



BookBrowse

Your guide to exceptional books

THE INNER LIVES OF BOOK CLUBS

A Report on Who Joins Them and Why,
What Makes Them Succeed,
and How They Resolve Problems



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INTRODUCTION

About This Report

BookBrowse is a website and online magazine that has recommended books that entertain, engage and enlighten since 1998. Our carefully curated content coupled with extensive book club resources make us a popular destination for book club members, and those who read to expand their horizons. In the past we have researched the mechanics of book clubs but, until now, we have not looked in-depth at their human side. For example, what do people want from their book club, and why do some groups flourish when others don't? In our quest to get to the heart of this topic, we conducted two surveys, parsing over 100,000 responses from over 5,500 people.

Who Should Read This Report

This report will be of interest to **book club members** looking to gain insight into how other book clubs run, and learn best practices for their own group. **Librarians** and **booksellers** who host book clubs, or advise patrons and customers who are in book clubs will find much of value. It is also of considerable relevance to **authors** and **publishers** wishing to understand the dynamics of book clubs.

Key Findings

There is a widely held perception that book clubs are primarily social groups who use books as a pretext to get together for a gossip and a glass of wine. Our research indicates that this stereotype is far from the reality. While there are some groups that are book clubs in name only, 84% of private book clubs and 90% of public groups spend at least 40 minutes of each meeting discussing the book, and most designate a facilitator to keep the conversation on track. Generally, the longer a book club spends discussing the book, the happier the members are. In groups who discuss for 20 minutes or less, 55% of respondents express themselves "very happy." This rises steadily all the way up to 81% in groups that discuss for 75 minutes or more.

That's not to say that socializing is not important; 71% of those in private book clubs and 43% of those in public groups feel that a social element is very important. But it is generally secondary to the book discussion because, as many of those who value both discussion and friendship observe, it is through the open debate and sharing of perspectives that friendship grows.

Another common misperception is that book clubs mainly consist of women reading "women's" or literary fiction. While 88% of private book clubs are all women, many would be happy to have men in their group, and 48% of public book clubs have male participants. As for what they read, while 70% of book clubs do read fiction most of the time, the qualities that book clubs look for in their books result in most groups reading across a wide range of books straddling multiple genres, including nonfiction; and the longer a group is together, the broader their reading tends to be.

This report shows that the vast majority of book club members share a common interest in focused, stimulating and respectful discussion, with 98% saying that respect for each other's opinions is very important. But that does not mean that they play safe with their book selections so as to avoid differences of opinion. 71% of respondents say that it is very important that their group's choices challenge them as a reader; and, when asked what they personally look for in a book club book, 55% say they are drawn to books that are "a bit controversial."

Of course, disagreements happen and, if they are not resolved, book clubs can disband, or people leave. Common issues include overly dominant participants, poor attendance, book selection, group size, and managing meetings. We explore twelve of these issues in detail, both from the viewpoint of those who left a former group due to dissatisfaction, and current book club members who share their experiences of responding to these challenges.

Despite occasional issues, it is important to note that the vast majority of book club members describe their group as a vital and fun aspect of their life. Book clubbers enjoy a sense of community and, often, personal friendships within their group; but, above all else, they value intellectual challenge and growth.

About the Survey

Interpreting the Numbers

When examining any statistical data, it is important to review the source of the information and understand the potential for bias so as to interpret the results through the correct lens. The bulk of this report is based on two surveys conducted by BookBrowse. Visitors to bookbrowse.com self-selected to participate with the knowledge that the topic was book clubs. In order to look in-depth at the book club experience, we asked those who were currently in more than one book club to pick the group that was most important to them and then answer all questions with just that group in mind. Because the dynamics of online groups tend to be different to those that meet in person, we excluded those whose primary book club met, or used to meet, online. Thus, all information in this report, except Section 5, is based on the experiences of people who are currently in, or used to be in, an in-person book club.

About the Respondents

4,240 respondents took the primary survey, of which 3,705 completed it (see Appendix A for demographics).

- 2,723 were currently in at least one in-person book club. We look at their responses in Sections 1 - 3.
- 1,581 had been in at least one in-person book club in the past that they no longer attended. Of these, 1,101 were also in a current book club (and are thus included in the responses for Sections 1 - 3) and 480 were not currently in a book club. Their combined responses form Section 4.
- 502 respondents read at least one book a month and have never been in a book club. We find out what they think of book clubs in Section 5.

Additionally, 1,434 book club members completed a follow-up survey to provide more depth and clarity on the topics of meeting length and discussion time, and the role of facilitators.

Terminology

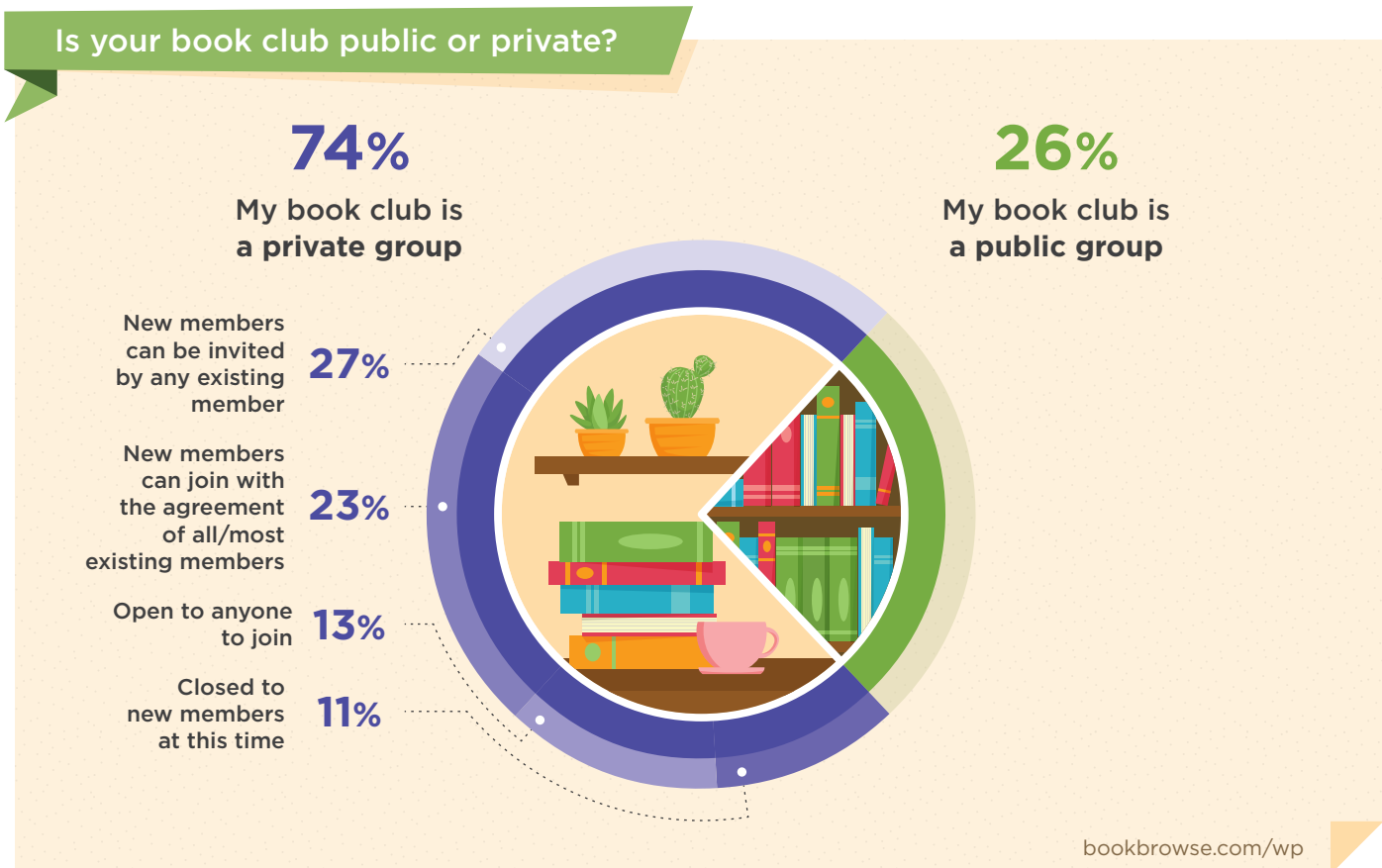
The terms “book club” and “book group” are used interchangeably in this report, as they are by respondents – and, as noted above, always in reference to groups that meet in person. Other terms used by respondents include “book discussion group,” “book discussion club,” and “reading group.”

1. BOOK CLUB LOGISTICS

Private & Public Book Clubs

Of the 2,723 people surveyed who are currently in one or more book clubs that meet in person, 74% categorized their primary group as a private book club and 26% as a public book club. In a number of places in this report we break down the responses between these two groups to look at the differences between them. But what is meant by the terms public and private in the context of book clubs?

Most public book clubs are run by organizations (often public libraries) and have open membership. Most private book clubs have restricted membership and are run by individuals. But there are exceptions; for example, a library book club might restrict membership to prevent a group getting too big, or to focus on a particular demographic. There is also some ambiguity about how people define their group; for example, one member of a book club that meets in a community room of a retirement complex might perceive their group as public because it's open to anyone in the community; while another might see it as private because it's *only* open to those in the community.



When & Where Book Clubs Meet

85% of book clubs meet monthly, sometimes skipping the occasional month. An enthusiastic 5% meet more frequently. 6% meet every two months or quarterly. Most of the remaining 4% meet on a seasonal basis; for example, a book club in a community in Florida that sees its population rise significantly in winter might only meet during those months of the year.

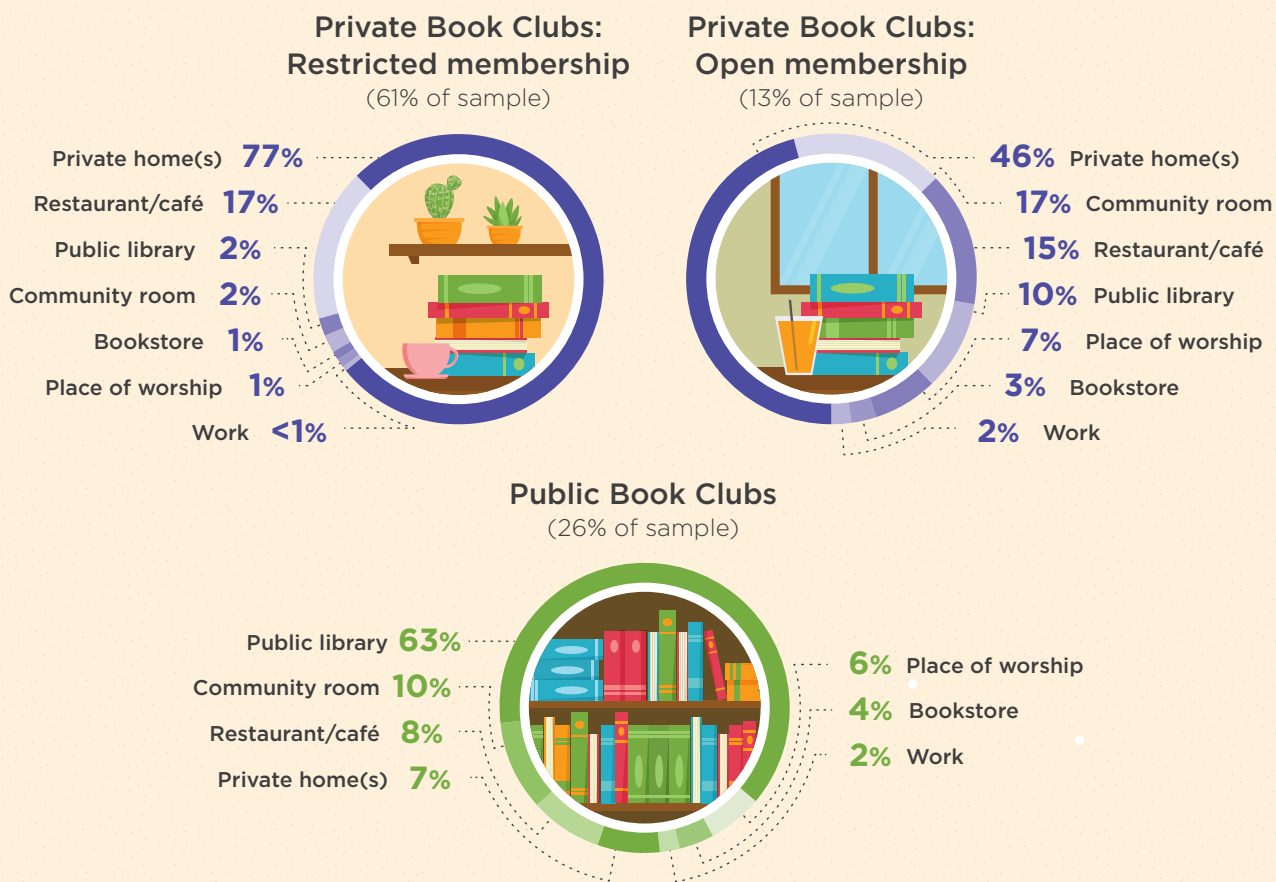
Over three-quarters of private book clubs that restrict their membership meet in someone's home, typically rotating between members' homes. The majority of the remainder meet in restaurants or cafes.

Of the relatively small number of private book clubs that are open to anyone to join, a little less than half meet in private homes. The remainder meet in public spaces such as restaurants and community rooms.

63% of those in public book clubs meet in public libraries. The next most popular places are community rooms and restaurants/cafes.

63% of those in public book clubs meet in a public library.

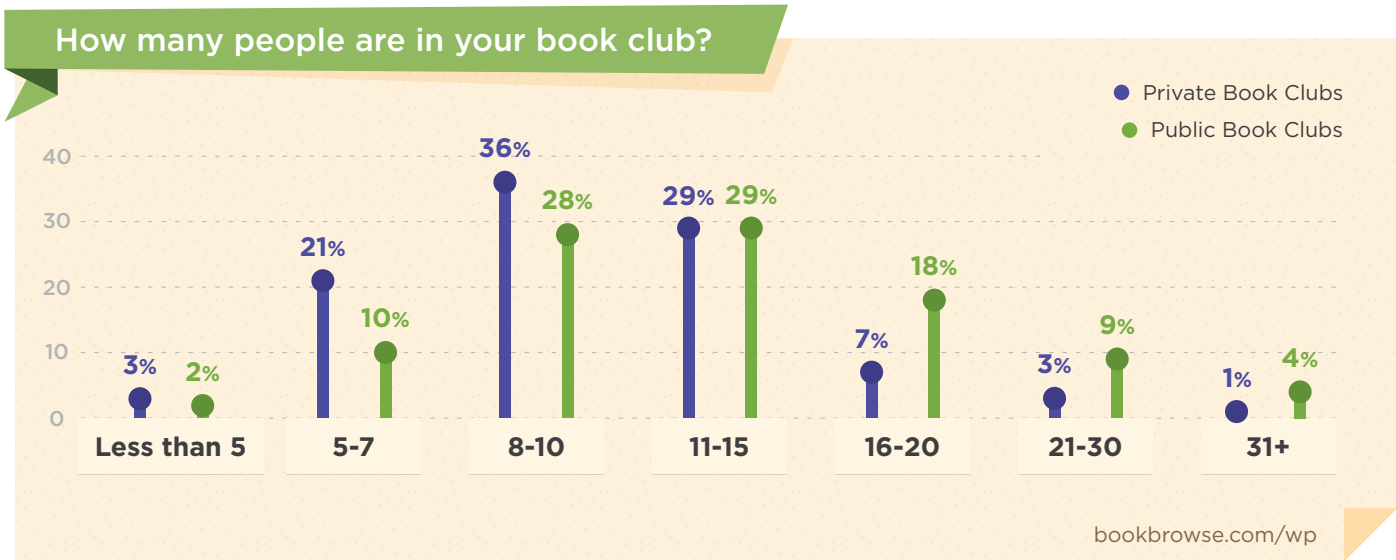
Where do you usually meet?



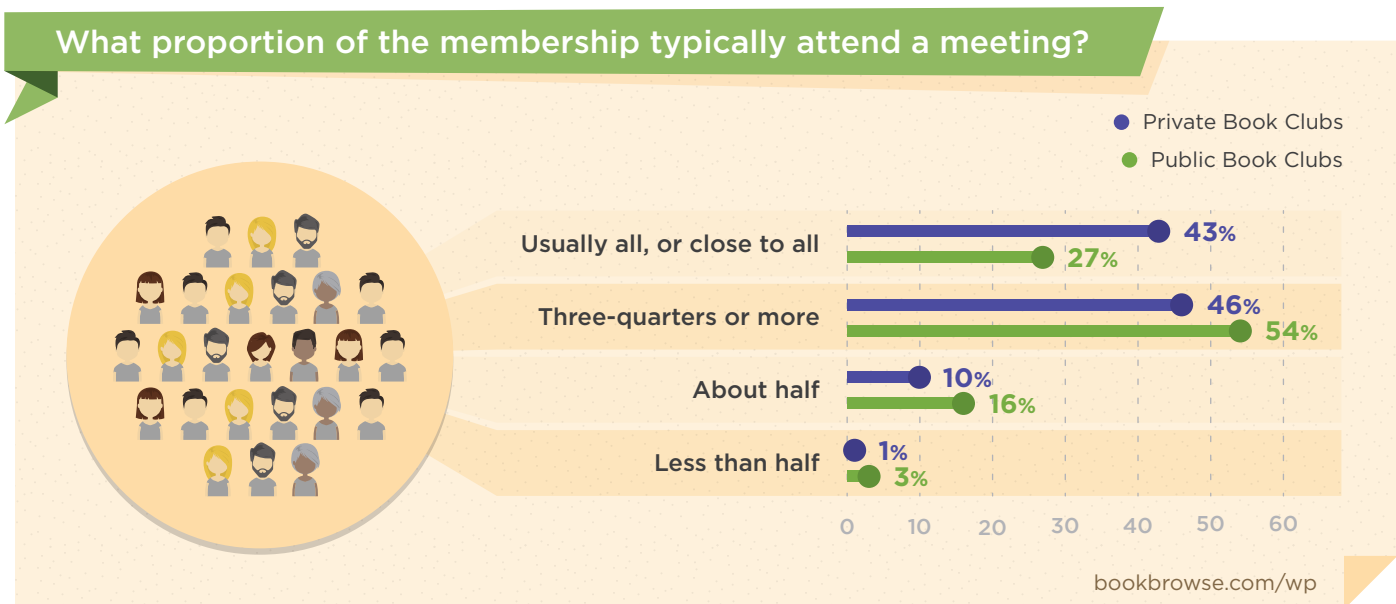
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Book Club Size & Attendance Rates

65% of private book clubs have between 8 and 15 members; most of the remainder are smaller. 57% of public book clubs have between 8 and 15 members; most of the remainder are larger.



89% of private book clubs and 81% of public groups enjoy attendance rates of three-quarters or more of their membership.



