

NATIONAL
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THE **BIG
READ**



The Big Read: One Book/One Community

Nine Parishes Read *The Great Gatsby*

Managing the Dialogue

The following facilitator guidelines come from the YWCA of Greater Baton Rouge's training for *Dialogue on Race*.

- **Keep the dialogue focused on the session topic.**

Straying too far could cause each session to lose its unique value. A delicate balance is best. Don't force the group to stick to the topic too rigidly, but don't allow the discussion to drift. Most people do not regard a "bull session" as a valuable use of their time.

- **Do not allow the aggressive, talkative person or faction to dominate.**

Don't let people call out and gain control of the floor. If you allow this to happen, the aggressive person will dominate. You may lose control and the more polite people will become angry and frustrated. They appreciate the facilitator keeping the discussion focused.

- **Draw out quiet participants.**

Create an opportunity for each participant to contribute. Instead of calling on them, notice if they are showing facial or body movements that indicate they have a thought about something becoming discussed. Ask, "Did you have something on that?" It is best not to say, "You haven't been talking much. What do you think?" This comment could make them uncomfortable.

- **Be an active listener.**

You will need to truly hear and understand what people say if you are to guide the dialogue effectively. Listening carefully will set a good example for participants and will alert you to potential conflicts.

- **Stay neutral and be cautious about expressing your own values.**

As facilitator you have considerable power with the participants. That power should be used only for the purpose of furthering the dialogue and not for establishing the correctness of a particular viewpoint. If you throw your weight behind the ideas of one faction, your effectiveness in managing the dialogue will be diminished.

- **Use conflict productively and don't allow participants to personalize their disagreements.**

Do not avoid conflict, but try to keep it narrowly focused on the issue at hand. Since everyone's opinion is important in a dialogue, participants should feel comfortable saying what they really think—even if it's unpopular. As you listen to the conflict, listen for what process question or comment will steer the discussion back to the topic.

- **Don't be afraid of pauses and silences.**

People need time to think and reflect. Sometimes silence will help someone build up the courage to make a valuable point. Leaders who tend to be impatient may find it helpful to count silently to 10 after asking a question.

- **Do not allow the group to make you the expert or “answer person.”**

The point of dialogue is not to come up with answers but to develop understanding. Do not set yourself up as the final arbiter. Let the participants decide what they believe and when a mistake has been made.

- **Don't always be the one to respond to comments and questions.**

As long as the dialogue is focused on the topic, let it continue without interrupting. Participants should be conversing with each other, not just the facilitator. Often questions and comments are directed at the facilitator, but these can be deflected to another member of the group.

- **Synthesize or summarize the dialogue occasionally.**

It is helpful to consolidate related ideas to provide a solid base for the discussion to build upon.

Using Questions Effectively

- **Do ask hard questions.**

Don't allow the dialogue to simply confirm old assumptions. Encourage participants to reexamine their assumptions. Actively call attention to points that have not been mentioned or seriously considered, whether you agree with them or not.

- **Utilize open-ended questions.**

There are questions that do not lend themselves to short, specific answers and so are especially helpful for drawing out quiet members of the group. For example: “What other possibilities have we not yet considered?” or “Do you have some other thoughts about that?”

Discussion Questions

Sample discussion questions related to our selected title, *The Great Gatsby* can be found at the website, www.ReadOneBook.org. They will also be available in print.

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