

Starting a Reading Group in Sheffield

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Reading groups in Sheffield

What is a reading group?

A reading group is a group of people who meet together to talk about a book they have read. Sheffield has over 250 registered groups. They usually read one book a month, and many groups take the book out for free from their local library. Some groups read a particular type of book each month; others read something different each time. You don’t have to be an expert, just willing to chat about what you’ve read.

5 reasons to be in a reading group

1. You have a chance to talk about the latest books you’ve read
2. You discover new books that you’d never have thought to read
3. You unearth things in each book that you’d never have noticed on your own
4. You can relax and escape from the demands of everyday life
5. You meet new people and make new friends.

Setting up a reading group

Reading groups are a great way to get to know people and enjoy reading books together. Before setting up your own reading group, think about the following questions...

Who would you like to join your reading group?

Think about who you would like to meet through your group. Do you want to meet up with people you already know, live near or work with, or would you like to make new friends, perhaps other parents or students, or meet with a range of people with similar lifestyles or from different backgrounds? Do you have an aim for your group, such as reading particular types of novels, or helping people from your street, for example, get to know each other better?

How could you advertise your reading group?

Ask the people you know whether they are interested in meeting together to discuss a book. Then ask them to ask their friends, family and colleagues. Some existing reading groups may be too full and have waiting lists: ask them if they know people who could join you. Alternatively, ask at your local library if there is anyone who has said they are interested in a reading group. Leave posters on noticeboards or advertise online, such as on the Sheffield's Directory website, www.sheffielddirectory.org.uk or on Sheffield Forum, www.sheffieldforum.co.uk. You could also register your group on the national 'Reading Groups for Everyone' website, www.readinggroups.org.

How many people would you like in your reading group?

The ideal group has between six and ten members: too few can lead to limited discussions, particularly if group members can't attend every time; too many members can mean that there is not enough time and space for everyone to express their opinion, and it can be hard to create a group atmosphere. Sheffield Libraries offer ten books in each book set. It's not possible to split the book sets so you will have to take home ten each time – alternatively, if your group is a lot smaller than ten, it may be that the library service has enough individual copies of a title for you to borrow individually.

When and how often do you want to meet?

As frequently as suits the people you want to meet with! Most groups meet once a month for about two hours. This gives enough time to read and reflect on the book but not too much time to forget it.

Sheffield reading groups meet at many different times of day. Find a time that suits everyone's work and childcare commitments.

Where will you meet?

Somewhere that suits the people you want to meet with. Some groups meet in a library room; others in a café or in a pub. You could meet in one person's home or

alternate homes from meeting to meeting. Try a bookshop, workplace or place of worship, depending on who is in the group.

What will you read?

The choice is almost limitless! You could focus on a particular type of book, such as crime or history. Alternatively you could read a different type of book every month. Plan ahead to ensure you end up reading books that satisfy most, if not all, in the group.

What should you do at your first meeting?

It's a good idea to discuss how you're going to run the group and what kind of books you'd like to read. Think up a name for your group so that you can get a library card. Some groups even set up their own website to advertise the group and keep everyone informed of what they're reading. Choose several books at the start to ensure you can get enough copies for when you need them. Get everyone's contact details and encourage people to bring their diaries to the first meeting so you can fix the dates of the next few meetings.

Be clear from the start how you're going to run the group, so that everyone knows and is comfortable. You might appoint a leader, or take it in turns to coordinate your discussions and books.

Spend the first session getting to know each other. Talk about what you do when you're not reading books and how long you've lived in Sheffield. Share your favourite book, story, poem or film, or talk about what book covers you like or how stories begin and keep you engaged. Talk about how you read books: where you like to read them, whether you skim-read the bits you don't find as exciting, whether you have one book on the go at the time or several.

Why not arrange a social event to get to know one another better? It's always a good idea to have some refreshments at a reading group meeting, such as cheese and wine, coffee and cake, or afternoon tea. Section 6 (Socialising) will give you some ideas.

What should you do next?

Arrange to join the library and start collecting and reserving books! You can do this at your local library or at the Central Lending Library in the city centre. You can reserve books in person or via the online catalogue, <http://library.sheffield.gov.uk> .

Think about starting a reading journal, entering in books you've read and what you've thought about them. This'll help you to think about books you might like to read in the future, both as a group and individually.

What help can you expect from Sheffield Libraries?

We are keen to promote reading groups across Sheffield and would like to support you as you set up your reading group. This pack gives you information about how to run your group, what to discuss and things you might like to read. Read on!