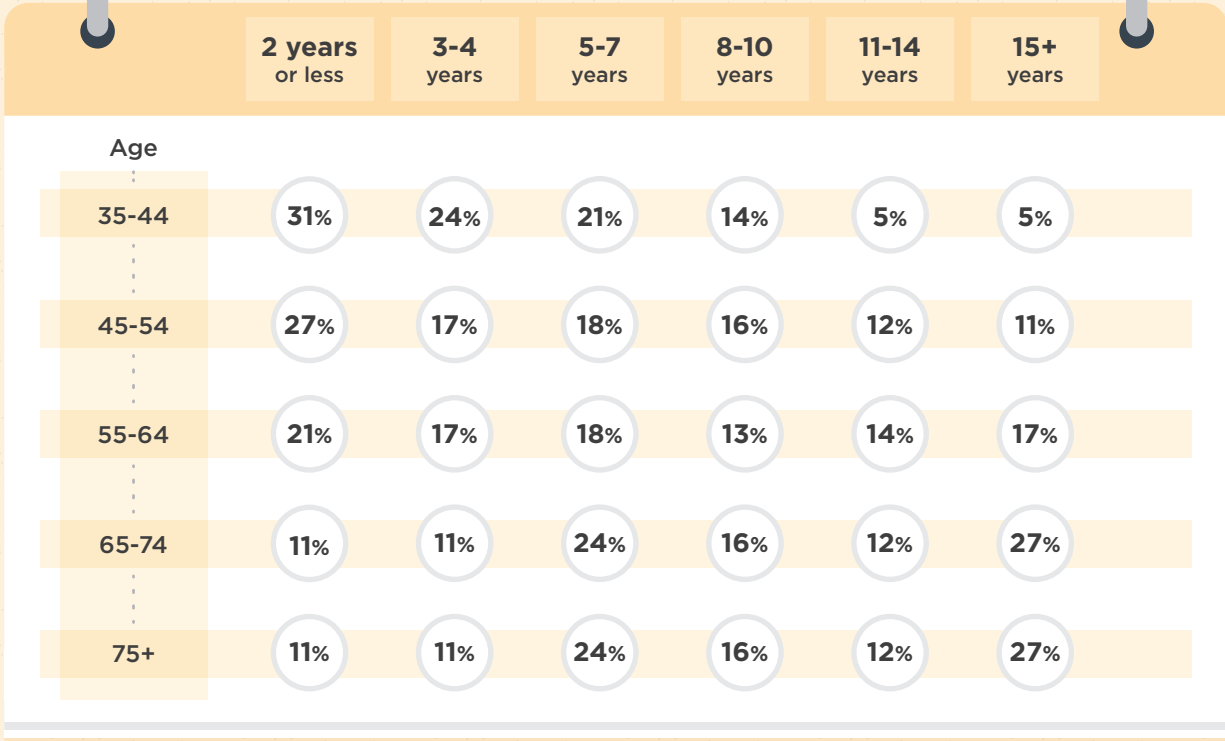
Given that public book clubs are generally open to all, there is room for ambiguity in the responses of those in public book clubs regarding both the number of people in their group and the proportion that attend a typical meeting.

Membership Longevity

70% of those in private book clubs have been in their group for five or more years, compared to 57% of those in public groups. As one would expect, time spent in a book club trends longer the older the respondent, but even among the relatively young 35-44-year old age group, 45% have been in their book club at least 5 years. And you're never too old to join a book club, 22% of those aged 75+ joined their group within the last four years.

70% of those in private book clubs have been in their group 5+ years.

How long have you been in your book club?



The sample size below 35 years of age is insufficiently robust to break out by age.

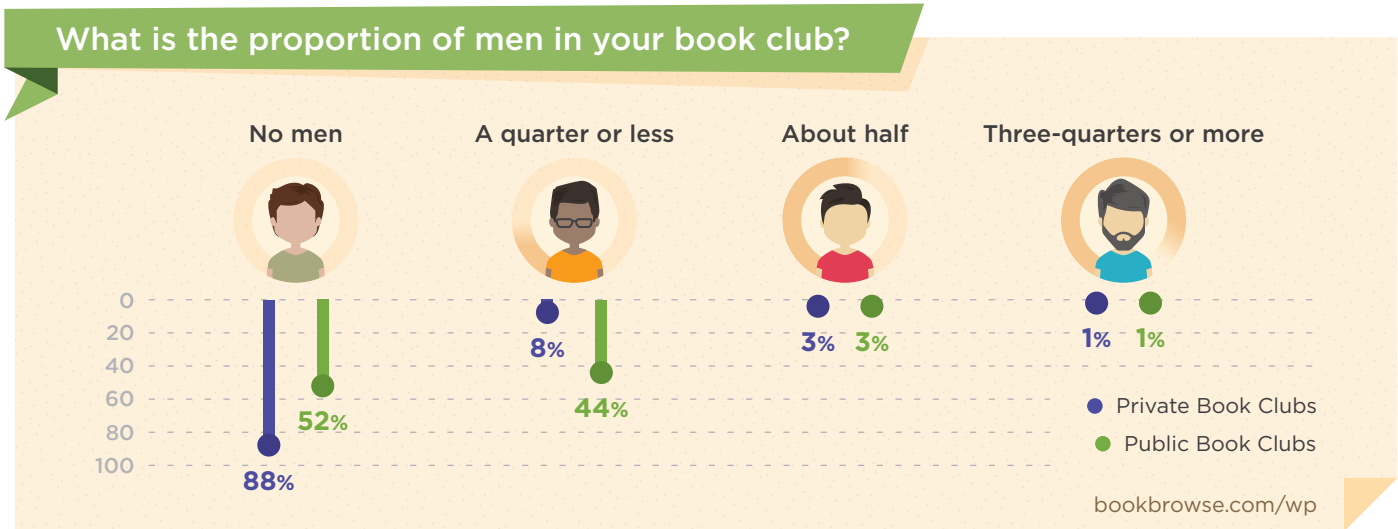
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In our 2015 report (see Appendix B), we found that book club participation increases with age—not because older age groups are necessarily reading more but because they have more time to participate in a book club, with noticeable increases in participation at ages generally associated with empty nesting and retirement.

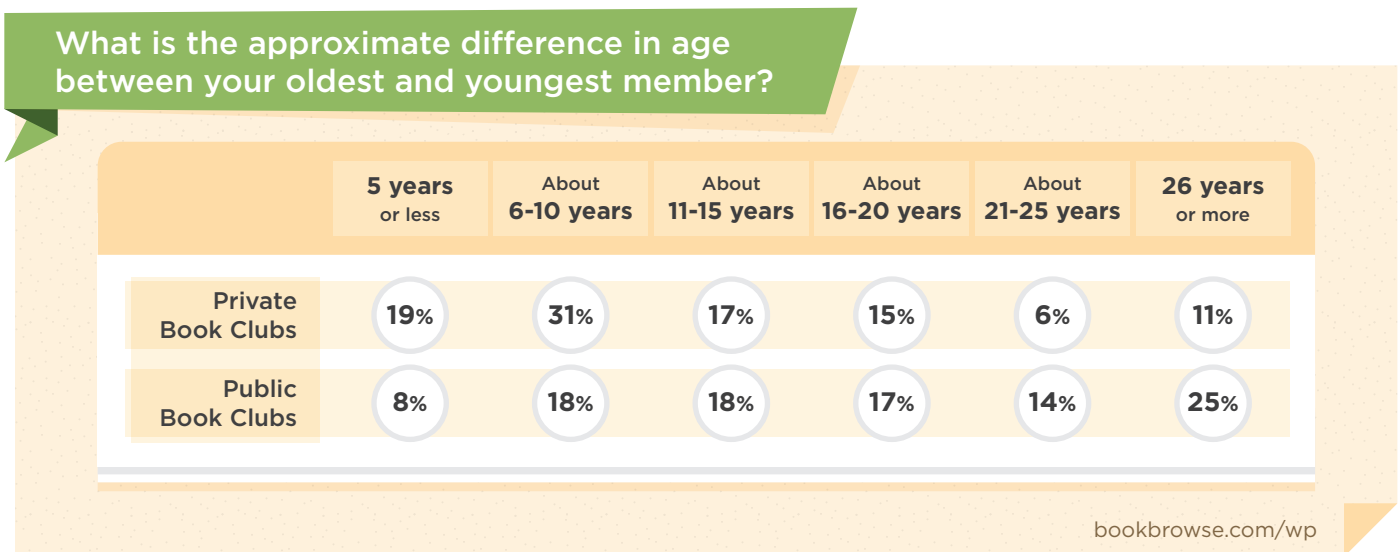
As we shall see in Section 2, the great majority of book clubbers are generally satisfied with their group, but not all book club experiences are happy. Among those who belonged to one or more book clubs in the past, 26% stopped attending because of issues with the group. We'll explore this in more detail in Section 4.

Ratio of Women & Men, and Age Range

Private book clubs are significantly more likely to be all-female and have a narrower age range than public groups. 88% of those in private book clubs are in all-women groups, compared to just 52% of those in public book clubs. Some book clubs are all-female by design, others are open to men but just haven't found any wishing to join. Less than one percent of respondents belong to an all-male group. In our 2015 survey we researched a small sample of men interested in joining a book club and found that almost all wanted to be in a mixed group (see Appendix B).



39% of those in public book clubs estimate that the age range of their group's membership spans more than 20 years compared to 17% of those in private groups.



91% of respondents were women, 7% were men and 2% preferred not to answer. See Appendix A for demographics.

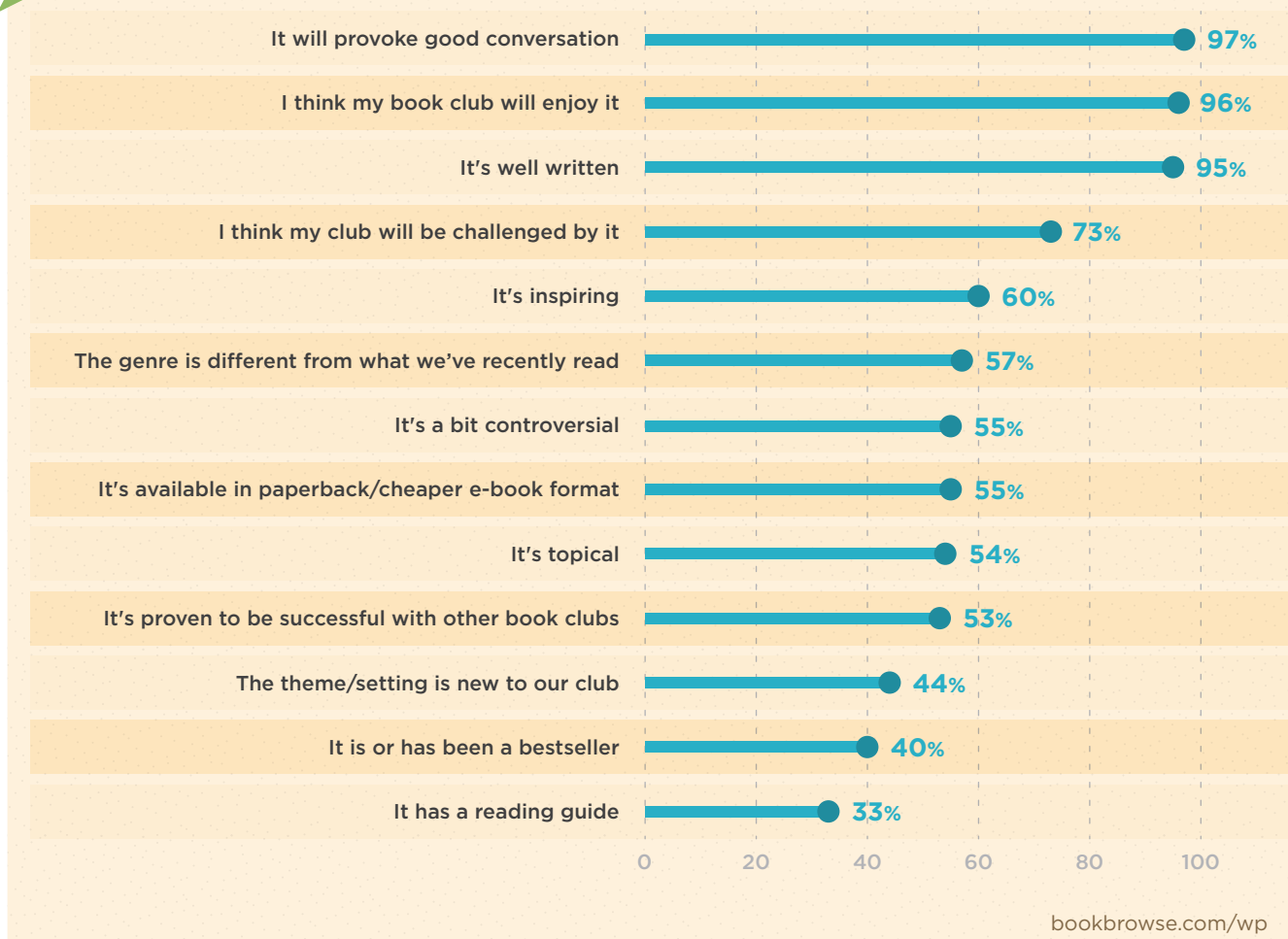
What Book Clubs Read

In our 2015 report, we found that 70% of book clubs read fiction most of the time, but they are not the bastions of “women’s fiction,” or even “literary fiction,” that some non-book clubbers perceive them to be (see Section 5). The qualities that book clubs look for in their books result in most groups reading across a wide range of books straddling multiple genres, for example 93% read nonfiction at least occasionally. Additionally, through over a decade of interviewing individual book clubs, we have seen that the longer a group is together, the broader their reading tends to be.

Overwhelmingly, book clubs want to read books that will provoke good conversation. Time and again we hear book club members say that a book was fun to read but provided little to discuss, while another book was not liked by some but generated good conversation.

We discuss book selection further in Section 3.

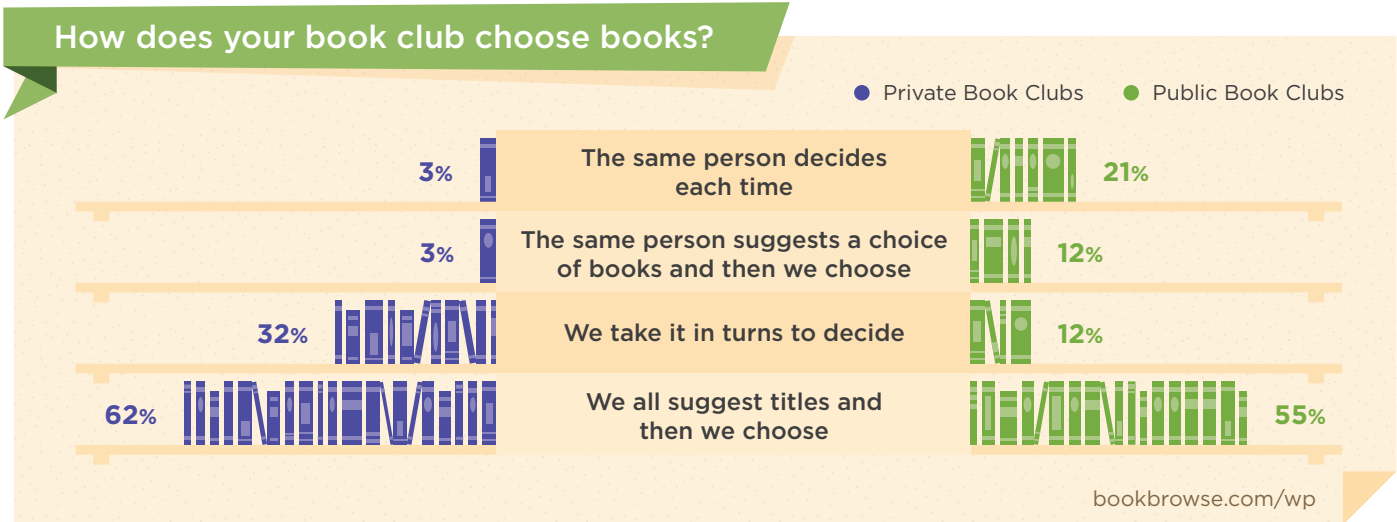
What do you look for in a book club book?



The chart above is taken from our 2015 report (see Appendix B). Respondents were asked to rate their responses on a 5-point scale: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree. The chart shows responses for agree and strongly agree combined.

How Books Are Selected

While the majority of in-person book clubs share the responsibility of choosing books, in 33% of public book clubs and 6% of private groups the choice is largely in the hands of one person. Sometimes, this is because the club's reading follows a certain theme which is better managed by a single person. But often, particularly in the case of public library book clubs, it is because the club tends to make use of library "book club kits," and the librarian is best able to manage the availability of these kits.



Many libraries offer book club kits, sometimes known as "book club in a bag." A typical book club kit will be checked out to one person and will contain multiple copies of the book, plus related information such as a discussion guide.

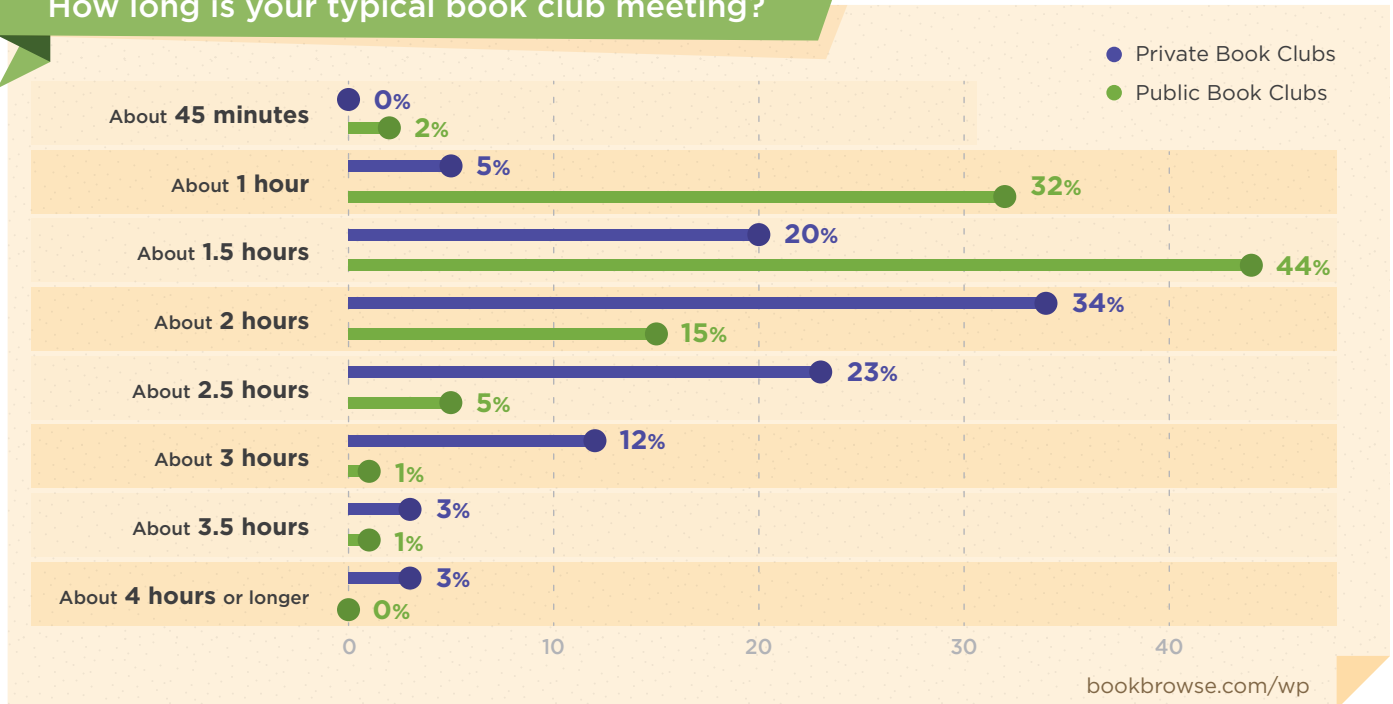
51% of public book clubs that meet in libraries usually use book club kits, but just 5% of private book clubs do. In their open-ended responses, some private book club members said they would like to use them more but their library's selection does not meet their interests—usually because the books available are considered insufficiently challenging, or are ones the group has already discussed. Some other respondents said that their local librarian works with their group to locate sufficient copies of the desired book, essentially creating a customized book club kit.



