

Some Considerations on Organizing a Children's Book Club

By Amanda Hale

I keep **six honest serving-men**
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.

--Rudyard Kipling

Why? *Or in other words, what's the purpose?*

Yes, your book club will select and read books, but to what end? Maybe you want the children to make a simple association that discussing books is fun. Maybe you want to gently teach them about book structure (plot, setting, theme, etcetera). Maybe you want to read historical fiction associated with a classical trivium sweep through history. Maybe you want to gather other similarly aged children to expose them to many wonderful age appropriate classics. Maybe you want to do group activities and use books as the medium (e.g. reading Huckleberry Finn? Visit Mark Twain's house in Hartford; reading Eleanor Estes' books set in New Haven? Visit Judges Rock, or other sites mentioned. Reading Pagoo? Try a field trip to the Milford Audubon or Norwalk Aquarium).

Reasons and purposes vary. If you remember your purpose, many of your choices for the club will flow from there. Remember that reasons for the group can change as the children grow older. **Don't be afraid to review your purpose (at least annually) and adjust the club accordingly.**

How? *How can we organize this?*

Minimally, you'll need a plan to lead, host and communicate::

- Lead the book discussion (perhaps monitor/suggest questions is a better description for older groups)
- Provide a location on specific dates and times (e.g. Host)
- Manage Communications (Communicate what book, date & time, things-to-bring/prepare, weather/illness cancellations/re-scheduling, sending a reminder of the meeting, etcetera)

Additional (optional) roles to consider:

- Child Care Provider: Take siblings not in the book club to another room/location.
- Snack Provider
- Leader of related activity (if doing something along these lines), or back-up leader.

Is this a drop off event that YOU (or a team of parents) are going to run? Then you (or the team) have a lot more control, but possibly more work. Is this a group effort? Then you will need strong communications. Personally, I tend to advocate the group effort--I think spreading the effort across many people sustains the group over time, without parental burnout. If you are in agreement on the purpose of the club (see "Why?" above), then you will have common goals that will go a long way towards "greasing the wheels" of your club's operation. I also believe experiencing a variety of leadership styles is good for children. Others might argue that different persons will present/lead differently and the children's experience will not be optimized. How you choose to balance the club here is your choice.

May I suggest creating a simple chart listing the meeting dates & times, and filling it in with the books and role assignments (e.g. Host, Lead, Child-Care, Snack--possibly a back-up leader, if you wish). I believe slating all the dates up front is best. However, You do NOT have to schedule all the books at once. In fact, scheduling only a third to half of the books for the year at a clip is less overwhelming and gives you flexibility to accommodate changes, while still giving members enough time to arrange for books/scheduling, etcetera.

Where? *Where can we meet?*

Possibly your library, community center or church may have a room available for you, but often homes are the first choice among HS'rs. This choice will affect other areas of your club, especially if non-participating siblings are to be accommodated. Libraries have larger rooms, and often a children's room to accommodate siblings. Homes accommodate a more limited number of people, so you need to decide on a comfortable number of members. Additionally, if you are hosting at home, you may want to consider the option of rotating the meetings through the homes of your members, some of whom may have homes larger or smaller than yours.

My suggestion would be to start small. For a club at a home, that would be 4-6 members to start. You can always grow the club later on. Remember to consider accommodations in the building for non-participating siblings, if present.

Who? *What's the age range? How do I find members and/or interested parents?*

The age range is your choice, but some flexibility could be useful. Reviewing the purpose of your club may help you decide this. I would suggest that with members less than 10 year olds, a 3 year range is about the max. The more accomplishment orientated your club, then perhaps the tighter your age range becomes. Remember, you can require more from older members...perhaps the oldest one or two lead/report on some previously assigned area. Perhaps the more struggling reader listens to a read-aloud of the book at home when a more challenging book is selected.

To find members and parents, try networking. Invite others you think might be interested. Talk things up at a park day, or other HS event. Advertise on the internet via email-loops such as FCH or Connecticut Inclusive or websites, such as the Classical Kids Website (members only) or the CHN website. Post a notice at your church, library or other appropriate location. If your note indicates a club meeting time of what is normally during school hours, this will automatically limit your responses from conventionally schooled children--something you may or may not wish to do. This is your choice. If you will consider strangers as potential members, please consider having the first meetings at a public place.

When? *What frequency and when, and for how long?*

You can decide this before you network and put it in any discussions, or you can wait until you have a few interested souls and work out a schedule. I would strongly urge that you schedule the dates for several months (even the whole school year) up front. Keeping the calendar open for your club will save you scheduling headaches later on! Remember, you can choose to skip a holiday or activity laden period, if you wish.

Consider what you will do when one member is ill. What if the weather is bad (and who decides this)? If you do re-schedule, do you:

- Move to a date between now and the date of the next meeting?
- Push the schedule back, (I.e. the January book moves to February, etcetera)
- Put the book on the last spot on the calendar (i.e. January got canceled, so you'll do it in May)
- Do you just skip that book and meeting?

With a small group of families (4 or less), you could probably handle these "on the fly", but it's nice to have an idea of what you'd like to do if the situation comes up. In one book club, we've actually scheduled a "bad weather" make-up date in March or April, and move any "missed" book to that date. If we don't need it, we don't use it.

How long should a meeting be? Consider the ages of the group and the purpose of the club. Younger children will need shorter times, unless you are doing activities related to the book as well. Some books will unexpectedly generate more interest than others. I suggest planning for a little more time than you think is needed, and expect some open time and/or a snack at the end. If your club is a group effort on the parent's part, you can use this "free time" to do a little planning, book selection, re-scheduling, or to poll the children for their ideas, etcetera.

What? *Um, exactly what do we do at a book club?*

The speakers tonight will cover a variety of approaches and ideas. Listen to tonight's discussion for other leads and take what appeals to you. Your club's purpose will help guide you, as will the various references and leads the speakers are sharing tonight. Check the reference list provided for books detailing more ideas of what you might do with specific books or for a specific purpose.

I *would* suggest that any meeting should consider including the following:

- Plan for a little time while folks arrive and set-up--not everyone arrives at exactly the same moment. For set-up, a marker, whiteboard or chart pad may be helpful at the meeting.
- When you gather the club together, consider putting some distance between some children physically. It's been my experience things are smoother if siblings that participate in the club are not seated next to each other. Sometimes other personalities need additional "personal space" too. If physical boundaries prove to be an issue, remember that meeting around a table can keep children "grounded" in their own personal space.
- Start your meeting with a very brief review of the club rules and/or purpose. A brief, timely reminder of what behavior members need to observe can help things go smoothly. The ages, purpose and personalities in your club will suggest certain rules to you, but perhaps you might like to start with something along the lines of:
Be Polite. Don't speak when someone else is speaking, let us know you want to speak & you'll get a turn.
Be Respectful. If you disagree with someone, don't attack the person; just tell us your view instead.
- Leader should be prepared with questions--the older the group, the more open-ended the questions. The younger the group, the more of an agenda is needed. Watch the group--If focus has flagged irretrievably, then wind things up!