We offer your reading group:

- Over 350 sets of ten books
- An online database and booking system
- Library staff to help you administer the group (staff cannot regularly attend or lead a group)
- Library space for a group to meet (where available)
- Training sessions and opportunities to chat about running a group
- Readers' events
- A website: <http://www.sheffield.gov.uk/libraries/reading-room/your-reading-group>

All for free!

Different kinds of reading groups

Set up a different kind of reading group, such as in your school for parents or in your workplace. Here are new ideas for what you can do...

Set up a reading group for parents, grandparents and carers from your school

If you are a parent, grandparent or carer, meet up with other people like you and enjoy reading together. Pick any book from our list of book sets, and discuss it like any other reading group, but also use the ideas below to relate what you've read to your child's learning and development.

The benefits of a group like this

- You meet up with people who share your interests, so you can talk about any issues or ideas with one another
- You live in the same neighbourhood which makes it easier to find a time and place to meet
- You will be encouraging the school's learning ethos
- You will be showing your children the value of reading and continued learning
- You can talk about what you're reading with your child, and read your book as they read theirs!

How to set one up

- Talk to the headteacher or the school's literacy coordinator to see what they think and if they are able to provide a room for you to meet in
- Advertise in the school newsletter, on the website, and through chatting at the school gate. Some people may be reluctant, so be enthusiastic!
- Find a time which suits everyone, taking into account working and childcare commitments
- Choose books which are interesting and at the right level for everyone.

Suggested questions to stimulate discussion:

- Does the book have any children in it? What are they like? Do you think they are a positive or negative character?
- Does the book have any parents in it? Do you think they are a good example?
- What did you find interesting about the book? Did you learn any useful facts to pass onto your child?
- Does the subject matter or writing style have anything to do with what your child is currently learning about in school?
- How is your child finding reading at the moment? Can you give one another ideas and encouragement?

- Finish by thinking about a summary of the book so you can tell your child about it.

Set up a reading group for children or young people

If your children and young people love reading, or you would like them to love it, think about setting up a group for children or young people. Our reading sets have books for adults and some for young people, but not many for children; however, talk to your local library and school to find out how they can help and what they can provide.

- The benefits of a group like this
- To your child excited about reading
- To help your child to make new friends
- To encourage your child to talk about books and improve their social skills
- To give you things to talk to your child about.

How to set one up

- Think about which age group you're aiming the group at to choose the right books
- Aim to have 5-8 children or young people in the group
- Look for another person to help you run the group
- Look at the school curriculum to see what the children or young people are studying and how the reading group could help them in their learning
- Get some extra ideas from <http://www.chatterbooks.org.uk>

Suggested questions to stimulate discussion

- Did they enjoy the book? Why, or why not?
- What were the characters in the book like? Did the children or young people like them?
- What was funny/sad/exciting/boring about the book?
- What were the main themes of the book?
- Did anything in the book remind the children or young people of things they have learnt in school recently or read elsewhere?
- Would they want to read a book like that again?

Set up a drama reading group

If you're not into full-on acting, why not meet up and have a read through plays together out loud? Our reading sets do not include dramas; however, you could register as a drama group and therefore get hold of our stock of scripts.

Alternatively, consider whether you want to invest in your own copies.

The benefits of a group like this

- It will be exciting and interesting as you read out different characters
- Reading aloud will keep you focussed and engaged
- You can go to the theatre together and prepare by reading the play together
- It will give you the chance to do drama without the pressure of having to do a performance.

How to set one up

- Look out for theatre productions showing in and around Sheffield to go to as a group
- Advertise widely – you never know who will be interested!

Suggested questions to stimulate discussion once you've finished reading the play and/or seen the production:

- Did you like this play?
- In what ways was the performance a good adaption of the play?
- What, if anything, did the performance miss out?
- Which actors were better than others?
- Did you prefer reading or seeing the play?

Set up a reading group for those who want to improve their reading skills

We have all sorts of easy-reading book sets known as 'quick fiction' and also several sets of books written for those with English as a second language (ESOL). If you are not a confident reader, have a look at our 'quick fiction' and ESOL book sets.

The benefits of a group like this

- A regular meeting will keep you learning
- The books we have are short and simple – but also interesting and fun to read
- Meeting with others will improve your conversation skills as well as your reading skills
- Good reading skills enhance your life in Britain if English is not your mother tongue – reading together is a great way to learn!

How to set one up

- Use our tips in Section 1 (Creating) for some ideas
- Ask at your local library for contacts of people who help to run such groups and for advice on how to do it
- Look for a place to meet which suits people of all cultures and preferences
- Ask at your library if your group could meet there
- Use our website to find easy-read book sets, called 'quick reads'. Use the library catalogue at <http://library.sheffield.gov.uk>, go to the 'power search' option and select 'reading group set' in the 'type' menu, and put 'quick reads' in the 'item' category box.