Meeting Duration & Discussion Length

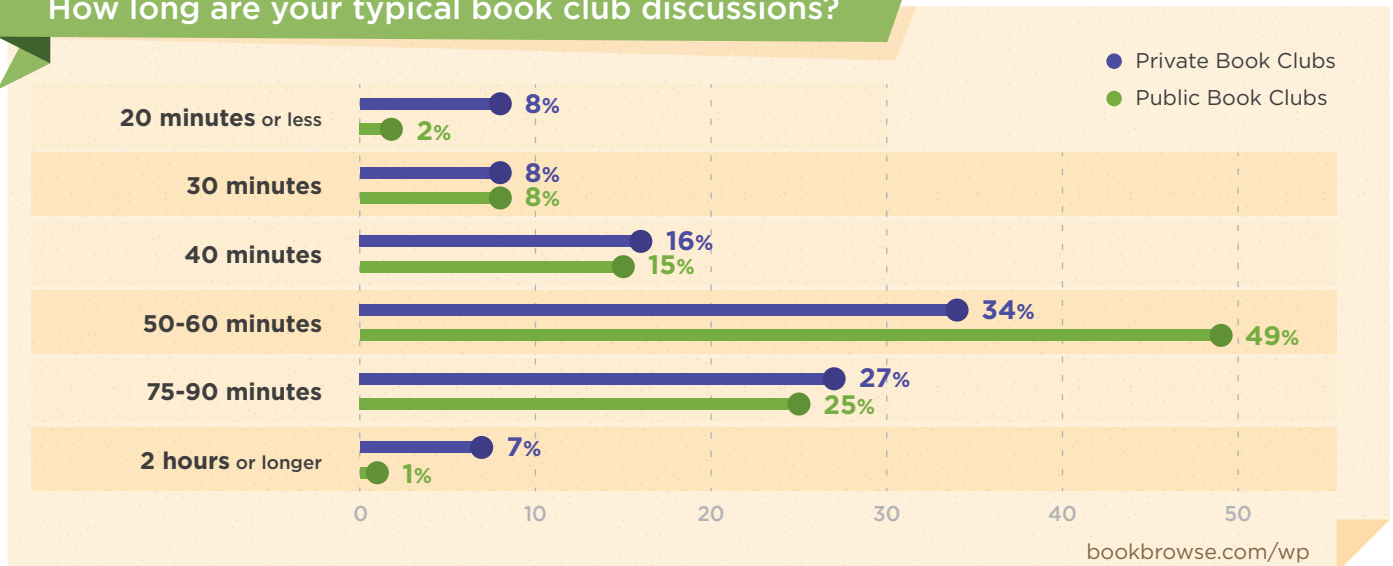
The most popular meeting length is two hours for private book clubs, and 90 minutes for public groups.

How long is your typical book club meeting?



90% of public book clubs and 84% of private groups typically spend 40 minutes or longer discussing the book. The most common discussion length is 50-60 minutes.

How long are your typical book club discussions?



Book clubs that meet for about one hour tend to stay focused on the book, with over 62% spending 50 minutes or longer on discussion. Among groups that meet for 75-90 minutes, 24% use all or most of that extra time to extend their book discussion; the remainder increase their social time.

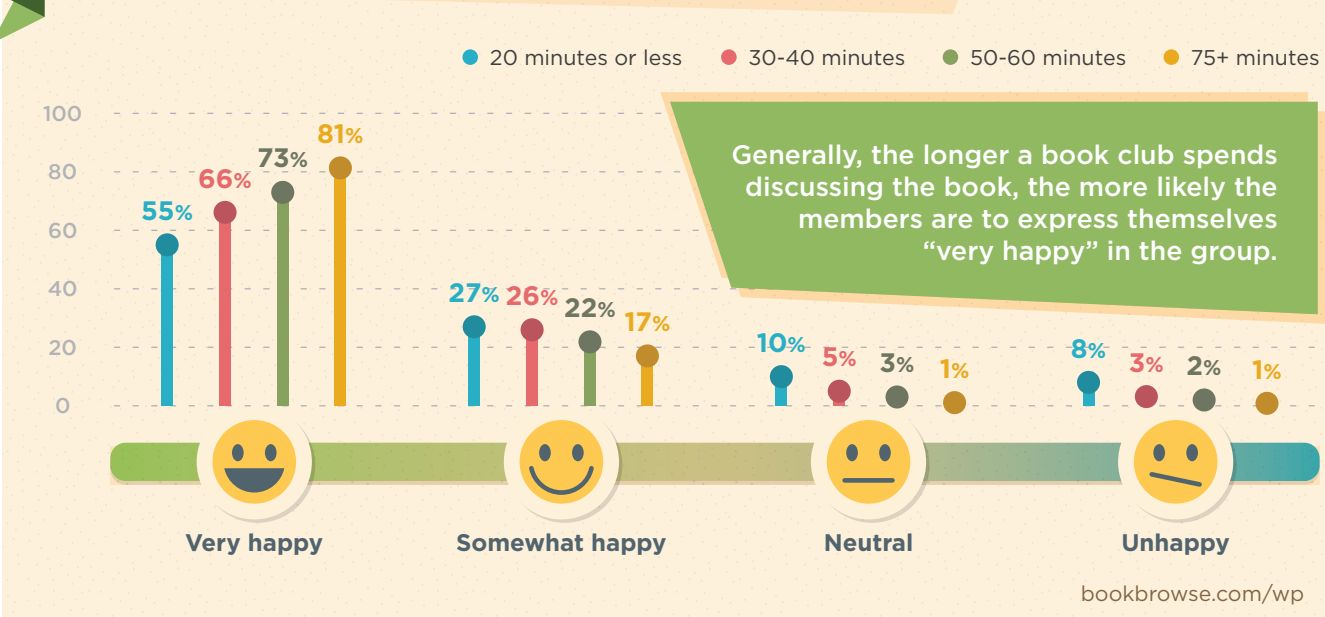
Typical time spent on book discussion by length of meeting

Approximate Time Discussing	30 minutes or less	40 minutes	50-60 minutes	75-90 minutes	2 hours or longer
Length of Meeting					
1 hour	15%	23%	62%	-	-
1.5 hours	13%	17%	46%	24%	-
2 hours	14%	13%	34%	35%	4%
2.5 hours	18%	14%	29%	28%	11%
3+ hours	12%	13%	26%	35%	14%

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Generally, the longer a book club spends discussing the book, the happier the members are. In groups who discuss for 20 minutes or less, 55% of respondents express themselves “very happy.” This rises steadily all the way up to 81% in groups that discuss for 75 minutes or more.

Relationship between discussion time and happiness



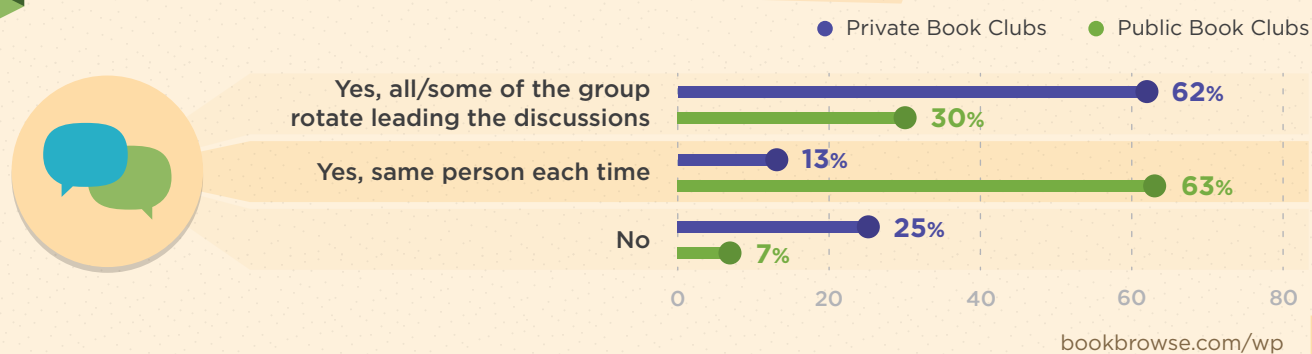
Facilitators

Many book clubs designate someone in the group to lead their discussions. In this report we refer to this role as the facilitator; other terms used by book clubs include but are not limited to discussion leader and moderator.

93% of public book clubs are facilitated; in almost two-thirds of these groups it is the same person each time, usually a librarian.

Three-quarters of private book clubs are facilitated, with most rotating the role between members of the group.

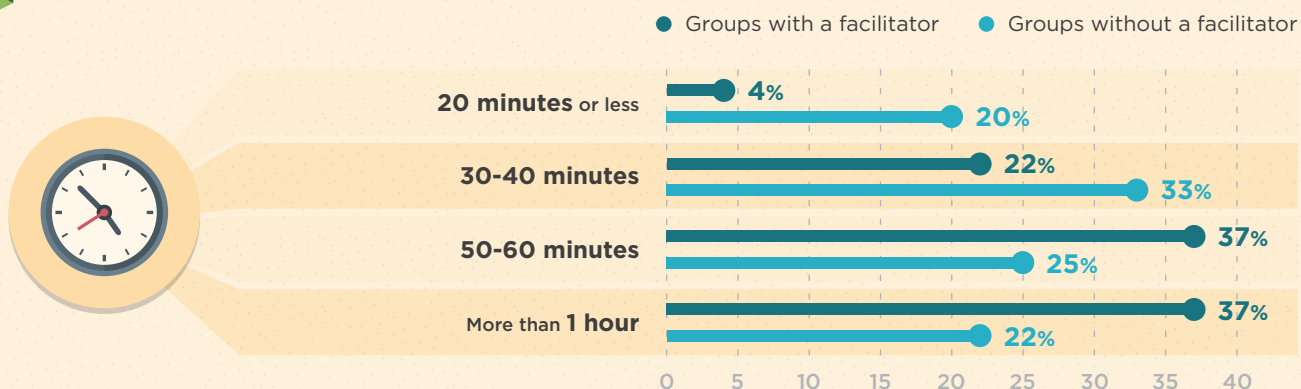
Does somebody usually facilitate your discussions?



Groups that have a facilitator generally spend more time focused on their book discussions than groups that don't. It is not possible to tell from the data how much of this is due to the facilitator keeping the discussion focused for longer, and how much is simply that groups that wish to have long discussions have found that these are best managed with a facilitator. Either way, 75% of those in facilitated groups say they are "very happy" in their book club, compared to 65% in groups that are not facilitated.

Groups that have a facilitator generally spend longer focused on their book discussions than groups that don't.

How long does your book club typically spend discussing a book?

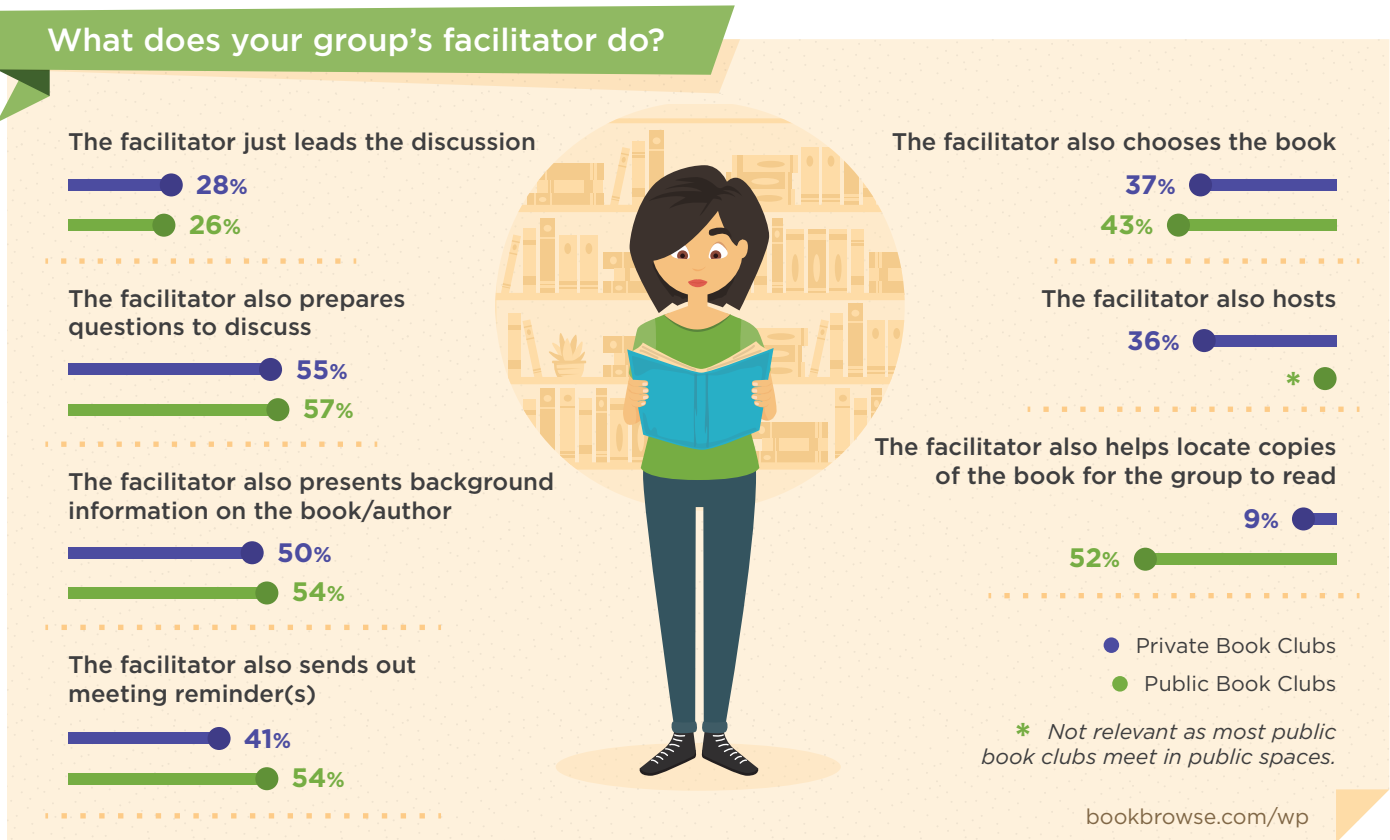


Because all but 8% of public book clubs surveyed have a facilitator, the chart above shows private book clubs only.

In 28% of private book clubs and 26% of public groups that are facilitated, the role is limited to just leading the discussion. In the remainder, the facilitator has multiple roles. For example, in at least half of groups, the facilitator is responsible for preparing discussion questions and researching background information.

In private book clubs, it is not so much that the facilitator wears many hats as it is that facilitating is often one of the responsibilities of the person who chose the book for and/or is hosting that particular meeting.

In some book clubs, particularly public groups, administration falls largely or completely on one person. Although we did not survey this quantitatively, in the open-ended responses a number of book club leaders—in both public and private groups—commented that they would like to see the load shared more equally.



Off-Limit Topics

A small number of groups have topics that are off-limits. We asked respondents specifically about religion, sex and politics. It is interesting to note the differences between respondents living in the USA (88% of the sample) compared to those living elsewhere.

At the time of the survey, 13% of American respondents said their group had agreed not to discuss one or more of these topics: 5% avoid religion, 3% do not discuss sex, and 11% steer clear of politics. This compares to just 3% of respondents not living in the USA, who mostly avoid religion. Less than 1% avoid sex and politics.



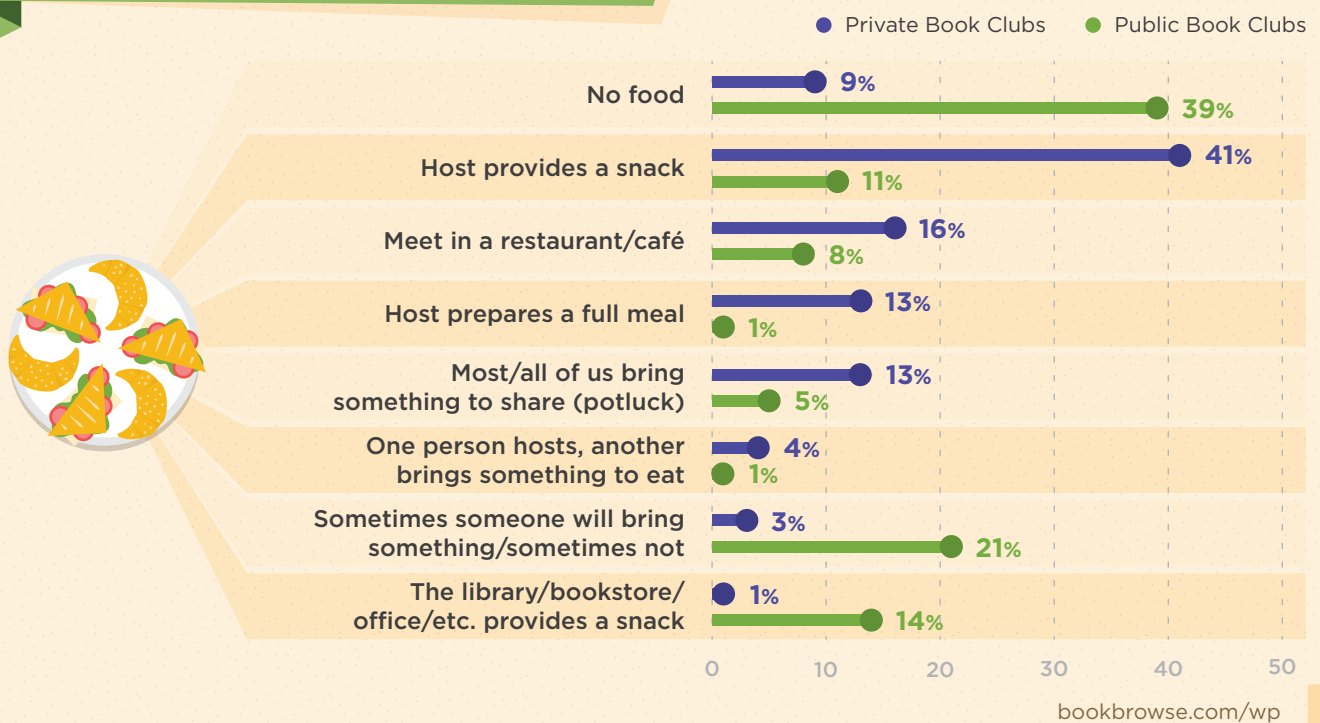
Food & Drink

91% of private book clubs have food at their meetings, ranging from a snack (41%) to a full hostess-cooked meal (13%) or potluck (13%). While food is integral to most private book clubs, and alcohol (usually wine) is enjoyed by about half of groups, both can be points of contention, with a few respondents complaining about drunk members, and some of competitive hosting (see Section 3).

