever facilitate. Most scholars and coordinators report that some of their best discussions result from books that people initially report "hating." When everyone loves a book, sometimes people do little more than gush about it and the discussion falls flat.

Why do we dislike books? Rarely is it because the book is badly written. More often than not, strong emotional reactions have to do with the lenses through which we see the world: our value system, our education and experience, our comfort or discomfort with certain genres or literary forms. Disturbing or controversial themes and characters and/or complex writing can cause readers to react negatively and think the book is "bad" when in fact it may be of very high quality. This is where the facilitator comes in especially handy. Statements like, "I hate this book!" are best followed up with a "Why?" and request for specific examples. Others may have a different interpretation. Scholar can then encourage participants to recognize his or her own lenses. "It's great to be able to see with the eyes of someone who has a totally different perspective," says Quechee resident and program participant Edythe Lowell.

Jim Schley likes to remind readers that "books do not spring fully perfected and complete from the brow of Zeus. They are written by human beings who are doing the best they can, moving word by word, sentence by sentence, and paragraph by paragraph through the chambers of a story using a complex combination of skill, experience, intuition, and guesswork." He also makes it a point to relate the book to "some pressing local or national concern." This works especially well with international literature, or writing that many people find difficult. Teasing out the universal themes and providing close-to-home examples can have an "A-ha!" effect on participants.

And then there is the book that creates factions within the group – some people hate it, some people love it. Tread carefully if you're on one side or the other. "Don't be afraid to criticize a book you don't like," says Jules Older, "[but] visibly welcome ideas that disagree with your own."

### **Little Extras**

*Consider these ideas for catering to multiple learning styles as icing on the cake. (But don't consider them necessities – the Council does not require scholars to provide any of the following extras.)*

- **Seeing is Believing.** Maps, artwork, photos of the author, newspaper/magazine clippings... the possibilities are endless. Bring 'em in and pass 'em around. Are you discussing a play that has a video version? Watch excerpts.

- **The Extra Touch.** Items related to the book that people can handle, as well as simply look at, make the book come alive in concrete ways. Historical items or ephemera are great crowd pleasers. But so are simple, everyday objects. This is a time-honored method of scholar Helene Lang, who loves to mine the book for just the right “prop.” (An example: if a novel takes place near the ocean, you might bring a bag of seashells and let everyone choose one while beginning the discussion.)
- **Now Hear This.** Does the work relate in any way – however indirectly – to music? Find a tape or CD that fits the bill and bring it, and the necessary equipment to play it, to the discussion. (If you’re musically inclined yourself, play or sing a relevant song.) If you’re discussing poetry, see if there’s a recording of the poet reading his or her work. If not, invite participants to read aloud. Hearing poetry – its meter, its rhyme – often helps in understanding it. Reading a play? Assign parts and read scenes aloud. (Remember, Shakespeare never intended his plays to be silently read.)
- **Taste (and Smell) Sensation.** The coordinator may already be arranging for food – either standard refreshments or snacks that relate directly to the series. Regardless, some scholars like to show up with treats. From the sublime (cookies, chocolates) to the ridiculously, but charmingly, relevant (fried green tomatoes), food always lights up a room.
- **The Write Stuff.** Writing exercises aren’t for everyone, but on occasion they can be a wonderful method of connecting the book to participants’ lives or spicing up a lagging discussion. For many people, writing helps in the thinking process and may make it easier for them to express their opinions. Choose a prompt that relates directly to the book, give participants 10 minutes write, and then invite those who wish to, to read their pieces aloud.

### **Drawing to a Close**

*More than an hour into the program, [extended] silence, or a dearth of comments, can be taken as a sign that the discussion is running out of steam. – Scholar Eric Bye*

The coffee’s cold and you’ve detected some distracted looks and a yawn or two. If you’ve been sitting there for more than an hour, chances are it’s time to call it a night. What’s the best way to sum up?

- Ask for last thoughts, final comments, or unresolved issues. Have participants changed their mind about the text over the course of the evening? Use the “sweep” method to let everyone have a final say.
- Leave participants with something to reflect on or question. (In doing so, you may want to read a short passage from the book. Or share a quotation, song, or poem related to it.)
- Whether or not you’ll be leading the next discussion, remind people of the date and the book. (The coordinator might jump in here and pass out the next book if participants have not already received it.)

- If you are facilitating the next discussion, you might want to hand out a list of questions or points to consider as people read the next book. (Or you may simply just give them a single question to think about.)
- Last, but never least: Thank everyone for coming.

**Want to become a scholar?**

*See the Reading and Discussion Scholars sheet and application for a detailed explanation of who we are looking for and how to apply.*