Suggested questions to stimulate discussion

- Did you enjoy the book?
- What did the book tell you about British culture or history?
- Did you find the English easy or hard to understand?
- Which words were new to you? Can you practice using them in a different sentence now?
- Were there any sentences which did not make sense to you? How can you help one another to understand them?
- Does this book remind you of any books in your own language? Share your experiences in the group.

Set up a reading group in your workplace

People spend many hours of their weeks in their workplace. Why not set up a reading group with your colleagues?

The benefits of a group like this

- It provides time for you to get to know your colleagues better
- It helps to make connections with colleagues from other departments and levels
- It gives the opportunity for relaxation in the middle, or after, a busy day
- It helps you develop reading and discussion skills and may link into your work.

How to set one up

- Talk to your HR and communications departments for ideas and help with advertising the group. They could help to find a room to meet in
- Talk to your boss to see if they will give you some extra time in your lunch break to meet
- Find a place and time to meet that means everyone can reach it wherever they work.

Suggested questions to stimulate discussion

- Did you enjoy the book?
- Did you have the time to read the book or was it difficult amidst work pressures?
- How far did the book have themes or ideas that relate to your workplace?
- Can you recognise your colleagues in any of the characters?
- Are there good or bad leaders, or good or bad team-players, in the book? Can you take anything away which might help your own personal and career development?

Set up a read-aloud reading group

Listening to poems, short stories or passages from a book and then discussing them afterwards can be thoroughly enjoyable.

The benefits of a group like this

- Most read-aloud groups are led by one or two people who choose the pieces each time. For the average participant, a group like this is relaxing and emotionally beneficial, not involving any preparation
- Listening to a story being read aloud allows you to think much more emotionally about the text and engage with your thoughts as you listen
- People report feeling happier after going to a read-aloud reading group – the aim is often to provoke an emotional response to the text
- Many read-aloud groups have classic literature as their focus. If this is what you most enjoy reading, then one of these groups could be for you!

How to set one up

- Go to The Reader Organisation's website at <http://www.thereader.org.uk> for guidance and connections to similar groups in Sheffield. The Reader Organisation sometimes runs training sessions which you may find helpful
- Get out a copy of 'A Little Aloud: an anthology of prose and poetry for reading aloud to someone you care for', edited by Angela Macmillan, from the library – it's got all sorts of pieces, short stories and poems which will give you food for thought
- Think about whether there is a certain group of people who you would like your group to be for, such as for those who have dementia or those who enjoy a craft activity but would also welcome listening sometimes instead of conversation.

Suggested ideas to stimulate discussion

- Read the text aloud before discussing. You could then split the text into chunks and re-read it, giving the opportunity to discuss each section
- It's ok to allow time for silence as group members digest what they've heard – remember, they won't have read the text(s) beforehand
- Open up the discussion for general thoughts from group members
- Ask group members if they have any personal connections to the text, or if it reminds them of something
- Look out for specific ideas or concepts that are included in the text. What do group members think about it?

Other types of group

- Reading groups for those with sight loss: check out <http://www.readingsight.org.uk> for ideas
- Writing groups
- Themed groups

Leading a reading group effectively

The idea of leading a reading group or discussion may excite you or may seem really daunting. Here are some suggestions about how your reading group could be led...

Three ways of leading your group

1. Appoint one person to organise the group and lead all discussions
2. Agree on a rotating leadership structure, with a different person leading the discussion each time you meet
3. Decide everything as a group, and have no one facilitator.

Bear in mind that each group needs one Contact Person who is responsible for the books. In addition, at the start of meeting as a group it is useful to have one person who takes an overall lead, but this can change as you get to know each other better.

Good organisation goes a long way. If you get the books on time, there will be time to read them and people will turn up to the group. You might like to remind people that the group is meeting. It is essential to have everyone's contact details.

What the leader of a group or discussion should remember

- Preparing for the group does not have to take a lot of time, but make sure you've got some discussion ideas and questions up your sleeve, otherwise the discussion might lose focus. Did you enjoy the book? Have some pages bookmarked so you can find your way.
- People have different styles and ways of commenting and getting involved in discussion groups. Think about how you can get everyone's opinion and involve everyone in the discussion. Look out for characters who dominate or stop others from chatting, or conversely those who say nothing at all
- Keep the group focussed on discussing the book. There is time afterwards for more personal discussions – some people may only have a short amount of time and will only want to talk about the book
- Talk to the group about how they're finding the group experience and the books you have read, so that you can all enjoy it as much as possible
- When choosing which books to read, give everyone a chance to choose a book and have their say – people will stop coming if they frequently don't like or don't want to read the books you've chosen
- Organise a few social events, so that the group can get to know each other better and will feel freer to share how the book has impacted their lives.
- If you want to get some more members, talk about this and who you feel would fit in best. Once the new members have come welcome them and talk to them about what you do and read, and why you've chosen to it that way. They might have some new ideas!