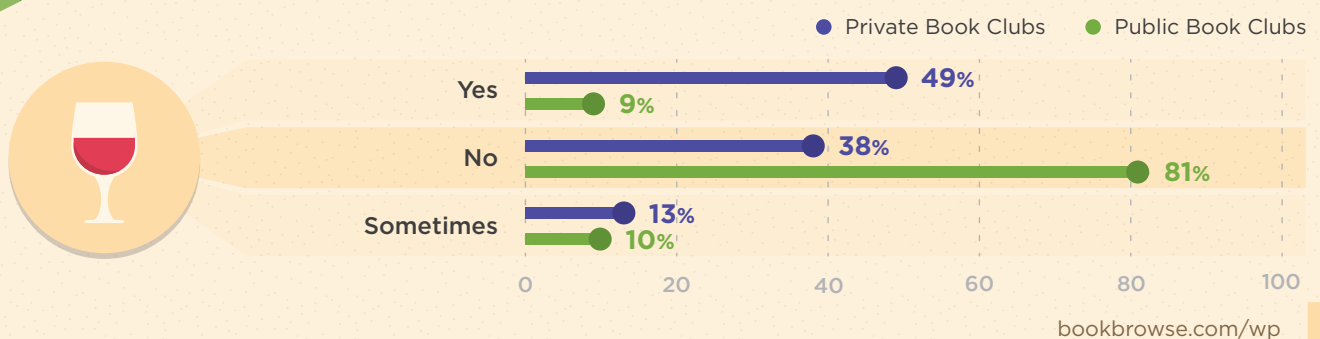
9 out of 10 private book clubs have food at their meetings.

39% of public book clubs do not include food in their meetings. 46% have a simple snack at most. Few public book clubs serve alcohol; those that do tend to either meet in restaurants/cafes or limit it to special occasions.

Do you have food at your meetings?



Do you have wine or other alcohol at your meetings?



2. BOOK CLUB DYNAMICS

What People Want from a Book Club

We asked respondents to rate the importance to them of nine book club attributes on a 5-point scale (essential, very important, neutral, slightly important, and not important). For clarity, in the table below we show only very important/essential.

Members of public and private book clubs are broadly in agreement about the importance of six of the attributes, but differ somewhat on three: trust, socializing, and personal friendships.

How important are these attributes to your book club experience?

All Book Clubs

Very Important/Essential

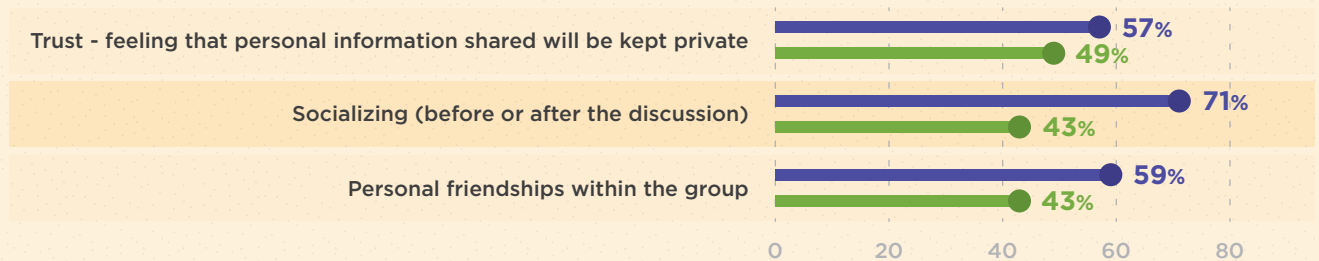


Comparison of Private vs Public Book Clubs

Private Book Clubs

Public Book Clubs

Very Important/Essential



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Respect for Each Other's Opinions

Book clubbers are in almost universal agreement that respect for each other's opinions is critical; 98% consider this very important/essential.

“ Everyone is respected despite differences in political, religious and social beliefs.

We have varied opinions but respect each other's right to them.

Listening to other people's opinions has taught us (most of us!) to be sensitive to others.

Respect for each other's opinions is very important/essential to 98% of book club members.

Exposure to different types of books

91% feel that “exposure to books I otherwise wouldn't read” is very important/essential to their book club experience.

“ I enjoy reading books I would not have normally chosen and challenging myself as a reader.

I love the opportunity to discuss books I might not otherwise read with people I trust.

It's a chance to discuss ideas, exposure to things I might not have sought out on my own.

Learning from Others

90% think that “learning from other people's experiences” is very important/essential. Participants comment on the mental stimulation of book club participation and how they appreciate being with a group of intelligent people.

“ I expand my knowledge of the world and grow as a person by being exposed to different ideas.

This group educates me, challenges me to think differently & listens to my point of view.

It's an opportunity to interact with intelligent and interesting people.

“A Place Where I Belong”

85% of book clubbers say it is important/essential that their book club is “a place where I feel I belong.”

It is interesting to note how much higher “a place where I belong” scores than “personal friendships within the group”- illustrating that feeling a sense of belonging within a group is not necessarily reliant on personal connections.

“ I enjoy meeting with people that I wouldn't normally socialize with.

I really appreciate being a part of a group of people who come from such a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. I love my close friends but we never have the depth of discussion my book club does.

When I walk into the book club each month I get this sense that I belong and that over the next two hours I'll be engaging my brain and growing as a person.

Good Discussions & Challenging Books

“Vibrant discussion” is very important/essential to 84% of respondents. Hand in hand with this go the books themselves, with 71% saying that it is very important/essential that the “books challenge me as a reader.”

“Vibrant discussion” is very important/essential to 84% of respondents.

Many specify that the opportunity to discuss with intelligent individuals is key. Respondents link the desire to discuss books with being part of a community and growing their personal knowledge.

- “ *The discourse enhances my opinion and understanding of the books, often due to learning from the members’ lives and their experiences.*
- I want to read and discuss books that challenge me both as a reader and philosophically.*
- I want to think deeply about issues from different perspectives.*
- You don’t have to love the book to be able to discuss it.*

Trust

57% of those in private book clubs and 49% of those in public groups think it is very important/essential to feel that “personal information I share will be kept private.”

- “ *I love the trust between members and the personal connections developed over the years.*
- You need to find a group that you can trust and feel comfortable in.*
- Sharing common experiences among trusted friends is very important.*

Socializing & Friendships

In private book clubs, 71% think that a social element is very important/essential, and 59% think personal friendships are very important/essential. Less than 2% consider them not important; the remainder are neutral on the topic.

In public book clubs, just 43% consider both socializing and personal friendships very important/essential. However, only 10% consider them unimportant; the remainder are neutral on the topic.

Based on analysis of the open-ended responses, our sense is that socializing and friendship are not so much unimportant to some book club members as simply less important than the book discussion itself, which is paramount.

Private book clubs

- “ *I find the socializing and friendliness very nurturing.*
- Book club is a very important part of my social life and relationships.*
- It’s just about the most important social engagement of the month. we are longtime friends and readers.*

Public book clubs

- “ *It is a place to meet new friends and socialize with like-minded people.*
- A chance to share opinions about books, and a vital social interaction.*
- Through discussion and sharing, our book club members started as strangers and have become friends.*

Above All Else—To Have Fun & Feel Connected

Above all else, book clubbers want their book group to be fun. Respondents consistently express that their group is an important and fun aspect of their lives. For most, it is a connection to people and a constant in a changing world.

Above all else, book clubbers want their book group to be fun.

Many respondents comment that book clubs are a good place to meet people, to connect with their community, and build new friendships. The fellowship of sharing life experiences, open debate, and good food are all frequently mentioned. In many cases, ongoing participation in a book club leads to deep and abiding friendships, which can become as important as the books themselves.

When asked how they would describe their book club to a friend, typical responses include:

Private book clubs

“

We laugh a lot and learn about the world and each other.

Love, love, love my book club. So happy we continue to meet each month.

Great friends, interesting discussion, intellectually stimulating, warm and accepting.

The most interesting group of women I know. I hate to ever miss a book club meeting!

I love the lasting friendships and the ability to share thoughts and feelings without judgement.

I love it, couldn't imagine not being a part of it.

Public book clubs

“

The book club is a great place to meet people in our community and get to know them through discussions that may not take place in ordinary social gatherings.

A vital part of my mental health—my favorite day of the month!

I meet interesting people with wonderful life experiences and ideas. I read books I never would have picked. I love the mental stimulation.

It is a very friendly and respectful group that all have a passion for reading and sharing.

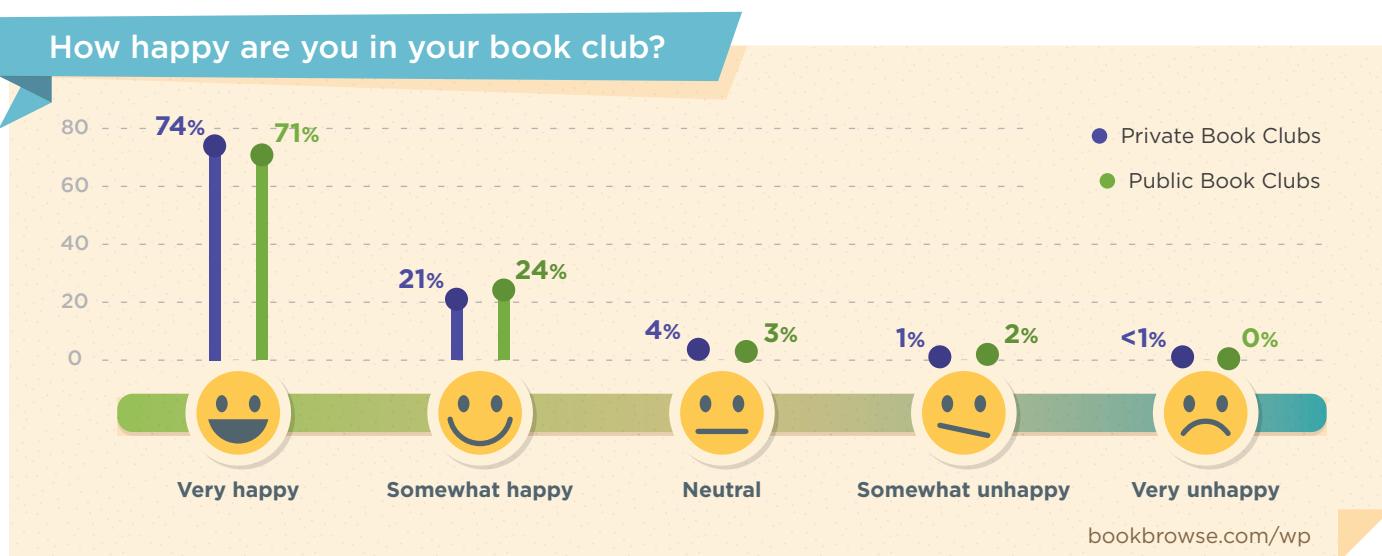
I enjoy reading and sharing books with others. Their opinions help me to view life and understand it and myself better. It is great to be with people.

Tell Us About Your Book Club

Having established what factors are most important to book clubbers, we now look at how respondents rate their own book club experience. In our past research, we have found that about one-fifth of book clubbers are in two or more book groups. For the purpose of this research, to avoid conflating responses from different book club experiences, we asked those in more than one group to decide which of their in-person groups was most important to them, and then to answer all questions in relation to that single book club.

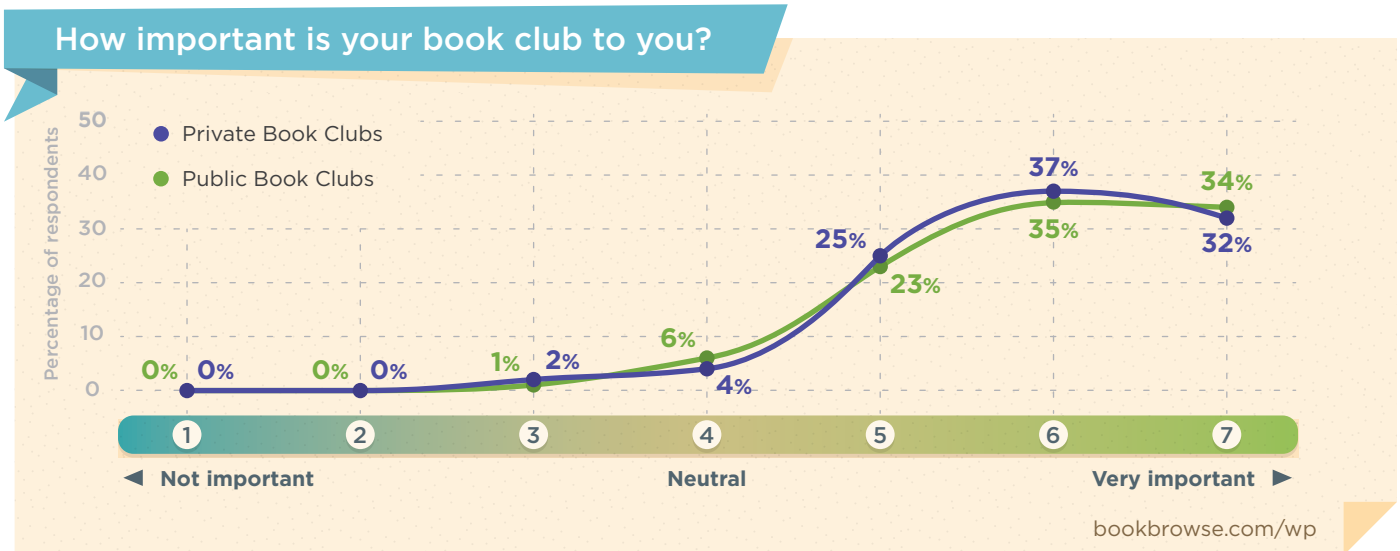
Overall, How Happy Are You in Your Book Club?

Almost three-quarters of book club members describe themselves as “very happy” in their group. Most of the remainder consider themselves “somewhat happy.” While it is remarkable to see such high levels of satisfaction, the fact that a full quarter of respondents fall short of describing themselves as “very happy” indicates that they see room for improvement in their group. And, in fact, many of those who rate themselves “very happy” have also encountered issues in their group or see ways to improve it—a topic we will explore in Section 3.



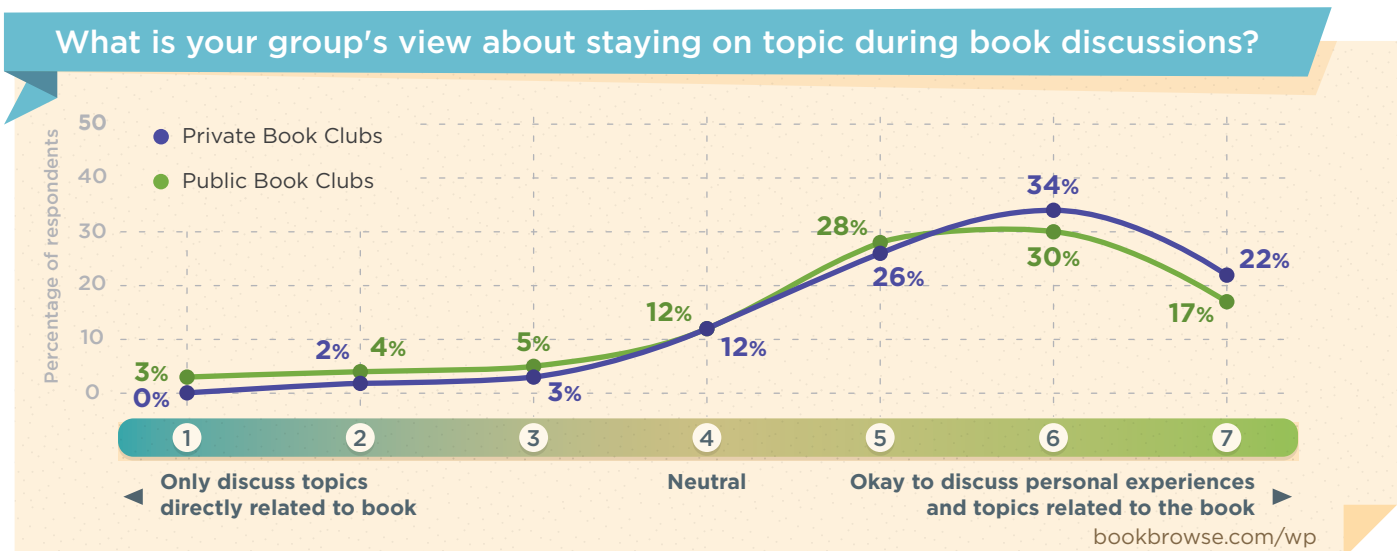
How Important is Your Book Club to You?

The vast majority of book club members feel that their group is an important aspect of their lives, with 69% rating it a 6 or 7 on a scale where 1 is not important and 7 is very important.



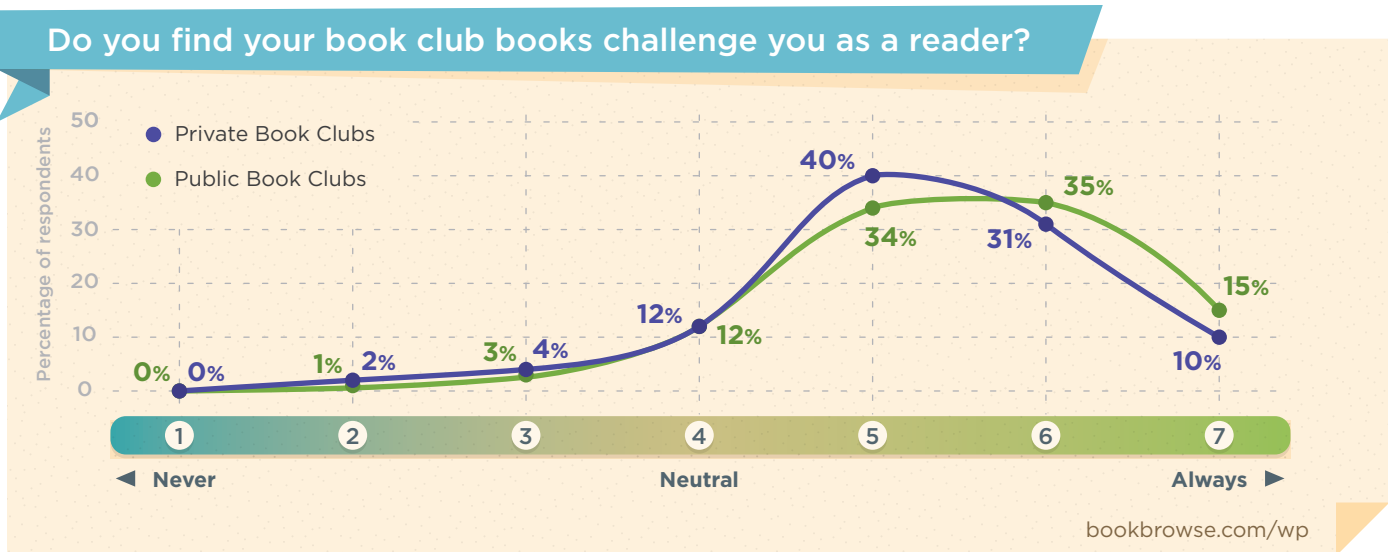
What is Your Book Club’s View About Staying on Topic?

As we saw in Section 1, most book clubs allow for some social time at their meetings, but once the book discussion starts, groups generally aim to stay focused on the book in hand. A very small percentage of book clubs restrict book discussions only to topics directly related to the book. Most allow conversations to delve into personal experiences and related topics. However, key for the majority of book clubs is that the conversation stays relevant to the book. As we will see in Section 3, members who unfailingly divert the discussion on to unrelated topics are a frustration in some book clubs, and some groups struggle because members of the group do not share the same definition of “off topic.”



