

# Virtual reading groups toolkit



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## Getting started

Reading groups are a great way to meet new people and stimulate your mind, and virtual reading groups are growing in popularity. These are groups where people get together online, rather than in person. It is also possible to read or listen to digital versions of books.

First of all, you may wish to see whether there are existing virtual reading groups available.

- The Kent Libraries Book Chat Facebook group provides a space for readers to come together to chat about books and reading. It does not focus on reading a particular book and discussing it; but is a place to recommend books, ask for ideas and share anything book and reading related. See <https://www.facebook.com/groups/KentLibrariesBookChat/>
- The Reading Groups for Everyone website, run by The Reading Agency, lists virtual reading groups <https://readinggroups.org/groups/virtual-groups>

## Setting up a virtual reading group

If you decide that you would like to set up your own virtual reading group, here are some suggestions to get going:

### Finding members

You could begin by asking friends, colleagues and neighbours to join you. Social media is also a good way of reaching out to people.

A virtual reading group allows you to include a large number of people, so it is helpful to focus on what you wish to gain from your group. If you are discussing a particular book, it works best to keep the numbers reasonably small and to “meet” at a certain time. As for groups that meet in person, around 10 members works well. If the aim is to share ideas about what to read and have a more general discussion, then a larger group can work well, with people opting in and out over a longer timespan.

If you decide to hold virtual meetings at a specific time, members’ availability will determine whether you meet in the daytime or the evening, on a weekday or at the weekend. If you are all going to read the same book, monthly meetings usually work well, as there is enough time to read your selected book between meetings, but you get together often enough for everyone to feel involved. Reading group meetings usually last around 60 to 90 minutes.

# How to meet virtually

## Group video calls

These can help recreate the feeling of a group where people meet in person, and you can see your fellow group members. You will need a Wi-Fi or Internet connection to use any of the following methods of staying in touch:

- [Skype](#) - online video/audio chat
- [Zoom](#) – online video/audio chat which is easy to use. Sign up, set up a 'meeting' and share the link with the rest of your group to join in. For three or more people, there is a limit of 40 minutes when using the free account option, but you can log back in after that to resume the meeting. See the [Zoomettes Guide to ZOOM](#) and watch the [‘How to use ZOOM’ film here](#)
- [Facebook messenger](#) video or phone chat, which can be used for groups
- [WhatsApp video](#) and phone calls. You will need to create a WhatsApp group with at least one other participant, then you can ‘Invite to Group via link’ for people to join which is helpful if you are worried about data protection. To start a group call click on the icon
- [Google Hangouts](#) online video/audio chat for people who have Gmail or Google accounts
- [Jitsi](#) free video conferencing service

## Forum discussions

Using online groups means that members can share their thoughts as they have them more easily by posting online. You can still arrange a time for most of the discussion to take place, but the conversation can be more open over a longer period of time. This can also work well for larger groups, or groups that are completely open for anyone to join.

- [Facebook group](#)– make the group either public for anyone to join, or private so people have to request to join. Facebook Live allows you to video yourself - log into Facebook and in your closed Facebook group click on Live Video in your create post options
- A [WhatsApp](#) group also enables group members to keep in touch and share thoughts.
- [Goodreads](#) groups – you can create different discussion topics for each book you’re reading.

# Running a virtual reading group

## Coordinating the group

You will need to decide who is going to coordinate your group. This will involve setting up a group using one of the platforms outlined above, which will require taking members’ social media details. You may wish to take other details, so that you can all keep in touch in other ways, subject to members’ preferences. For groups that meet virtually at specific times, the

coordinator will need to set up the meeting and let everyone know about it. For groups that use discussion forums the coordinator will need to keep an eye on the discussion.

You may want to agree some guidelines for your group, such as giving everyone an opportunity to talk and defining acceptable behaviour. It is also helpful to think about how much time you wish to spend on socialising and non-book talk.

## Leading your group meetings

For groups that meet virtually at specific times, you will need to decide who will lead your meetings. It usually works well if everyone takes a turn at this, and it could be that the person who has suggested a title leads the discussion about it.

