

No Jacket Required

• Keep 'em Reading •

Grades
3-6

by | Donalyn Miller

Sponsoring Student Book Clubs in the Library

We all know that Oprah's Book Club made reading cool again. *The Today Show* sponsors a book club as do scores of local libraries, bookstores, and social organizations. Don't have time to attend a book club meeting? You can join a book club online and share your impressions of the books you read with other readers around the globe. I belong to a book club with other moms like me. We call ourselves the "No-Names" because we decided we were too mature to have a club with a name and felt silly choosing one. I love meeting with my book club every month at various restaurants, spending hours talking about our latest book. My membership in the No-Names guarantees that I will read at least twelve adult books a year and commune with friends who share my love for books.

Book clubs, groups of readers who meet on a regular basis to discuss books they have read, are a hit with student readers because these clubs pair reading with an opportunity to engage with their peers. Maintaining an identity as an avid reader can be difficult, particularly in upper grades, when an interest in independent reading declines in so many kids. Joining a school or library sponsored book club provides a community for potentially disenfranchised readers who may have trouble finding other readers who share their obsession. Additionally, the social nature of book clubs motivates students to join who may not be diehard readers because these students have friends who are members and they don't want to miss out on the fun.

I have sponsored student book clubs for several years. My first book club, at my former campus, was a collaborative effort between the librarian and several other teachers. The club began as a once a month affair with only twelve members. Four years later, this club had grown to over sixty members who met once a week.



When I moved to my new school two years ago, I mourned the loss of the club and the energy for reading the members carried to every meeting. It wasn't long, however, before my new students begged me to start a book club for them. Students agreed to stay after school every Friday, when most kids want to bolt out the door and start their weekends, just so they could chat about the books they loved.

Sponsoring a book club in your library or classroom may seem like a daunting task, but it is more manageable than you might think. Consider the following factors and you can launch a flourishing book clubs with your students.

What Is the Purpose of Your Book Club?

Keep your goals simple. Broad plans to encourage students to read more will have the most appeal for students. As I mentioned before, the chance to respond to books with their friends is also a powerful draw for kids. Resist efforts to turn your club into an extension of the academic day. Do not ask students to prepare lengthy reports or projects, complete graphic organizers, or answer lists of comprehension questions. Readers will shun any endeavor which attempts to prolong the drudgery they connect with in-school reading activities. Do not disguise a tutoring session

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under the label of a book club, either. Think about how adult book clubs work and model your purposes around why adults join these clubs. Your book club should be fun and engaging to readers.

When and Where Will Your Book Club Meet?

Good readers know that setting refers to a time and a place, and you must be thoughtful about both when starting your book club. How often will your club meet? I suggest holding meetings once a week. When I met only once a month with my first club, I discovered that students had finished the book long before the meeting, lost interest in reading it, or had few recollections of their specific responses to the book. When is the best time for your club to meet? Meetings that take place before or after school offer the least interruptions and the most motivated students. Think about the transportation needs of your students when setting a time for book club meetings. If most of the students at your school take the bus, holding meetings before or after school may be a problem. I encourage students who walk home or ride the bus to carpool with another friend in the club. I have seen students develop friendships with other readers because they share car rides home after club meetings. As a last resort, I loan book club books to students who cannot regularly attend the meetings, but want to keep up with the books the club is reading, anyway. How long should your club meetings be? Forty-five minutes to an hour is a good length of time for students to visit for a few minutes then get down to discussing the book.

A longer meeting session gives you the time you need to take care of any housekeeping duties that go along with running the club, too. Thirty minutes is probably not enough time to have much of a discussion.

With comfortable seating, space for large groups, and a backdrop of bookshelves, the library is the ideal meeting place for your club. Unfortunately, our school library is often booked for other meetings before and after school. Take a

look at your school's calendar, select a day and time for book club meetings, and reserve a meet-



ing space as far in advance as you can. If regular meetings in the library are not possible, get creative. One year, we held our book club meetings in the choir room before school. The music teacher was an avid reader herself and enjoyed listening to our discussions while she got ready for class! Meeting in the band hall, cafeteria, or auditorium are other possibilities. Any large space where your members can sit comfortably is fine. Require students to clean the space after each meeting and respect the classrooms and belongings of other teachers and students.

How Will You Select and Purchase Books?

Selecting and acquiring books for a large group of students are probably the most challenging tasks when sponsoring a book club. What sort of funding do you have for books? Many librarians conduct book sales or other fundraisers during the school year. Can your book club sponsor these fundraisers and generate money for their own books? Is there any money in your library funds for student activities that relate to the library? If these funding options are not available to you, consider charging dues. If your district allows it, collect ten or fifteen dollars from each student and use these funds to purchase books from book club companies or discount stores. You could also provide students with a list of the books you will read and expect them to buy or borrow the books on their own. If most of your students are not able to purchase their own books, pay dues, and you have limited funds, approach your PTA or local businesses and solicit donations to provide books for the book club.

When choosing books for your students to read, think about their needs and interests.





Which books, authors, or genres do your students enjoy? Are there district or state lists that your library program expects you to promote? I suggest choosing and purchasing a few titles prior to the first meeting and encouraging students to select future books after that. Set aside a short time at the beginning or end of each meeting for students to preview potential books and share any titles they would like the rest of the club to consider for future reading. Read any books you plan to read with the club yourself before ordering them to determine if they are appropriate, engaging, and offer topics for group discussion.