Practical issues

There are several practical issues which need to be thought through in your reading group, such as how the group gets hold of book sets. Frequently asked questions are answered below...

What is a reading group set?

This is a set of 10 copies of the same title loaned to a reading group.

How does the group join the library?

- Each group must have a Contact Person who takes responsibility for borrowing and returning the sets
- For the group to become a library member, the Contact Person needs to complete an application form on behalf of the group and provide one official proof of ID (either something showing their name and address or a photo ID that includes their name)
- The Contact Person will be responsible for the group library card, as well as the items that are on loan to it.

What if the Contact Person changes?

- The new Contact Person needs to bring the group library card into the library
- Library Staff will update the library records
- A new card will be issued which the new Contact Person will sign for. They will then assume responsibility for the card and any items on loan to the group.

Borrowing sets

- Each set consists of 10 copies
- The initial loan period will be for 6 weeks (42 days), with a renewal of 6 weeks (42 days)
- Groups will be allowed to borrow a maximum of 3 sets. This allows for a set that is about to be returned, a set currently being read, and a set that has been borrowed in preparation for the next group meeting.

Returning sets

- All copies in the set must be returned at the same time. If you return an incomplete set staff will renew it, if necessary, and ask you to return all copies at once
- A reminder letter will be sent when the set is one week overdue. If the set becomes 3 months overdue, a bill will be sent for the cost of replacement
- As we have a limited number of sets, it would be helpful if groups would return sets as soon as possible to make them available for other groups
- We won't charge fines, but expect sets to be returned promptly or renewed.

Renewing sets

- One renewal will be allowed on a set to allow the group to keep it for a further 6 weeks, after the initial 6-week loan
- Sets can be renewed by telephone by ringing the Central Lending Library on 0114 273 4727 or 273 4729, at any of our other libraries, or online at <http://library.sheffield.gov.uk> , provided you have the library card number and PIN
- When renewing a set, please be ready to give the library staff your reading group's library card number when asked
- If another group has reserved the item, prompt or early return would be appreciated.

Lost or damaged copies

If a set copy is lost or totally damaged, please provide a replacement copy, of the same edition if possible. If the book is out of print, please let library staff know and we will make an appropriate charge. If damage is minimal, we will make an appropriate charge for the level of damage caused.

Where are sets available from?

- The sets are kept in the Central Lending Library and are available from there. Ask staff if you need help or want more information or ring 0114 273 4727 or 273 4729
- If you want to collect a set from a Community Library, sets may be reserved on the Library Catalogue in any of our libraries or online.

What if the set I want is already on loan?

You may place a reserve on the set and you will be notified by post or email when it becomes available. There is no charge for this service.

How do I reserve a set on the Internet?

- The Library Catalogue can be accessed at <http://library.sheffield.gov.uk> .
- Enter your search terms in the search box (author or title etc.), including the words 'Reading Group Set', and then click the Search button. The relevant record should then display.
- To reserve the set, click the Reserve Item link and enter the group card number, PIN and pickup point in the relevant boxes and then click the Reserve Item button.
- A screen message will confirm your reservation has been placed. Click OK.

What to discuss

The great things about a reading group are that you get to talk to different people about a book and realise that you've noticed different things in it or enjoyed different parts. It's fine not to reach a consensus on the book; you don't have to agree on everything. Consider these discussion ideas so you can have an interesting and varied time together...

Questions to get you going

- Did you all manage to finish the book? If not, why not?
- Did you enjoy the book?
- What did you think of the book's cover? Do you think it reflected what the book was about?
- How far did the first line/paragraph of the book grab you?
- Ask the person who chose the book to spend a few minutes giving some background on the author and title, and sharing their own perspective on it.
- To get everyone involved, give each person the chance to say a few words about how they found the book before moving onto other questions.

Questions to ask about the book's style

- Does the book have a particular style? Did you like or dislike it?
- Did you find the book too long, too short or just right?
- Did you find the book too fast, too slow or just right?