It is helpful for the meeting to have some structure, and the leader can do some initial preparation to get the conversation started. Try to give everyone the opportunity to contribute if they want to, but avoid putting anyone on the spot if they prefer to be a listener. You may have to deal with someone who wants to dominate the discussion. “Round the table” questions are a good way of getting everyone involved. There will often be different opinions about a book, and disagreement can make things more interesting. Do remember that everyone’s opinion is valid and should be treated with respect.

Some suggestions for discussion:

- Ask whoever chose the book to introduce it (briefly!) and say why they chose it
- Ask people why they liked the book, or didn’t like it
- Consider the themes, characters, plot, style
- Did the book deal with any issues?
- Find out about the author from their website
- Has anyone read other titles by the same author? How do they compare?
- Look at reviews

## Choosing what to read

You can choose books by taking turns, having a lucky dip or voting.

You can decide to all read the same title (as most book groups do), read different books and compare them or discuss books and reading in general.

You may wish to focus on specific genres, or read a variety of books.

Kent Libraries has a great selection of eBooks and eAudiobooks. Individuals can borrow up to 10 eBooks and eAudiobooks at a time.

To see which eBooks and eAudiobooks are available you can browse the OverDrive library without downloading anything or signing in <https://kent.overdrive.com/>

To borrow eBooks and eAudiobooks you need to be a library member, and you will need your library card number and PIN. You can join online – see <https://kent.spydus.co.uk/cgi-bin/spydus.exe/MSGTRN/OPAC/JOIN>

To find out more about eBooks and eAudiobooks, read the getting started guide on the OverDrive website <https://help.overdrive.com/en-us/categories/getting-started.htm> There is a guide for using OverDrive on different devices, and a link to the software you need to download. Alternatively, the Libby app makes it even easier to borrow eBooks and eAudiobooks.

If your reading group would like to borrow multiple copies of an eBook title, OverDrive has a section with unlimited copies available <https://kent.overdrive.com/collection/1056049> Each member can borrow the title individually using their own library card.

If you need any help with joining the library or using eBooks, contact Ask a Kent Librarian using online chat [www.kent.gov.uk/leisure-and-community/libraries/free-computers-and-wifi/ask-a-kent-librarian](http://www.kent.gov.uk/leisure-and-community/libraries/free-computers-and-wifi/ask-a-kent-librarian), email [AKL@kent.gov.uk](mailto:AKL@kent.gov.uk) or call 03000 41 64 38 (9am to 6pm on weekdays and 9am to 5pm on Saturdays).

## Sources of information

### General

- <https://readinggroups.org/>  
Advice, resources and reviews from The Reading Agency
- <http://www.thereadingclub.co.uk/>  
Advice on setting up and running a book club
- <https://www.thebookseller.com/>  
Magazine for the publishing industry available in print and through the website – some content is available without a subscription

### Reading guides

- <https://www.readinggroupguides.com/>  
Discussion guides for a wide range of books which can be searched by author, title and genre
- <https://www.bookbrowse.com/>  
You can search for books by genre, setting, time period and theme. Also includes listings of new titles and reading group guides
- Publishers' book guides, for example:  
<https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/communities/reading-group-guides/>  
<https://www.harpercollins.com/browse-reading-guide/>  
<http://www.randomhousebooks.com/brand/random-house-readers-circle/>

### Media book clubs

- Richard and Judy book club  
<http://www.richardandjudy.co.uk/home>
- BBC Radio 2, Radio 4 and the World Service all run book clubs

## Literary Prizes

See <https://www.waterstones.com/category/cultural-highlights/book-awards> for some of the major prizes. For example:

- The Booker Prizes <https://thebookerprizes.com/>
- The Costa Book Award <https://www.costa.co.uk/costa-book-awards/welcome/>
- The Guardian First Book Award  
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/guardianfirstbookaward>
- The Women's Prize for Fiction <https://www.womensprizeforfiction.co.uk/>