I always choose at least one book every year that has been turned into a movie. This year, we are reading *City of Ember* and *Inkheart*, both books with upcoming films. Students are motivated to read these books before they see the movies. You can schedule an informal outing one Saturday with students and their families and extend the reading experience and strengthen the bonds between your students by watching the film together at the theater. The meetings following our movie fieldtrips always involves heated discussions about how the filmmakers interpreted the characters or changed the plot, too!

Choose at least two titles for students to read at any one time. Providing options in reading material validates students by giving them control of their own reading choices and acknowledges those students who may have read one of the club books already. Furthermore, your faster readers can move on to the second club selection when they finish the first, rather than wait for the other members of the club to catch up.

Will You Serve Snacks?

Most adult book clubs include eating during meetings as part of the communal experience. If students are meeting for book club before or after school, they may be short-changing their breakfast or missing an afternoon snack. I usually provide snacks for the first meeting and ask students to sign up for snack duty rotation for subsequent meetings. One student provides the food and one provides the beverage. Keep snacks simple—popcorn and juice boxes are fine. You don't need to set up a buffet! If you have a large group,

you might want to spread snack duty among more students. Invariably, someone forgets to bring snacks on their assigned day. You can keep some emergency snacks for the day when a student forgets or misses a club meeting due to illness. Ask parents to donate cups and napkins from past birthday or holiday parties. I always seem to have remnants crammed into my kitchen cabinets at home! We have limitations on what types of snacks we can serve at school-related functions, so share any guidelines for snacks with your students before they bring anything to eat. Determine if any students have allergies, too.

If you think that providing snacks is a pain to manage, clean up after, or attracts students to the book club just for the free treats, don't offer them. I would suggest asking students to bring their own snacks to the meetings, instead.

How Will You Invite Students to Join Your Book Club?

Now that you have scheduled a meeting time and place, selected a few books, and hammered out details like funding and snacks, it is time to advertise your book club. Talk to students during library visits, broadcast upcoming meeting dates on school-wide announcements, and hang banners and signs around your school. Don't be discouraged if you have just a few students at first. Continue to advertise the club after initial meetings. Many students think that there is a time-sensitive window for joining extracurricular activities like clubs and will not join if they cannot make the first meeting or two. Continue to solicit members for the club and encourage your initial members to bring their friends to future meetings. Once the word gets out that your book club is a fun place for readers, more students will want to join.



How Will You Conduct Meetings?

If you want to plan out a schedule and list of activities for conducting meetings in advance, do so. I prefer to meet with students first and invite them to plan with me how our meetings will look. Set expectations for behavior at the first meeting and remind students that since the club takes place outside of school, you will pull their membership if they misbehave during meetings or fail to participate by reading most of the books or joining in discussions. Share your plans for selecting books, charging dues, and bringing snacks at the first meeting, too, and discuss with students how formal or informal you expect your conversations about books will be. Will students have specific roles within the club? Will students meet in small groups to discuss their chosen book

or meet as an entire club? Will students have time to read during the meetings or will they read their books at home and in class? I usually read the first chapter of any new books out loud to students during the meeting we start the book, but ask them to read the rest on their own time. Are students reading the entire book before discussing it or do you want them to engage in conversations about the book after specific chapters?

No matter what else you do at that first meeting, hand out books. If your entire meeting centers on procedures and behavior guidelines, some of your keenest readers probably won't come back. Don't lose sight of why these students joined book club in the first place—they want to read!

Let me caution you—the more formal and structured the discussions are the less likely students will participate. I see my role at book club meetings as that of a facilitator, not a director. I jot down a few thought-provoking questions about the book and research background information on the author to share with students, just like the leader of my adult book club does, but that is all. I share this information while students eat their snacks. During book discussions, I wander among students, and insinuate myself into their conversations when I see the opportunity. My role is that of another reader who has insight into the books we have shared, not a drill sergeant who questions their comprehension.



How Will You Maintain or Expand Your Book Club?

After the book club takes off, you can add more activities to enhance students' engagement and interest. Schedule an author's visit or invite a storyteller or writer to come and talk to students. Set up a blog, message board, or Web site where students can write about the books they are reading. One book club I've visited has their own t-shirts and hosts summer camps for younger readers. Another meets in a science lab and students bring their own books. Both clubs foster a love of reading and build connections among their members. Invite parents and other teachers to help you with the management details or to co-sponsor the club with you. Involve the students themselves with running the club and the meetings. Do not try to do it all yourself.

Book clubs are a trend that doesn't seem to be waning. Tap into the popularity of book clubs by bringing them into your library and provide your students with an authentic outlet for reading that reflects the habits of adult readers. Who knows? Your students may look back on your book club fondly in future years as the first one they ever joined, but not the last.



Donalyn Miller teaches sixth grade Language Arts and Social Studies at Trinity Meadows Intermediate School in Keller, Texas. She is the author of Teacher Magazine's popular "Book Whisperer" blog where she provides tips on motivating young readers and explores topics of interest to literacy professionals. You may contact Donalyn at miller.donalyn@gmail.com or check out her blog at www.teachermagazine.org.