Questions to ask about the book's content

- What did you like or dislike about the book's content?
- What did you think of the beginning? Were you interested in the book immediately, or did it take you some time?
- Did you like the end of the book? If not, what would you change?
- Was the storyline interesting? Did you want to keep reading or did you feel fairly neutral as you read it?
- Did you like the characters in the book? Did you identify with any of them? Which ones were particularly well drawn?
- What were your favourite parts or passages in the book?
- Did you find a particular part of the book especially memorable?
- Did your feelings towards the book or a character change as you read it?
- Were there things you felt the author missed out or should have said?
- If you could think of one or two emotions that surfaced as you read the book, such as happy, sad, irritated, relaxed, what would they be?
- If you read a biography, did you find you liked the subject? Was the story well told?
- What, if anything, irritated you about the book?

Questions which go a bit further

- Which issues did the book raise for you?
- Does the book have any connections to your life, be it a place, profession, family make-up, or something else? Do you think it was realistic?
- Did the book have any underlying argument? Was the author trying to persuade you of anything? If so, were you persuaded? Do you agree with the author? Does the book tell you anything about the author?
- Where was the story based? Would you want to go there?
- Did the book inspire you to do anything or research anything further?
- How does the book compare to other books you've read?
- Was the book a prize-winner? If so, do you think it deserved it?
- Do you think the book had a target audience? Were you it?
- Would you recommend the book to someone else?
- Would you read the book again?
- Would you want to read more of the author?
- Has the book or author been in the news recently?
- Is there a film or drama production of the book which you could see?

Getting to know each other

Meeting up with the same group of people every month can be great fun, and you'll hopefully make some new friends. However, sometimes it can be awkward chatting about books with people you don't know very well. Why not have a few socials with each other so you can get to know each other better? Read on for some ideas...

Simple social ideas

- Have dinner together before your reading group meets
- Go to the pub after your reading group meets
- Hold your reading group in a café
- If the book you're reading has been made into a film, watch it together
- Go out for coffee and read the book together
- Check out the exhibitions at the various museums in Sheffield together
- Explore Sheffield's local history sites
- Have a family day out at a farm or in the Peaks
- Watch the book of the film.

Social ideas that involve a bit of organisation

- If your reading group likes to read crime novels, organise a Murder Mystery evening for family and friends
- If your reading group likes to read historical novels or biographies, organise a day trip or weekend to a stately home or historical city
- If your reading group likes cheese, wine or chocolate, go cheese-, wine- or chocolate-tasting
- If the book you're reading talks a lot about food, or is from a historical period or country which has a particular type of food, have a special food evening where you eat food which compliments the book, period or country
- Get together with another reading group for a special event.

Social events organised for you

- Sheffield Libraries organise events for budding readers. Have a look at www.sheffield.gov.uk/libraries/all-libraries/events for more information
- Off the Shelf is a reading and writing festival organised by Sheffield City Council. For more information, go to www.offtheshelf.org.uk
- Sheffield Doc/Fest celebrates documentary making. Have a look online to see if this is happening soon and if there's anything you would be interested in or which relates to a book you've read or are about to read as a group: www.sheffdocfest.com
- Other events in Sheffield can be found at www.welcometosheffield.co.uk/visit/events.

Which books to read next?

Sheffield Libraries, Archives and Information has over 350 books available for reading groups to read together.

When picking your next book to read...

- Go to our website, www.sheffield.gov.uk/libraries/readingroom , where you can search our reading group sets by author and title
- Think about a theme you might like to investigate further, such as books with a historical thread running through them
- Think about a country you might like to read about. We've put some suggestions below for books based in continents you might like to discover
- Let each group member choose a book to keep you going over the next year
- Use The Reading Agency's 'Find A Read' online resource at www.readingagency.org.uk/findaread
- If we don't have available in book sets exactly what you'd like to read, why not try a selection of books, with each person reading something different, and feeding back at your next meeting what was said and how the books compare and relate to one another?

Finding out more about reading groups

There are many good websites to give you ideas and inspiration for your reading group. These include...

Websites for reading groups

- Bookgroup: <http://www.bookgroup.info>
- Reading Group Guides: <http://www.readinggroupguides.com>
- Reading Groups for Everyone – register your group here: <http://www.readinggroups.org>
- The Reading Club: <http://www.thereadingclub.co.uk>
- The Book Club Forum: <http://www.bookclubforum.co.uk>
- The Reader Organisation: <http://www.thereader.org.uk>

Websites about books

- Fantastic Fiction: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk>
- Love Reading: <http://www.lovereadng.co.uk>
- Tangled Web: <http://www.twbooks.co.uk>
- Which Book: <http://www.whichbook.net>
- Richard and Judy Book Club: <http://www.richardandjudy.co.uk>
- The Poetry Society: <http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk>

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