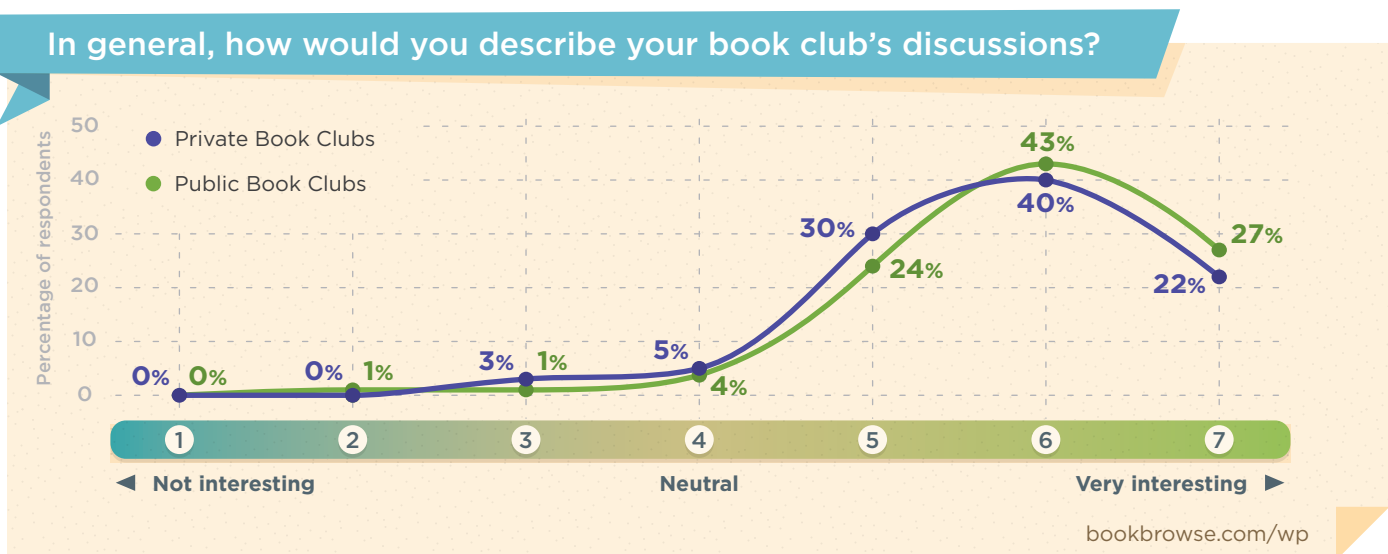
Do Your Book Club Books Challenge You as a Reader?

Earlier, we saw that 71% of respondents feel it very important/essential that their book club books “challenge them as a reader.” Although most respondents indicate that their book club books are at least moderately challenging, a relatively small proportion feel that their group’s choices are consistently so.



How Interesting are Your Group’s Discussions?

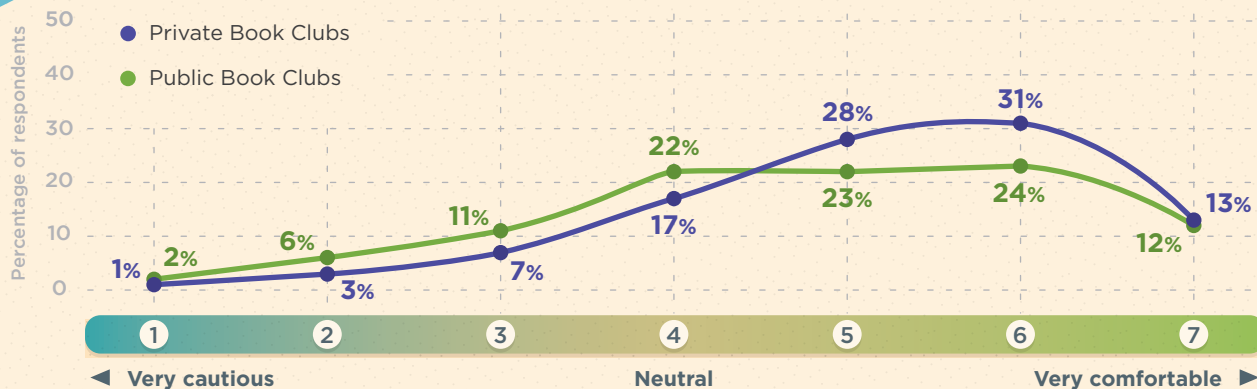
62% of those in private book clubs and 70% of those in public groups rate their club’s discussions as a 6 or 7 on a scale where 1 is not interesting and 7 is very interesting.



Are You Comfortable Sharing Personal Information?

While 72% of those in private book clubs and 59% of those in public groups feel at least somewhat comfortable sharing personal information, only around 13% feel very comfortable.

How comfortable are you sharing personal information with your book club?



bookbrowse.com/wp

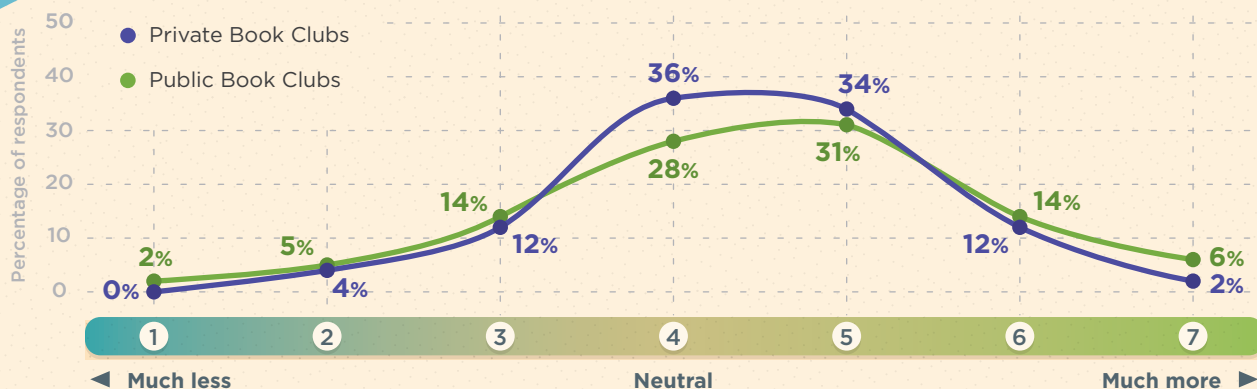
Do You Talk More or Less Than Others?

A frequent complaint we hear from book clubbers (and a topic we will explore in Section 3) is that certain members of the group dominate the discussions.

Approximately half of all book club members think they talk more than others in their group. 16% of those in private book clubs and 21% in public groups feel they talk less.

About half of respondents feel that they talk more than others in their group while 16% of those in private book clubs and 21% in public groups feel they talk less.

Thinking about your group's discussions, do you think you talk more or less than others?



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3. BOOK CLUB ISSUES

As we have already seen, in general most book club members are happy with their group. Nevertheless, problems do arise. This section explores common issues and shares ideas about how to resolve them.

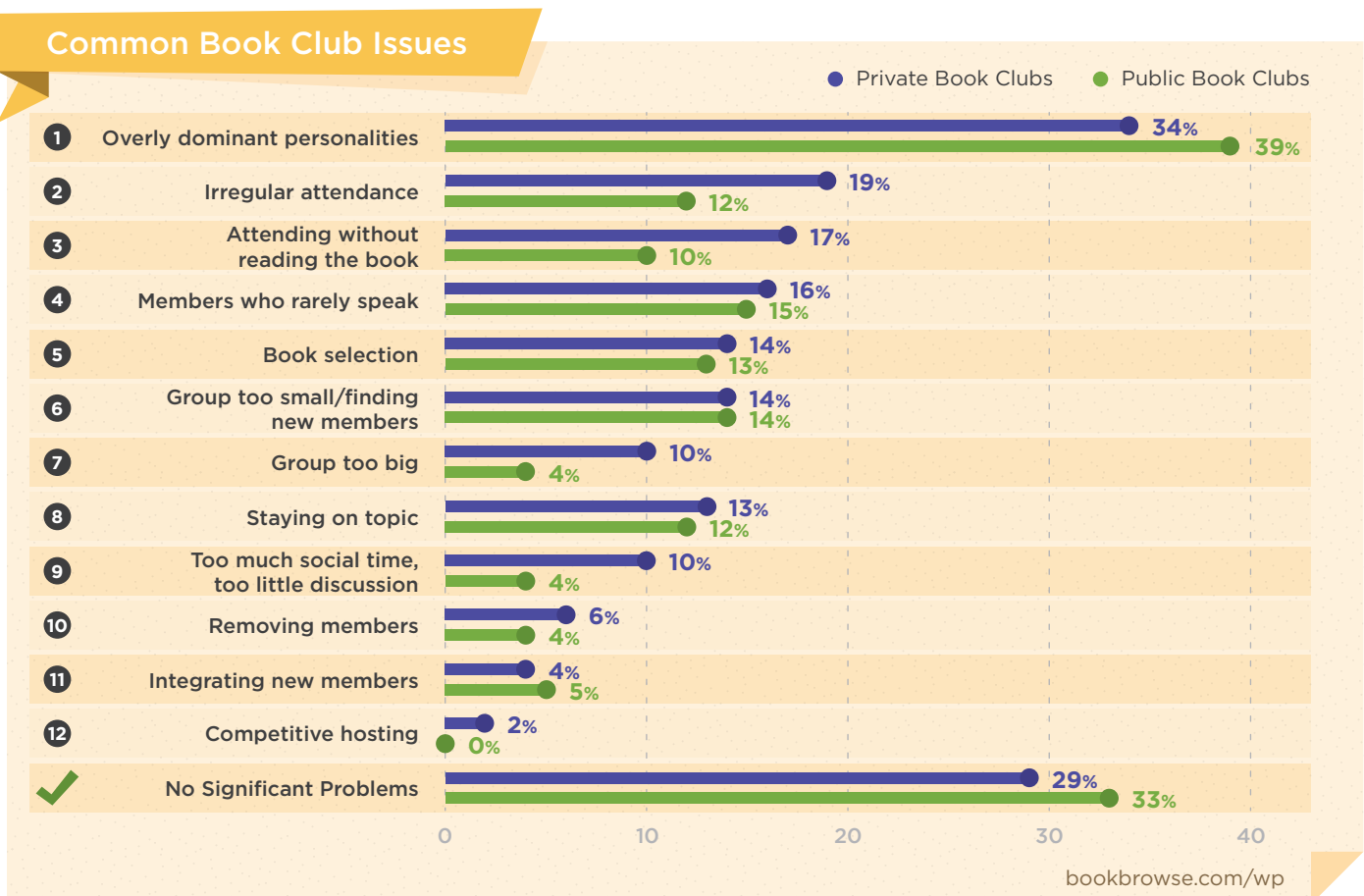
Before embarking on this topic, it is important to keep in mind that, while there are some attributes that most happy book clubs share, there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all book club, so what one group experiences as an issue may not be experienced as such in another.

Common Book Club Issues

We presented those currently in a book club with a list of common book club issues and asked them which they had experienced in their group.

By far the most commonly reported issue is that of overly dominant personalities (ODPs). 34% of people currently in a private book club and 39% of those in public groups say that they have experienced this as a problem. ODPs are also the leading reason respondents give for leaving a book club due to dissatisfaction – a topic we explore in Section 4.

Over one-third of book clubs have experienced problems due to an overly dominant personality.



How Book Clubs Respond to Issues

Do Nothing

Book clubs are often comprised of friends and neighbors, so a confrontational situation in a group can ripple into other aspects of the members' lives. Perhaps because of this, a number of respondents say that they prefer not to address issues. Sometimes problems resolve themselves, but other times they do not and this can result in members leaving the book club or the group disbanding entirely, often leaving friendships damaged. In Section 4 we ask those who left a previous book club due to dissatisfaction why they did so, and also ask if the group continued after they left. In 41% of cases the group ceased meeting immediately or soon after.



Problems have been left unresolved, and we have lost some members because of it.

Issues have not been dealt with. It feels like a sinking ship.

We just adjusted.

Set Expectations to Prevent Problems

Often, book club issues arise because members have not discussed and agreed upon the basic expectations of their group. Simply put, there is never going to be harmony in a book club if some members think of meetings as an excuse for a fun night of catching up on local gossip with a few minutes spent on the book if time allows, while others anticipate an in-depth discussion of the book's merits. Both are valid ways to run a book club, they're just not compatible expectations for members in the same group.

Discussing and agreeing the core objectives of the group will help prevent problems from happening, and make resolving them easier if they do. A simple set of guidelines can be of value to many book clubs.

Agreeing upon the core objectives of the group will help prevent problems from happening, and make resolving them easier when they do.



We remind the members of the rules we have made and there are not that many.

I've posted the rules of the book group and have it on our table where the members sign in.

The facilitator passes out rules to each new member which essentially say no interrupting, no side discussions, and no attacking for differences of opinion, every opinion is welcome.

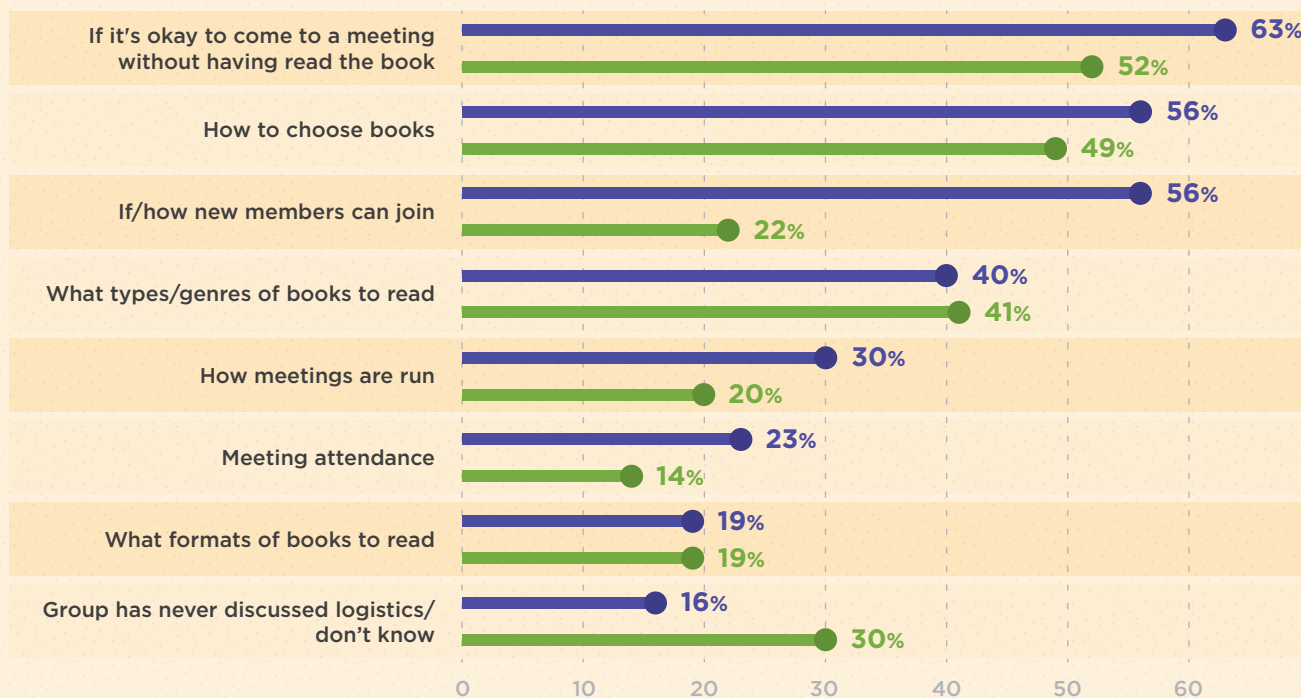
Even when things are going smoothly within an established group, a significant number of respondents suggest setting aside time regularly for the group to discuss how things are running, and provide a forum to raise issues and new ideas. Just as many of us have an annual checkup at the doctor, an annual "health check" can prevent a book club from stagnating, or for unexpressed tensions to reach breaking point. In Section 4, we will see that among those who left a previous book club due to dissatisfaction, 62% stayed with the group for a year or more. It is perhaps interesting to reflect on how many of these people might still have been in their book club if there had been a regular forum for discussing issues.



We have a planning meeting in January of each new year to discuss how we all feel about how we structure our meetings. We also exchange ideas on how to improve our get-togethers.

Which of these logistical issues has your book club discussed?

● Private Book Clubs ● Public Book Clubs



bookbrowse.com/wp

Talk About It!

Effective book clubs are built on active listening, respect and compromise. Just as there is no single right way for a book club to run, there is no single right way to resolve problems that arise. In this section we will look at specific problems and how book clubs respond to them; but, in general, a good first step to resolving any issue is to talk about it!

Effective book clubs are built on active listening, respect and compromise. Just as there is no single right way for a book club to run, there is no single right way to resolve problems that arise.

➤ See also BookBrowse's book club advice pages, which include "topics to discuss when starting a book club" and "tips on handling difficult book club situations", which are useful resources for new and established groups:

bookbrowse.com/bookclubs/advice

Responding to Specific Issues

1. Overly Dominant Personalities

34% of those currently in private book clubs and 39% of those in public groups have experienced issues in their group due to there being one or more overly dominant personalities (ODPs) who exercise an over-sized influence on their group as a whole, or a specific aspect of it.

Problems with ODPs tend to overlap with other issues. For example, 14% of respondents said their group has had differences of opinion about off topic conversations; this rises to 24% in groups that have one or more ODPs. Whatever the specifics of the situation, those who occupy too much of the limelight (whether intentionally or not) can be a breaking point for a book club, sometimes leading to members leaving or the group disbanding. As we will see in Section 4, 38% of those who left a book club due to dissatisfaction did so, at least in part, because of an overly dominant personality.

38% of those who left a book club due to dissatisfaction did so, at least in part, because of an overly dominant personality.

“

There are two people who are very loud. We try not to put them next to each other for the discussion. I will try to draw someone else into the discussion if one is dominating the conversation.

She's like the student in college who wants the professor to know how much she knows about the book.

One member is very rude, others have left because of her.

We have one member who is subtly dominant and sabotages book choices that are more challenging.

One member does a lot of research into books but only in the genre she likes. Because she has done so much work we often feel obligated to choose her books.

One of the original founders sees it as her book club. She talks at least twice as much as anyone else and there can be no changes to our format without her blessing. Members have quit because of this.

How Book Clubs Respond

Although ODPs can negatively influence any aspect of a book club, their impact is most often felt in the discussions themselves. As we saw in Section 1, 75% of private book clubs and 93% of public groups have somebody facilitate their discussions (sometimes the same person each time, sometimes the role is rotated). The facilitator has the authority to bring the discussion back on track without being seen as “bossy.” It is interesting to note that 75% of those in book clubs with a facilitator say they are “very happy” with their book club, compared to 65% in groups without a facilitator.

75% of those in book clubs with a facilitator say they are “very happy” with their book club, compared to 65% in groups without a facilitator.

“

A good facilitator can handle the overly dominant member by asking for another's comments.

As the facilitator, I carefully rein in the dominating ones while still allowing them to jump in. It is done delicately and sometimes with a bit of humor.

Successful groups that do not have a facilitator tend to be those that have established clear ground rules and whose members feel comfortable pitching in to redirect other members if needed.

“ *Setting ground rules before the group begins talking helps discourage dominant speakers.*
We have one member that makes a habit of derailing the discussion. Everyone in our group (except the culprit) seems to recognize this and, as a group, we gently but firmly steer the conversation back to the book. It can be taxing at times.

Some groups limit the amount of time each person has to express their opinions.

“ *We ring a bell when someone goes on and on!*
We give each person five note cards. A person has to throw a card into the hat each time she speaks.

In some cases, a private conversation with the individual helps.

“ *I spoke to her privately about the problem and it was fixed.*
People have spoken to her privately in a very respectful manner.

If all else fails, sometimes the member will be asked to leave, or will leave of their own accord; other times the group disbands (see #10 in this section for more on this).

“ *We let the member go but we all felt bad.*
We disbanded the book club and then restarted another club.

2. Irregular Attendance

19% of those currently in private book clubs and 12% of those in public groups say their group has experienced issues with members who don't attend regularly.