## Book recommendation websites

- Goodreads  
<https://www.goodreads.com/>  
Offers personalised book recommendations and a strong social element. You can organise your own virtual library, create a wish list and find out what your friends, or other members of the community, are reading and reviewing. The site comes with a Facebook app, and is linked to Twitter and Google +.
- Whichbook  
<https://www.whichbook.net/>  
Choose books based on combinations of different factors to match your interests or mood. There are sliders which you can move *happy* to *sad* or from *conventional* to *unusual*, for example. Whichbook then generates a list of matches. You can also choose books by character, plot and setting, and there are lists such as *Comfort zone* and *weird and wonderful*.
- LoveReading  
<https://www.lovereadng.co.uk/>  
Experts from the world of books and publishing select and review books in a range of categories – fiction, non-fiction, children's books and audio books, each arranged in sub-categories such as action adventure/spy, historical fiction and relationship stories for fiction. There is also a blog and a podcast.
- What should I read next?  
<https://whatshouldireadnext.com/>  
This site provides suggestions of what to read next based on a title that you have enjoyed. You can also browse the results by subject.
- Fantastic fiction  
<https://www.fantasticfiction.com/>  
This provides bibliographies for over 40,000 authors and you can search by author, book or series. It highlights new authors and books, as well as those about to be published. You can also follow your favourite authors.
- Bookish  
<https://bookish.netgalley.com/>  
An attractive site which offers thematic lists, blogs and features.

- The Bookbag  
<http://www.thebookbag.co.uk/>  
Reviews of new releases and old favourites, including children's books. Plus author interviews, top tens and recommendations.
- Jellybooks  
<https://www.jellybooks.com/>  
This provides free e-books in exchange for receiving reading data such as when you read and your reading style.
- Riffle  
<https://www.rifflebooks.com/>  
This site has a rather involved signing up process. It offers book recommendations based on your favourite books and what you are currently reading, and lists best sellers and new releases. It also allows you to follow other readers.
- Book riot  
<https://bookriot.com>  
A blog featuring book-related news, reviews, commentary, advice and information.
- Nudge Books (formerly New Books)  
<https://nudge-book.com/>  
Website linked to *Nudge Books magazine*, featuring lots of book reviews in categories such as Book Chap, Book Diva, Book Noir.
- Book club forum  
<http://www.bookclubforum.co.uk/community/>  
Book discussion forum.
- LitLovers  
<https://www.litlovers.com/>  
For people who like reading. There is guidance for reading groups, book reviews and over 3,000 reading guides, literary games and ice breakers.
- Library thing  
<https://www.librarything.com/>  
A cataloguing and social networking site.
- The global network of discovery (GNOD)  
<http://www.gnod.com/>  
This provides a different approach as it is an experimental site using artificial intelligence. It is a self-learning system which asks you about things you like so that it can suggest new things. The literature map is strangely compelling – type in the name of an author you like and it produces a map of other writers recommended by people who like the same author. The site also covers music, film, art and products.

- Tastedive  
<https://tastedive.com>  
A recommendation engine that helps you explore your taste in books, as well as film, music and television. You can set up a taste profile, and find and follow other people with shared interests.
- Free book notes  
<http://www.freebooknotes.com/>  
An aggregation of study guides and summaries from a range of content providers.

## Children's book recommendation websites

- BookTrust  
<https://www.booktrust.org.uk/>  
BookTrust is the UK's largest children's reading charity. The website features reviews of new books, booklists, a book finder and reading tips.
- Lovereading4kids  
<https://www.lovereading4kids.co.uk/>  
For children and teenagers, this provides book lists by genre and age. There is also information on book awards and recommendations for people with dyslexia and reluctant readers.
- Bookstart – for children aged 0-5  
<https://www.booktrust.org.uk/what-we-do/programmes-and-campaigns/bookstart/families/>  
The website for the national book gifting programme, which includes interactive storybooks, themed booklists, a bookfinder to give you inspiration and activities to make and do at home.
- Epic Reads  
<http://www.epicreads.com/>  
Book lists and reviews for teen and young adult titles. The focus is often on American books.
- Children's Book Sequels  
<http://www.childrensbooksequels.co.uk/>  
This lets you search for other titles in series of children's books, and gives the order of titles. It can be searched by series or author.
- Authorfy  
<https://authorfy.com/>  
Brings readers and writers together through interactive video masterclasses, downloadable activities and after school club resources.