Some groups have a relaxed attitude to attendance (or, particularly in public book clubs, may not be in a position to enforce it even if they wished to). Bigger groups sometimes rely on there being no-shows for the group size to be manageable. But for some book clubs, irregular attendance can be a logistical issue, for example in smaller groups where a critical mass is needed to have a good discussion, or in groups that have a waiting list to join.

Over and above practical issues, discussing books together over a period of time generates bonds of friendship and shared confidences, so it can disturb the dynamics of the group and be a source of frustration for those who prioritize book club when others don't take the commitment as seriously.

“ *We have one woman who regularly skips book club because she's getting her hair cut or having lunch with someone else. We meet the same day and time each month, why can't she schedule her other appointments for some other time?*

Discussing books together over a period of time generates bonds of friendship and shared confidences; many who prioritize their book club find it frustrating when others don't take the commitment as seriously.

How Book Clubs Respond

Respondents emphasize the importance of a consistent meeting day and time, and the value of good communication.



We meet at the same time each month which has helped to solidify attendance.

Communication is important, from a recap of meetings to reminders of upcoming meetings.

A person in the club is great about emailing all of us the agreed-upon date and location for the next meeting.

In general, when regular attendance is a requirement of membership, one or more members will discuss the situation with the irregular participant. This will either result in improved attendance, or the member dropping out or being asked to leave.



If a member skips more than two meetings in a row without notifying the group leader, they will be asked if they want to continue and told the policy for absences.

Those who regularly do not attend, very soon - after prodding - drop out.

We had to tell non-attending members that we would miss them but attendance and participation are essential.

We developed guidelines after reading what other book clubs did. This caused our irregular attenders to drop out which was not our intention but why do you want to be in a club and not participate?

Sometimes absent members are simply removed from the mailing list.



If a member does not RSVP and is not attending regularly, he/she is dropped from the club.

3. Attending Without Reading The Book

17% of those currently in private book clubs, and 10% of those in public groups say their group has experienced problems with members who come to meetings without having finished the book (or, in some cases, even starting it). In smaller groups this can be an issue if there are insufficient members to hold a good discussion, but the particular bugbear, irrespective of group size, is when members who have not finished the book complain about plot spoilers in the discussion, or get bored and want to talk about other things.

As we will see in Section 4, a quarter of those who left a former book club due to dissatisfaction cited frustration over members not attending meetings, or attending without having read the book as a factor in their decision.

A quarter of those who left a former book club due to dissatisfaction cited frustration over members not attending meetings or attending without having read the book as a factor in their decision.

How Book Clubs Respond

Some groups have a rule that members must have finished the book to attend a meeting. Some are accepting of members attending without having read the book but make it clear that it is not acceptable to prevent others from discussing it in full.

“ Our rule is that you are always welcome to attend book club but if you haven't read the book you may only listen.

We agreed that we would not curtail discussion to accommodate those who have not read or finished the book.

We un-invited a member who did not read the books.

4. Members Who Rarely Speak

16% of those currently in a book club say their group has had a problem because one or more members rarely participate in the discussions. Usually, they express sadness and frustration saying that they would like to hear from these quieter members because their opinions and experiences are of value.

Low participation in discussions is generally caused by one or more of these factors:

- Overly-dominant personalities—while 16% of all respondents say they have experienced this issue, 26% of respondents in a group with an ODP say they have experienced it.
- Individual personalities—some people are simply quieter than others.
- Lack of familiarity with the group—for example, new members holding back until they feel comfortable with the group.

16% of groups have experienced a problem because one or more members rarely speaks. This rises to 26% in groups with an overly dominant member.

How Book Clubs Respond

Groups that have set out to encourage participation from quieter members have generally achieved this simply by ensuring that each person is given time to express their opinion.

“ We start each meeting by going around the room asking what each person thinks of the book, this allows the quiet person to have their say.

The facilitator makes sure to ask a question of someone who is quiet.

We limit the time that any one person can take in the discussion so as to allow for more member participation.

5. Book Selection

Selecting good books to read and discuss is of critical importance to the success of a book club. 14% of those currently in a book club have experienced book selection issues; and, as we will see in Section 4, disagreements over book selection was a factor for 26% of those who left a former book club due to dissatisfaction.

26% of those who left a former book club because of dissatisfaction cited book selection as a factor.

Frustrations include:

- Members who don't participate in suggesting books. This can lead to burnout in those who do participate, and may limit the variety of book selections. Some respondents (particularly those who are official or de facto leaders of their group) feel that the burden of book selection is falling too heavily on too few shoulders.
- Conversely, others are frustrated that just one, or a few members, select the books and would like to have a more inclusive process.
- The selection process being too time-consuming.
- Book choices being too limited in terms of genres, or not sufficiently challenging.
- Poor books being read, often because members suggest them without reading, or even researching, them first.

How Book Clubs Respond

Selecting the books

There are so many different ways that book clubs select books that it could be the topic of an entire report. In fact, it was one of the core topics of our 2015 report (see Appendix B). So, the ideas below are not a comprehensive look at how book clubs select books, but simply a roundup of some of the typical ways book clubs handle book selection.

In our 2015 report, we found that 30% of book clubs choose their books month to month. The remainder plan at least two months ahead, with 43% planning at least 4 months ahead, and 19% planning a full year ahead.

As we saw in Section 1, in 32% of private book clubs and 12% of public groups the members take it in turns to pick a book. Some respondents commented that choosing books this way has proven helpful in adding variety to their group's reading.

“

We previously tried to make suggestions and have the group agree but that led to some people dictating our reading schedule and the books being similar. So now we take it in turns to select books. This approach has worked well.

In 62% of private book clubs and 55% of public groups all members can suggest book titles, and then the group as a whole decides which to read. Many of these groups have settled on a process whereby book selection takes place at designated times of the year. Oftentimes, members come to these meetings with one or more book suggestions, and then the titles are discussed and agreed upon. Many groups stipulate that the person proposing a book must have read it, or at least done sufficient research to justify the selection.

“ *Two years ago, we instituted a rule that you must read a book prior to recommending it. This has honed our choices and helped us to make better recommendations.*

To guarantee good selections, choosers of books must either be familiar with the author, read reviews from good sources or read at least a portion of the book before recommending it.

In book clubs where the group as a whole decides what to read, there are many variations on the process. Some groups ask members to introduce their book suggestion(s) and say a few words, or write a short description; others prefer suggestions to be anonymous. Respondents who favor the latter approach say that anonymous recommendations reduce the anxiety of suggesting a book only to have it rejected. However, it does limit the opportunity for individuals to advocate for their particular recommendations, or for the group to be reassured that the person making the recommendation has actually read or researched the book.

“ *Each year we put together a list of titles to vote on which includes reviews and short descriptions of each book. This is sent to members ahead of the meeting. Then we vote at the meeting.*

Each member brings a copy of their proposed title and says a few words about it.

We do not know who recommended which book so feel free to say we did not like it!

Some engage in discussion before voting, others don't. Some vote openly, others have secret ballots.

“ *We are 7 members and we choose 3-4 books at a time. Anyone can make suggestions (but not all do) and then we discuss and decide which we want to read. We've found the discussion takes too long if we try to pick more than this many books at a time.*

One member compiles a list of suggested titles (we can all contribute) and this gets sent to us all. That way we don't have to spend time discussing at the meeting, we just vote.

We all suggest books and say a few words about them, then the members privately rate them on a 1-10 scale. This helps us select books that most members want to read and gives everyone a voice in the process.

We changed to the secret ballot, which is so much fairer.

Some have rules about who can suggest books.

“ *A decision was recently made that any member who did not attend regularly or who failed to read a book will not be allowed to participate in book selection.*

New members have to be in our group for 12 months before being involved with choosing because if they don't stay the group is reading books chosen by someone not attending.

Avoiding Getting in a Rut

As we saw earlier, a significant number of respondents say that their group's book selections are not sufficiently challenging. Frequent comments include a desire for the group to read outside their comfort zone; and from a wider range of genres, particularly nonfiction. Also, to take more risks.

“ *We should be selecting books that will elicit more differences of opinions - rather than each one saying "I loved it."*

Book selection is often challenging for book clubs. Respondents frequently comment that it is not the book that is outside the group's comfort zone that disappoints, but more often the one that is too comfortably within it.

Our 2015 report offers insight into this quandary, which seems to come about due to the conflicting desires of those responsible for picking books. When asked to describe what they look for in a book for discussion, 57% of book clubbers say they would like it to be in a genre different from what their group has recently read, and 73% want their group to be challenged by it; but the overwhelming majority, 96%, also want it to be a book the group will enjoy (see page 10 of this report).

Thus, the desire to pick a book that will be liked can override the desire to explore new reading avenues. This can result in book recommendations too similar to ones the group has previously enjoyed —and, thus, paradoxically, members of the group can end up dissatisfied because they feel insufficiently challenged. It is worth noting that book clubs members frequently state that many of their best discussions have been about books that elicited strongly divergent opinions precisely because not everyone liked them.

The desire to explore new reading avenues can override the stronger desire to pick books that the group will like.

“

Sometimes the best discussions are about books where some people love it and some hate it.

We have learned to laugh when some people dislike the book. It just makes for a better discussion.

6. Group Too Small/Finding New Members

14% of book clubs have experienced problems with being too small and/or finding new members.

Sometimes a group simply has too few participants for a good discussion; other times, the group itself may not be overly small but members would like to introduce new perspectives. Over time, book clubs can consolidate to a core group who tend to have similar reading tastes and opinions, thus introducing new members can shake things up, adding diversity of opinions and reading interests which may lead to more fulfilling discussions.

14% of book clubs have experienced problems with being too small and/or finding new members.

“

We started out with a wider range of members but have narrowed, and discussion and variety of books have both suffered.

Some feel that their club's discussions would be improved if they could broaden a specific demographic of their group, such as attracting younger members, more ethnic diversity, or the opposite sex. Others simply wish to introduce new perspectives irrespective of demographics.

“

We could benefit from greater gender, age and political party diversity.

We are recruiting more members so we read a wider variety of books.

We need racial diversity, but it's rather white up here.

How Book Clubs Respond

Book clubs employ various strategies to boost membership. The majority of clubs gain new members through word-of-mouth; some use social networking; or advertise locally, such as in their library.



Each member approached a friend or associate to join.

The library tried getting new members by personally talking to patrons. It worked.

We promoted the book club through flyers in the library.

We hosted a summer potluck where members invited others to come and decide if they would like to join.

On a cautionary note, adding new members to an existing group can backfire if the character of the group shifts too dramatically. See #11 and Section 4 for more on this.

7. Group Too Big

10% of private book club members, and 4% of those in public groups, say that their book club has encountered problems due to the group getting too big. The optimal size for a book club depends on a number of factors including the group's discussion format and meeting location. As we saw in Section 1, the most popular size for a book club is 8-10 members, closely followed by groups with 11-15 members, but there are many happy and successful groups that are both smaller and larger.

When book clubs exceed the optimal size for their format, issues emerge, such as:

- Difficulties finding venues/group too big for some members to host at home.
- Declining participation in discussions because the more vocal members tend to overwhelm quieter ones.
- An increase in side conversations.
- Meetings running too long.

How Book Clubs Respond

Respondents suggest a variety of solutions which fall into three broad categories:

- Have an agreed upon cap for membership and, if necessary, a waiting list.
- Split the group into two.
- Maintain a single book club but with concurrent independent discussions.



We have determined that no new members can be added unless someone drops out.

We have a waiting list.

When our group got too big we split into two new book clubs.

We started up an evening book club as another option.

We have about 30 members, so we have two discussion leaders at each meeting so each group can be 15 or fewer participants.

8. Staying on Topic

Almost every book club has times when the discussion veers off topic. In most groups such segues are either acceptable and/or the conversation is gently steered back to the book after a bit. But for some groups it can become an issue. About 13% of those currently in a book club say that their group has experienced differences of opinion about staying on topic when discussing books. 21% of those who left a previous book club due to dissatisfaction cited off topic discussion as a factor.

21% of those who left a previous book club due to dissatisfaction cited off topic discussion as a factor.

“

There are always a couple of people who go a little too deep with their personal experience and how it seems to relate to the book. It frustrates some of us.

Some people offer too much personal information that at the start relates to the book and then they get off track and others join them.

How Book Clubs Respond

Sometimes problems are rooted in members of the group having different definitions of what “off topic” means. As with so many other book club issues, a good first step is for members to discuss and agree upon what the group as a whole considers off topic. The best time to do this is not in the heat of the moment during a book discussion but at a separate time.

“

We have had a few members in the past who have taken over the discussion and gone off topic, so the person who started the book group facilitated a discussion about keeping our group on topic and giving everyone time to speak.

There was too much time digressing from the book. We solved it by agreeing to remind each other to stay on topic. We lost two members.

We still don't agree on what being on topic means since some of us like to relate to personal experiences, etc. more than others.

Side discussions and talking over each other are frequent irritants, with many book club members finding them distracting and disrespectful. Respondents stress the importance of ensuring all voices are heard.

“

The main problem we have is people talking among themselves about other things while we are having the book club discussion. We have had talks about this but it still happens. I am the facilitator and have asked a few people to leave the club because of this.

Since the group is large, sometimes several people speak at once. I have a little bell that I ring if too many are speaking at once.

As we saw earlier, almost all book club members say it is okay to discuss personal experiences as they relate to the book, but toeing that fine line can be a challenge.

“

Book discussion often leads to a memory of a similar experience. We allow a bit of time for this because there's value in personal reflections, but then one of us will segue with “now, back to the book.”

Personal experiences related to the book are of great interest since our group members come from many different cultures and countries.

Occasionally a member will feel we have veered off the topics in the book. We either get back on track or explain why we feel our tangent is in fact related to the discussion at hand.

Many groups designate a facilitator whose role is to keep the conversation on track.

“ *One member tends to talk about her personal experiences excessively. The facilitator gently redirects the discussion. Others help by “jumping in” with thoughts of their own as most of us are aware of the situation.*

While some groups have “persistent offenders,” most book club members have led the conversation off topic at one point or another and, often, other members are happy to join in. But there comes a point when it’s time for a gentle reminder to bring the conversation back to the book at hand.

“ *We just made it policy that it was OK for anyone to speak up if they felt the discussion was getting too far off topic.*

When we lose track of discussing the book someone usually jumps in and gets us back on track. In twenty years we have always been able to solve this without any words or unpleasantness.

Preparing discussion topics ahead of the meeting can help keep the conversation on track and add depth to the discussion.

Sometimes groups use discussion guides provided by the publisher, other times one or more members of the group will think up topics themselves; many use a combination of both.

Most book clubs do not limit themselves to books with discussion guides. As we saw in Section 1, only one-third of book club members factor in the availability of a discussion guide when deciding what to read.

“ *At one point we were getting off track too often, so we decided we each should come with a question or two to keep the discussion centered on the book.*

We were not spending long discussing the books. It has been resolved most of the time by having talking points ready to stimulate the discussion.

We try to choose books with discussion guides so we can get back on track by going to the next question.

Preparing discussion topics ahead of the meeting can help keep the conversation on track and add depth to the discussion.

9. Too Much Social Time, Too Little Discussion

10% of those currently in private book clubs and 4% of those in public groups say they have experienced issues in their group relating to the ratio of discussion vs. social time. Overwhelmingly, these respondents wish their group's discussions were longer, not shorter. While there are happy book clubs that keep their discussions short, as we saw in Section 1, statistically speaking, the longer the discussion, the happier the group. In Section 4 we'll find that insufficient time discussing the book was a factor for 20% of those who left a previous book club due to dissatisfaction.

Insufficient time discussing the book was a factor for 20% of those who left a previous book club due to dissatisfaction.

How Book Clubs Respond

Groups that have resolved this problem have generally done so simply by agreeing time for discussion and time for socializing—and sticking to the plan.

“

We have agreed to start discussing at a certain time even if the socializing is going full throttle.

Come at 7 to chat - discussion starts at 7:30 and stays on topic until all topics are covered, around 9.

We socialize first, but when we sit down to dinner, it's time to discuss the book.

We established the mission of the book club at the onset; it states that meetings will be limited to book discussions with limited socializing.

Some are resigned to the fact that their group is never going to be one that is focused on discussion.

“

Unfortunately, our book club has become more of a social club. I try to spur them into doing a bit more, but it's quite disappointing.

Some members think that the discussion of the books is not detailed enough, whilst others say it goes on for too long sometimes.

Those who want to discuss have just given up.

Some groups are happy spending most of their time socializing.

“

My book group is more social than geared towards intellectualism.

We have had some members drop out because they were seeking more literary discussion time than we provide. Those who remain just really like each other. We enjoy having good social time and enjoy reading.

10. Removing Members

6% of those currently in private book clubs and 4% of those in public groups say their book club has had to ask one or more members to leave. In their open-ended responses, some other respondents noted that one or more people have left their book club after the group failed to resolve a disagreement.

How Book Clubs Respond

Generally, asking a member to leave a group is not a step taken lightly, and sometimes it is only considered when things have reached the point where other members of the group are starting to drift away.

Sometimes the issue is relatively clear-cut because it relates to the book club's rules; for example, a member who either regularly misses meetings or doesn't read the book in a group that expects one or both from its members. Other times, it might be because a member is consistently disruptive.

“ We basically told the woman who was drinking too much that she could no longer belong. We've talked about people talking among themselves while we are having a discussion; always the same few people. I am the facilitator and have asked a few people to leave the club because of this.

Sometimes, a member, given the choice between changing their habits or leaving, will choose to leave the group. Sometimes, it simply becomes clear to the member that they are not a good fit and they decide to move on of their own accord.

“ The member removed herself when she began to rant and figured out we just do not do that! One member was disrespectful to the other members and to our guest authors. I sent them an email letting them know their behavior could not continue. If they were disrespectful just one more time, I would ask them to leave the group. The person never acknowledged my email, nor came back.

There have been problems with one or two members interrupting other members, rolling eyes, staying on topic. The problem was resolved in most cases with gentle reminders, but in one case the member became mad and quit the group.

One previous member thought she was more intelligent than us and would let us know how she felt! We confronted her and eventually she quit the group.

We had one member who hated reading books! We simply refused to sit and gossip all night. It took about six months, but she finally left our group.

Once in a while a new member wants to transform the group. The moderator talks with them personally (often over lunch or coffee) encouraging them to find a group that better fits their needs.

Some groups fail to resolve the problem and either end up continuing with the challenging member(s) or disbanding. Sometimes a group that disbands will reform later without the difficult member(s).

“ We haven't done a great job of removing “poor fits,” they continue to be part of the club.

She's not a good fit but as she's a neighbor we haven't figured out how to remove her.

Sadly, we didn't handle it well and disbanded!

We had a dominant and disrespectful member so we disbanded and then reformed without her. It was the only way we could think of to solve the problem without hurting her feelings.

11. Integrating New Members

4% of those currently in private book clubs and 5% of those in public groups say their group has had issues integrating new members.

How Book Clubs Respond

Integration can be a challenge for a new member who may feel like an outsider. It can also be a challenge for existing members if the dynamics of the group shift significantly. As we will see in Section 4, some of those who left a book club due to dissatisfaction did so because they felt the group dynamics had changed for the worse with the introduction of new members. This is one of the reasons why it is important for book clubs to talk about, and agree upon how they want their book club to run—so that expectations are clear for both new and existing members.



New people are given leeway as they get used to the group norms. We provide in-person and email guidance to help them feel comfortable.

We invite a new guest for two meetings in a row. Then the group votes at the next meeting to determine if the guest becomes a member.

12. Competitive Hosting

For many, food is an integral part of their book club experience—as we saw in Section 1, it plays a role in 91% of private book clubs and 61% of public groups. However, 2% of those currently in private book clubs say their group has encountered difficulties when hosting has got out of control or the burden has not been shared equally. Competitive hosting was cited as a reason why 4% left a previous book club due to dissatisfaction.

How Book Clubs Respond

Groups that resolved this problem did so by cutting back on the hosting and/or sharing the load more evenly.



We found that some of us were guilty of overdoing the “snacks” and producing full meals, so we dialed back on cooking efforts, so as not to create a competitive atmosphere for hosts.

The facilitator tries to not have any member host more than once or twice a year by suggesting alternate locations such as restaurants or the library.

Themed potlucks can be fun occasionally, but not every month. Sometimes I'd make excuses not to go. Luckily, it turned out that some of the others felt the same way, so now we keep things simple and just occasionally splash out.



See also BookBrowse's book club advice pages, which include “topics to discuss when starting a book club” and “tips on handling difficult book club situations”, which are useful resources for new and established groups:

bookbrowse.com/bookclubs/advice

4. WHY PEOPLE LEAVE BOOK CLUBS

To further understand the dynamics of book clubs, we asked the 1,581 respondents who had been in one or more in-person book clubs in the past about their experiences. 480 were not currently in a book club; the remaining 1,101 were currently in a book club and are thus also included in the statistics for current book clubs reported in Sections 1 – 3.

61% were no longer part of their former book club(s) for logistical reasons such as moving out of the area. 13% had left feeling that “a book club wasn’t for me at the time.”

The remaining 26% left their previous book club(s) due to dissatisfaction. In this section we look at the key factors that caused them to leave.

A full quarter of respondents who had been in a book club in the past left the group due to dissatisfaction.

Why are you no longer in this/these book club(s)?

Practical reason (e.g. I moved away, meeting time didn't work, the group stopped meeting, no time to read etc.)

61%

No specific reason. I just felt that a book club wasn't for me at the time

13%

Issues with the book club

26%



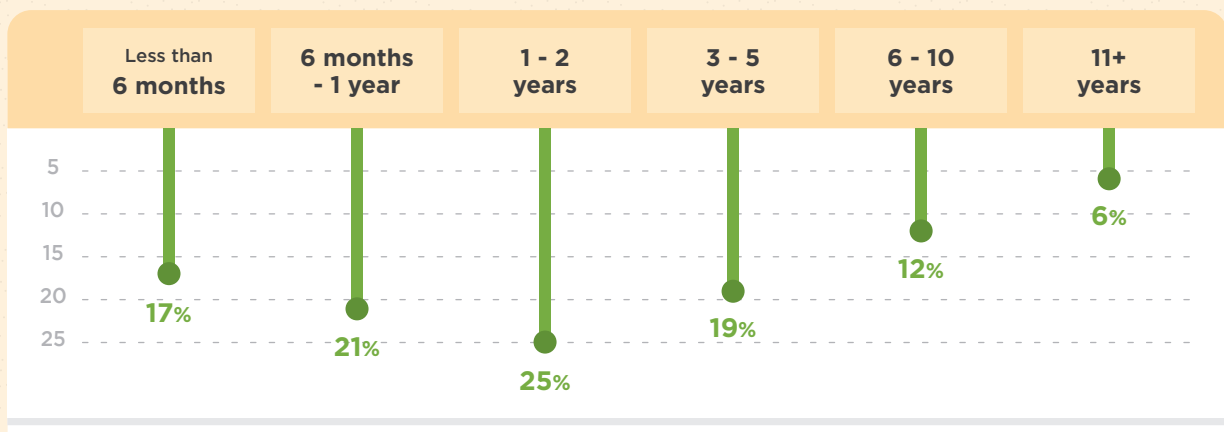
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Time in Group Before Leaving Due to Dissatisfaction

On the whole, those that leave book clubs due to dissatisfaction do not do so lightly. 62% stayed with the group for a year or more before leaving.

62% of those who left a book club due to dissatisfaction stayed with the group for a year or more before leaving.

Before you left your past book club(s), how long had you been with the group(s)?



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Reasons for Leaving a Book Club Due to Dissatisfaction

Many of those who left a book club because of dissatisfaction cited more than one reason for doing so.

For 38%, an overly dominant personality factored into their decision.

An overly dominant personality was a factor for 38% leaving a book club due to dissatisfaction.

“

One person had notes galore and took over most of the conversation.

Overly dominant “miss know it all.” We disbanded the group.

One of the members would just talk on about herself and her family; the rest of us couldn't get a word in. It was supposed to be a fun night out but it wasn't, so I quit.

26% expressed dissatisfaction with the book club's choice of books.

I like to read current books. They often chose obscure, sometimes decades old books.
There was too much fluff. I wanted to read books with substance that would challenge me to think.
I wish we could have read more varied books, it felt like we were playing safe too often.
Some people dominated the book selection. I had enough of being told what to read in school!

25% had been frustrated by some of the membership not attending meetings, or attending without reading the books.

Seemed like pulling teeth to get everyone to meet. Some members indicated they had no time to read.
It was really frustrating to spend time reading the book, even if I wasn't finding it easy, and then to come to the meeting to find others hadn't bothered to read it."
I work full time and have children; I made book club my priority, sometimes it would be the only night out I had all month, but some others didn't turn up regularly or read the book, so I decided I had better ways to spend my time.

Three related factors had been issues for many (with considerable overlap between them): off topic conversation during discussions (21%); too much social time, too little discussion (20%); and disliking how the discussions were run (17%).

I love to read but found that drinking alcohol (I'm not opposed to drinking at all - love my wine) and gossiping were the reasons most of these women got together. At times the book was never even brought up.
They just couldn't stay on the book—one of them would jump off to another topic and they'd all follow. It was like herding cats.
We were supposed to have designated time for social and discussion but the social time would always over run and then the discussion would be really perfunctory.
The same person led the discussions each time but she didn't do a good job keeping the conversation on track and it was really frustrating.
There's a line between robust discussion and getting angry, some members of the group didn't know where that line was.

11% felt that the group did not share their values.

There were a couple of very snarky members who said some not so nice things, and the rest of the group did not put a stop to it, so I decided enough was enough.
I was told one of my selections was "godless." My book was a classic read from a French author.

Some had also experienced overly competitive hosting and members getting drunk.

We started out as friends who liked to read and share our books. This progressed to competitive "which book was best" and the hosting became unreal.
There were some really loud women who didn't read the book and drank a lot.
We went on a book/movie weekend every year and each time someone got extremely drunk and made it uncomfortable for the rest of us.

A theme running through many of the comments is that the respondent simply felt that they had outgrown the group.

“ At times, members did not read the books, they were not an upbeat group. I outgrew them and found a better book club.

I enjoyed most of the books but it felt we were picking the same sort of books each time, and I was getting bored and didn't feel challenged.

After a few years I felt like I wasn't learning anything new with the group, I was glad to have the excuse of moving away.

Additional factors noted frequently in the open-ended comments include the group getting too large, the group getting too political, and feeling unwelcome in the group.

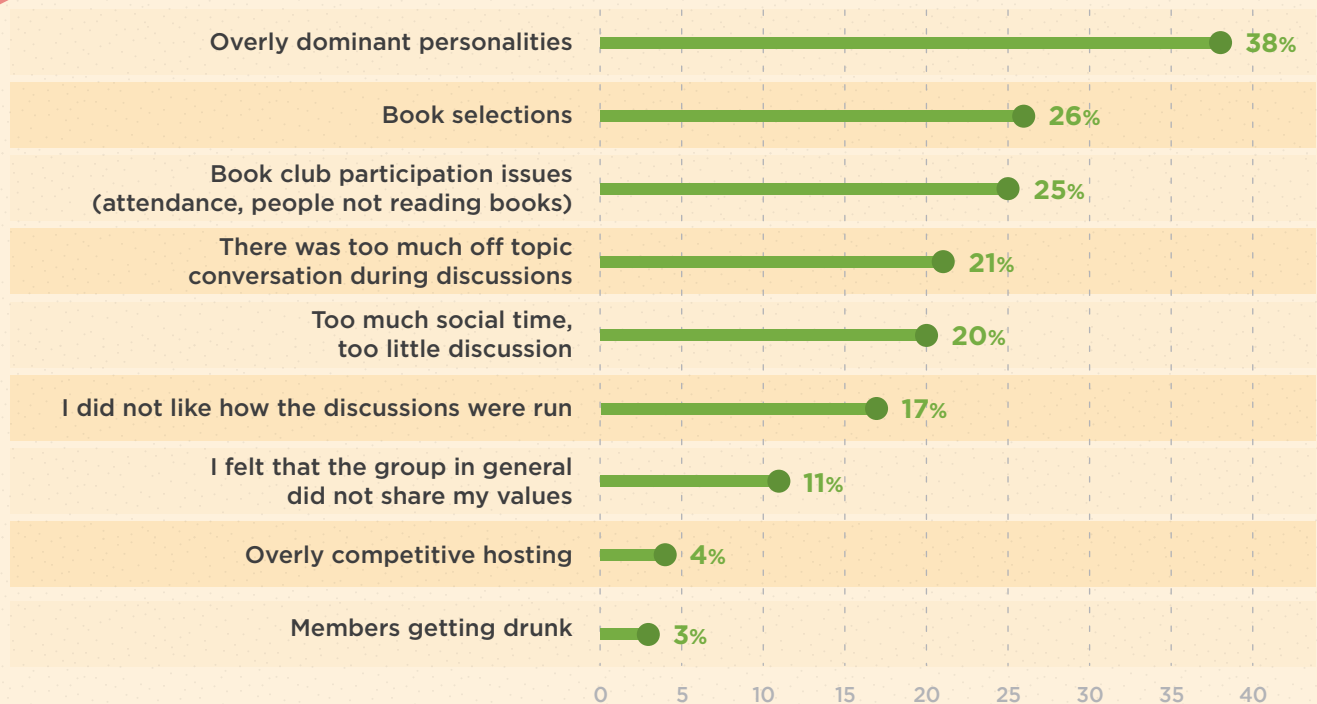
“ The library group was so large that you never got to know people well and some people came to listen and not participate.

Every book became a political issue and some of the members became extremely agitated.

All of the members had been friends for quite a while. I was “the new kid” — awkward.

A few had left their group because they felt that they were the odd one out, such as the respondent who had been the sole man in an all-women book club. In our 2015 survey we found that the majority of men interested in being in a book club want to be in a mixed group, but being the only representative of a demographic can be uncomfortable—and not just for men. In this survey, and over years of interviewing book clubbers, we have heard from others who left a group because they felt that they did not fit in for a variety of reasons including age, ethnicity, background, and education.

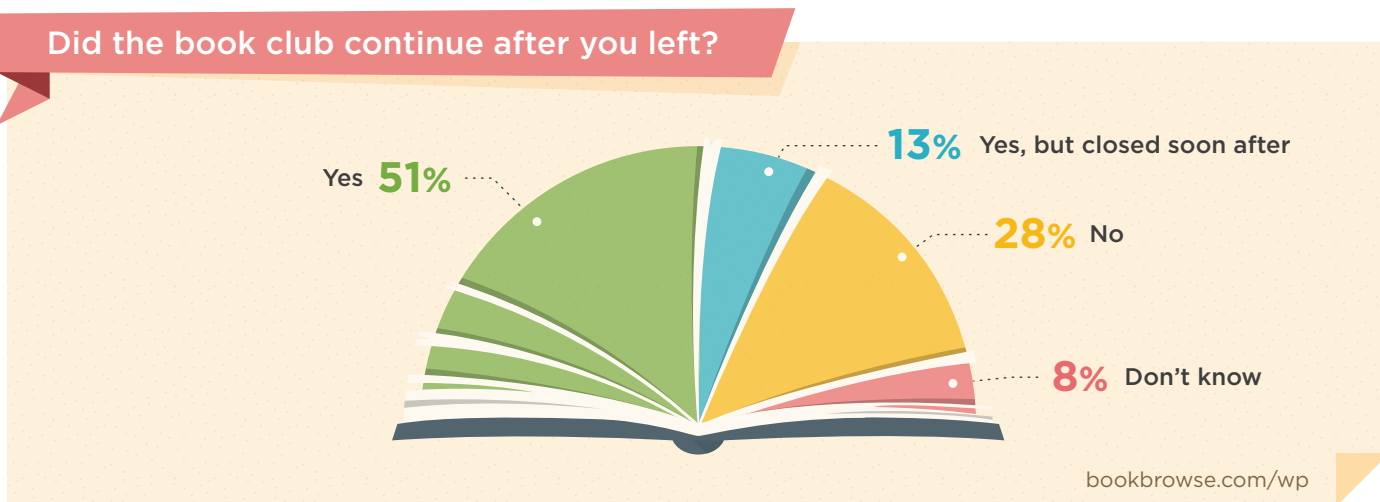
What were the main reasons for you leaving the book club due to dissatisfaction?



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Did the Book Club Continue After You Left?

In 41% of cases, the group disbanded at the same time, or soon after, the dissatisfied member left the group.



Reasons Why Long-Term Members Leave a Book Club

Given how much time and emotional energy most people invest into their book club, it surprised us to see that 37% of those who left a book club due to dissatisfaction did so after having been with the group for at least three years, and 18% had been with their group for six or more years.

Over one-third of those who left a book club due to dissatisfaction stayed with the group for three or more years before leaving.

Why would someone invest so much time in a book club if they were unhappy in it?

While we need to be cautious about drawing conclusions from a relatively small sample, the reason given by the majority is that the dynamics of the group shifted over time when new members joined.

“ Some new members came in and took over the discussion so instead of discussing the book we talked about their family, their life and all kind of things not related to the book.

A new member joined who only wanted to read memoirs or discuss movies.

The membership changed and it was no longer a fit for me.

After agreeing in the group that we weren't going to add any other members, someone invited another person to join and the discussions sidetracked much more.

New members joined from the same neighborhood (not where I lived) and spent most of the time socializing.

5. EXTERNAL PERCEPTIONS OF BOOK CLUBS

Of those who responded to the survey, 502 had never been in a book club but read at least one book a month (i.e. a sufficient number of books to participate in a book club, should they wish to). 85% were women, 15% men.

When asked if they were interested in being in a book club, 28% said they were not. The remainder expressed an interest, with one third expressing definite interest and the other two-thirds saying they may be interested. This breakdown is provided so as to put the sample size into context. It should not be interpreted as representative of the interests of readers as a whole. This is because those taking part in the survey knew that it was about book clubs and thus there is a high likelihood that the sample skews towards those at least somewhat interested in the topic.

Not Interested in Being in a Book Club

Primary reason for not being interested in a book club



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We asked those who were not interested in being in a book club to tell us in their own words why not.

45% see book clubs as primarily social groups not engaged in serious book discussion, or as cliques, or only for women—often a combination of all three. It is interesting to note that this perception of book clubs is held by both men and women. In fact, within our small sample, proportionally more women felt this to be the case.

“ *From what I've heard from friends (and seen in the media), book clubs often seem more about getting together and drinking wine and gossiping than actually discussing books.*
Female, 25-34, reads 5-6 books/month

Members are mostly women and their choice of books would be skewed accordingly to a low level.
Female, aged 75+, reads 5-6 books/month

A bunch of white soccer moms gather in a crowded room borrowed from their church to discuss a boring book they all hate but they go anyways because it's something to keep them busy.
Female, aged 18-24, reads about 1 book/month

Half the time they're talking about things other than books.
Female, aged 55-64, reads 3-4 books/month

I know several people that are members of book clubs and there always seems to be tension that has nothing to do with the books.
Female, aged 65-74, reads 3-4 books/month

Boring books are chosen and probably one person dominates.
Male, aged 65-74, reads about 1 book/month

They are often monopolized by dominant individuals trying to impose their opinions and impress other members.
Female, aged 55-64, reads about 1 book/month

They read boring literary fiction, gossip and talk off topic.
Female, aged 55-64, reads 7-8 books/month

From what I've heard from friends (and seen in the media), book clubs often seem more about getting together and drinking wine and gossiping than actually discussing books.
Female, 25-34, reads 5-6 books/month

36% don't want to be tied to reading books they have not chosen.

“ *I want to read what I want and not what someone else thinks I should read.*
Female, aged 55-64, reads 5-6 books/month

I like to read books I'm in the mood for and feel reading is very much a solitary thing. Reading the same book as everyone else seems like a chore.
Female, aged 35-44, reads 3-4 books/month

I really don't care about someone else's opinion of a book. I will decide what I like without being influenced by someone else.
Male, aged 65-74, reads 3-4 books/month

You wind up wasting time reading something that is not your taste, and then having to discuss it just to be with friends.
Female, aged 55-64, reads 5-6 books/month

I want to read what I want and not what someone else thinks I should read.
Female, aged 55-64, reads 5-6 books/month

Others are not interested in analyzing books or feel that reading is something personal that they do not want to share. Some said that they simply aren't "club" people or are shy and do not feel comfortable in group situations.



The simple pleasure of reading is ruined by over-examination.

Female, aged 55-64, reads 9+ books/month

It's between me and the book. I'm not interested in discussing issues.

Female, aged 65-74, reads 3-4 books/month

I like to savor the quiet time and draw my own conclusions.

Female, aged 75+, reads 9+ books/month

I am an introvert and it seems a bit awkward to have a group where I don't know anyone—especially if the other people are likely to know each other.

Female, aged 25-34, reads 5-6 books/month

The simple pleasure of reading is ruined by over-examination.

Female, aged 55-64, reads 9+ books/month

Some prefer to read at their own pace.



I can't fathom spending that much time on one book!

Male, aged 25-34, reads 9+ books/month

By the time the club met I would have moved on and read another 20+ books.

Female, aged 55-64, reads 9+ books/month

I don't like to be committed to reading a book by a particular date and don't want to be committed to finishing it.

Female, aged 45-54, reads 3-4 books/month

I can't fathom spending that much time on one book!

Male, aged 25-34, reads 9+ books/month

Interested in Book Clubs but Not in a Group

We asked those who said they were interested, or might be interested, in joining a book club the primary reason they were not currently in a group.

Primary reason for not being in a book club among those interested in being in one

I do not know of any book clubs to join **46%**

I don't have time/ I'm unable to **39%**

15% I do not want to be a part of the clubs I know about



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39% said they do not have the time or feel unable to take part.



When I retire (in 2 years) I am going to start or join a book club.

Female, aged 55-64, reads about 1 book/month

I have too many things going on right now, but I think I will enjoy it when I do join.

Female, aged 45-54, reads 3-4 books/month

In-person book clubs are awesome, but I can't keep up the pace because of work, children's activities etc.

Female, aged 45-54, reads 5-6 books/month

I find I usually cannot read a book on demand in a short time.

Female, aged 65-74, reads about 2 books/month

Transportation and child care are sometimes difficult to plan.

Female aged 35-44, reads 2 books/month

I have a visual handicap, plus transportation is a problem.

Female, aged 65-74, reads 5-6 books/month

I'd be interested but I'd be worried they'd all read too quickly, I'm a slow reader because of my dyslexia.

Female, aged 55-64, reads about 2 books/month

*When I retire (in 2 years)
I am going to start or
join a book club.*

Female, aged 55-64,
reads about 1 book/month

46% do not know of any clubs they could join.



There are no book clubs in my area that meet face to face. The online book clubs that I've looked into seem impersonal.

Female, aged 45-54, reads about 2 books/month

I have moved to a new city and haven't made any acquaintances with people in book clubs.

Female, aged 55-64, reads 3-4 books/month

The books clubs in my area are very popular and are full. If and when I'm aware of one I will join.

Female, aged 65-74, reads about 1 book/month

The only book clubs I know of are closed.

Female, aged 45-54, reads about 2 books/month

15% do not want to be a part of the clubs they know about.



In my town, they are very cliquey.

Female, aged 45-54, reads 3-4 books/month

It's hard to find clubs that suit my interests where I am, and I am not interested in joining more digital groups.

Male, aged 25-34, reads 3-4 books/month

Most book clubs seem to discuss literary fiction, which I do not read or enjoy.

Female, aged 25-34, reads 5-6 books/month

The book club at my local library doesn't read books I'm interested in.

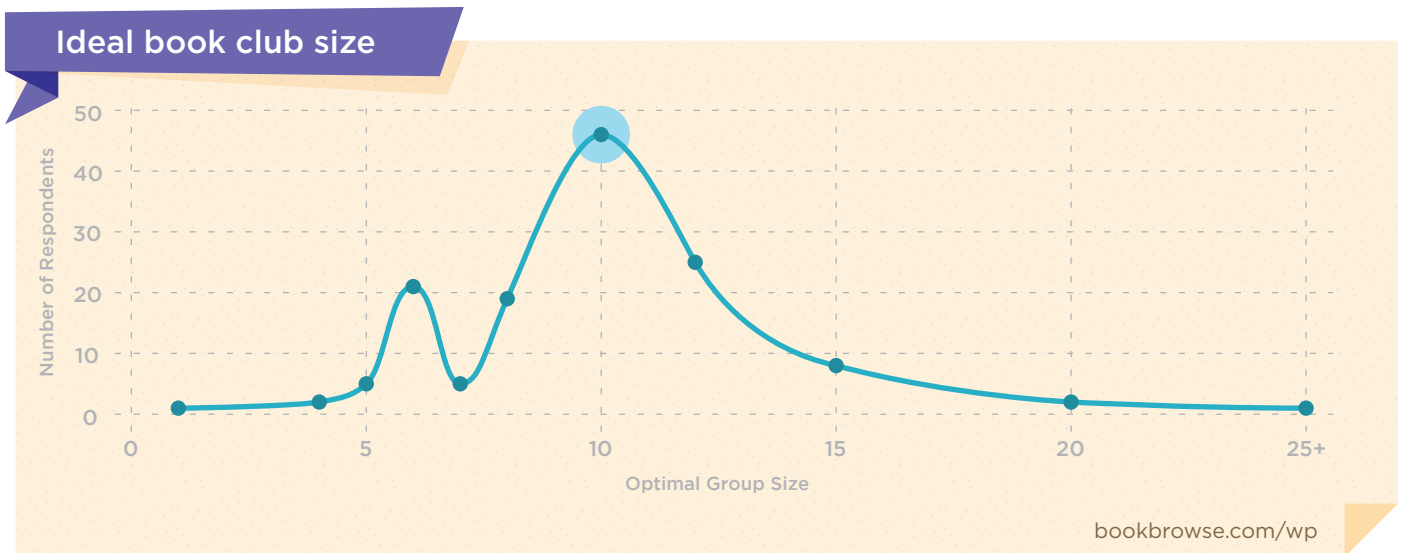
Female, aged 55-64, reads 7-8 books/month

What Would be Your Ideal Book Club?

We asked those who expressed an interest in being in a book club to describe their “ideal” book club in their own words.

Size

Most people would like to be in a group of 8-12 people.



Meeting Frequency

75% would like to meet monthly; 5% less than once a month. The remaining 20% would like to meet weekly or bi-weekly.

Meeting Location

50% would prefer to meet in a public location; 30% favor meeting in a private home; 20% would like to meet online. For those wanting to meet in a public place, a coffee shop was the most commonly mentioned location, followed by a library.

50% of those interested in being in a book club would like to meet in a public location such as a coffee shop or library.

Genres

There was no consensus regarding what types of books to discuss, with responses ranging from wishing to read broadly to an interest in specific genres, covering the gamut from literary fiction to sci-fi.

Social

The majority would like there to be a social element, and for food to be kept low key.

Gender & Age Diversity

Among respondents who commented on the age range and gender of their ideal book club, most would like their group to include both men and women from a range of age groups. All respondents who wished to be in a single-sex group were women.

We did not ask specifically about ethnic, religious, or sexual preference diversity, but among the few who stated a preference, all wished to be in a diverse group.

The Ideal Book Club

As we said earlier, there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all book club. To illustrate this, here are a sample of the hundreds of responses to the question: “If you could design a book club to perfectly fit you, what would it be like?”



I would design a book club to focus on morals, challenging philosophies and some politics to have a wide range of thoughtful discussions. I would meet in a cafe with preferably a small group of 4-6 of mixed age and sex.

Female, aged 25-34, reads about 2 books/month

We would read newer, diverse books. We would take turns hosting and drink wine & eat snacks while chatting about books!

Female, aged 25-34, reads 3-4 books/month

Narrative nonfiction book club that meets in a public space (bar or cafe) with 6-9 people around my age meeting monthly. All sexes and genders allowed, no discrimination, 85% book discussion 15% social discussion.

Male, aged 25-34, reads 4-5 books/month

My ideal book club would be online so anyone can comment at their convenience and we could also have set chat dates. Anyone would be able to join in no matter age or gender.

Female, aged 35-44, reads about 2 books/month

We would read fiction and meet somewhere other than my home. 8-10 members, monthly, have some social elements and be diverse.

Female, aged 45-54, reads 3-4 books/month

Mostly non-fiction; at home so you can tuck your feet under and get comfy with a cup of coffee and not have to worry about how loud or late you are. About a dozen people, any age 25 to 100. I want to say I'd like it to be mixed, but I'm so tired of "mansplaining" and how so many of them talk over women that unless it was an exceptional sort of man, I'd prefer it be all women.

Female, aged 55-65+, reads 5-6 books/month

Books with important themes or topics or interesting characters, some comfortable place with coffee and snacks, 5-20 people, monthly or every other month, mostly about the book but with social elements, range of ages, especially younger, all women or mixed is fine.

Female, aged 45-54, reads about 1 book/month



Multi-cultural books, meeting in a public place, 8-15 people, meet every other month, there would be a social element, mix of ages, mix of genders.

Male, aged 45-54, reads 3-4 books/month

I enjoy different genres, but would probably be interested in new fiction, history and political science. I would like to meet in person, at someone's home, with 5-7 people, mixed sex, over 40.

Female, aged 55-64, reads 3-4 books/month

Probably best sellers, but a curated list. About eight people. Definitely a social element with like-minded people. People close to my own age. Meet in various places, rotational.

Female, aged 55-64, reads 3-4 books/month

A mix of books—fiction and nonfiction, recent and older books. Maybe start in a public place but as it becomes established and we get to know each other, it might be more comfortable in homes. 6 to 8 members meeting monthly. Social element is good and a range of ages. I am imagining all women in my perfect club.

Female, aged 55-64, reads 3-4 books/month

I would like to have a small book club with a mixture of ages, races and sex; and discuss a mixed cross section of books. We can serve light snacks and adult beverage.

Female, aged 55-64, reads 2 books/month

I'd like my book club to have no more than 10 people of all ages that will meet once a fortnight in a public space. Socializing to be done after the books are discussed.

Male, aged 55-64, reads 3-4 books/month

Mixed age, variety of books, mixed backgrounds, once a week, mid-size group of people, 5 to 6 people.

Male, aged 55-64, reads 3-4 books/month

Mixed-sex, about 10 people, meet in a home, once a month, range of ages, all genres except romance and crappy mass-market bestsellers.

Male, aged 55-64, reads 7-8 books/month

A ladies-only club of like-minded people with serious discussion about the chosen book followed by some refreshment and social interaction.

Female, aged 65-74, reads about 2 books/month

I would prefer to meet in a public place such as a library or café, or online. I would like to read non-fiction (but not political works) and meet monthly. Limitations on age and sex could make it monotonous - though not too young people.

Female, aged 65-74, reads 9+ books/month

A wide variety including good fiction and nonfiction (travel, biographies, art, literary criticism, history). A dozen reasonably interesting, well-read men and women meeting once a month in a library or private home would be preferable. Age is not a factor.

Female, aged 75+, reads 5-6 books/month

Neutral, cozy, private place, with coffee/tea - no more than 8-10 members - once a month - other than "interest in reading" no membership-restrictions. See how it evolves.

Male, aged 75+, reads 9+ books/month

Both fiction and non-fiction. Meet in a public place. Membership of 5 minimum to 15. Meet once a month. Concentrate on book discussion. Mixed ages. Mixed sexes. We would discuss various books individuals have read, not on a single book.

Male, aged 75+, reads 7-8 books/month

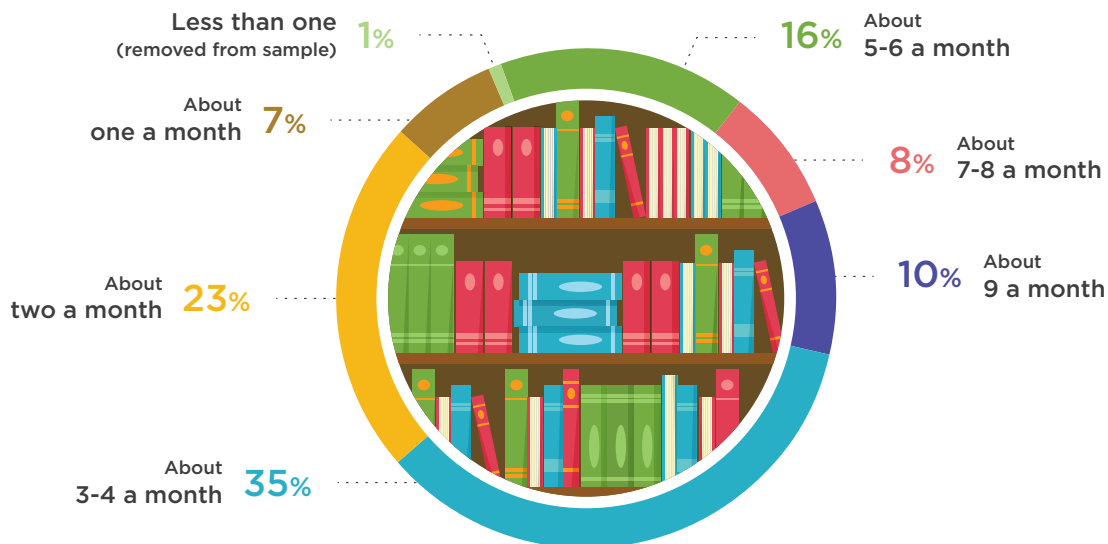
Appendix A: Demographics

The primary research for this report took place over a four-week period in October 2017. An ad inviting participation was placed on BookBrowse, visible to approximately 100,000 visitors/week. An invitation was also sent to approximately 30,000 newsletter subscribers. 4,240 people responded of which 3,705 completed the survey which was hosted on SurveyMonkey:

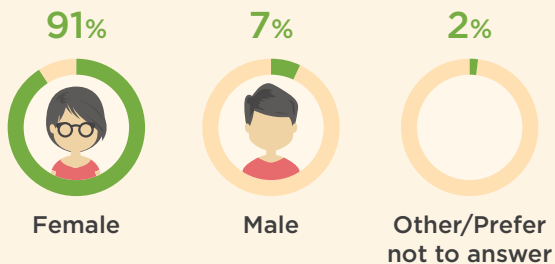
- 2,723 were currently in at least one book club.
- Of the 2,723, 1,101 had been in at least one prior book club. A further 480 had been in a book club in the past but weren't in one now.
- 502 read at least one book a month and had never been in a book club.

The demographics of this primary group are shown below. A follow-up survey was completed in April 2018 with similar methodology and demographics. The second survey probed some additional areas, including the role of facilitators, meeting duration, and discussion length. 1,672 current book club members responded, of which 1,434 completed the survey.

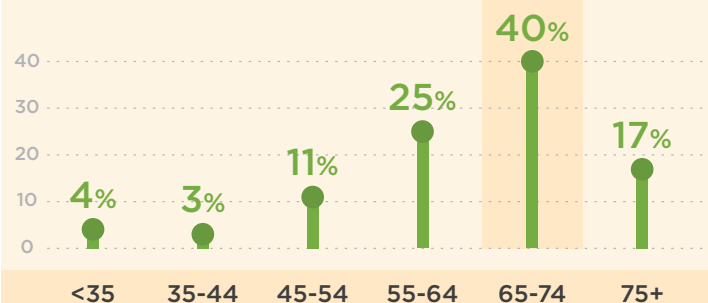
In an average month, how many books do you read?



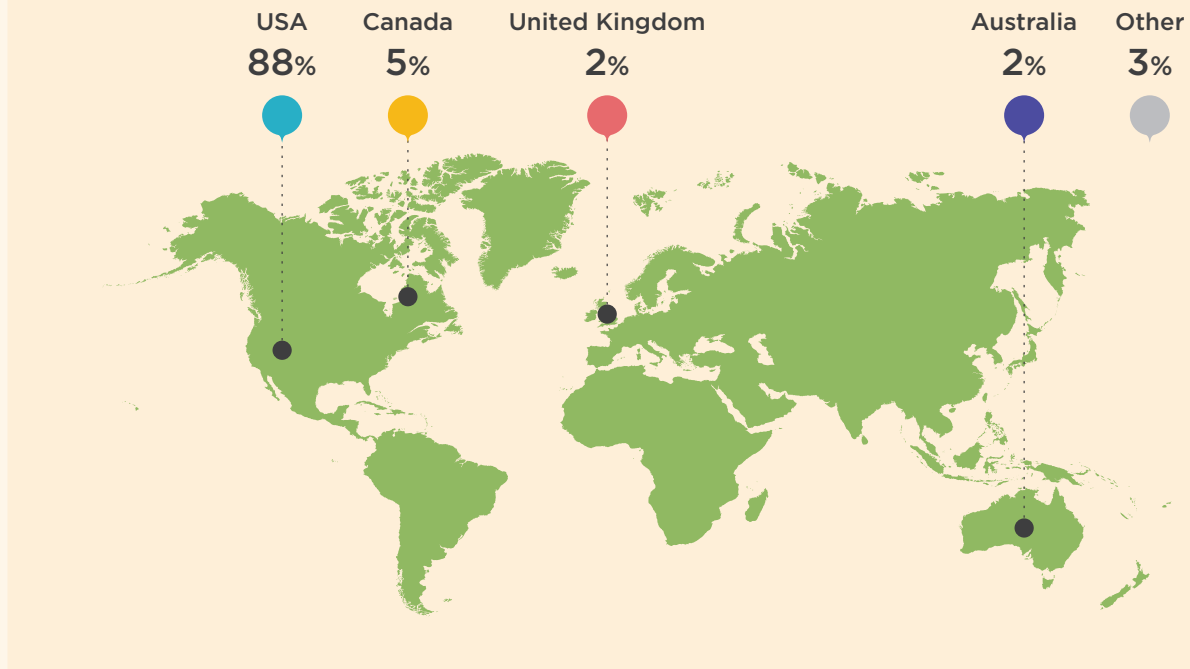
What gender are you?



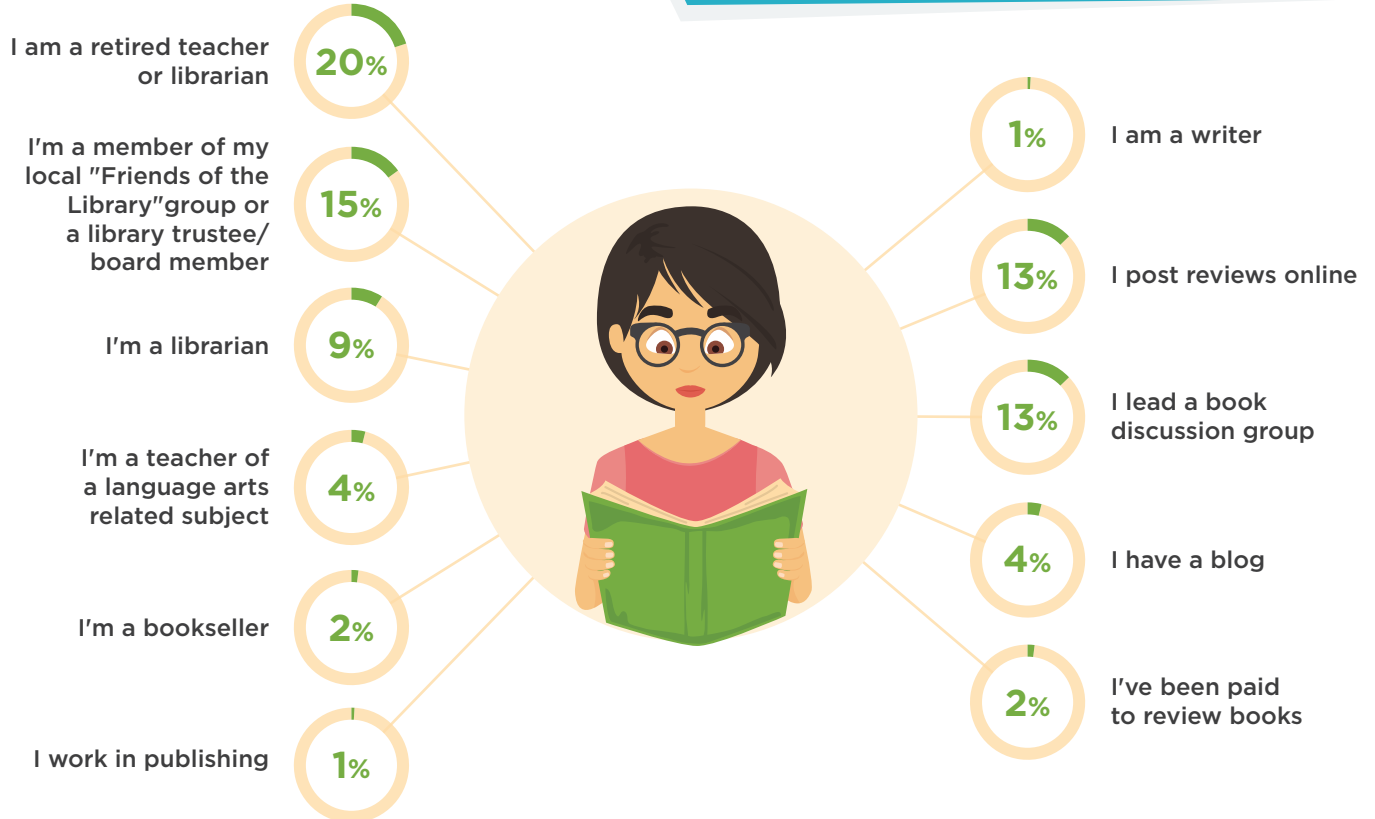
What age group are you in?



What country do you live in?



Do any of these descriptions fit you?



Appendix B: 2015 Report

Since 2004, BookBrowse has regularly researched book clubs. This report is a companion to our 2015 report, “Book Clubs in the USA,” which summarizes the findings from our first 10 years of research. The topics covered in this earlier report are shown below. It is available at bookbrowse.com/wp/wp2015

Introduction

- What is a Book Club?
- Who Should Read This
- A Note About Interpreting the Numbers
- About BookBrowse

1. By the Numbers

- The Rise of Book Clubs
- Age Matters
- Education as Indicator
- Income Less of a Factor
- What Men Want
- Multiple Memberships
- In-Person & Online Groups
- Book Club Size
- The Importance of Public Book Clubs

2. What Book Clubs Read

- Book Clubs Read Widely
- Reading Local Authors
- The Ideal Book Club Book

3. Book Club Mechanics

- Who Chooses the Books
- How Many Books Read
- Planning Ahead
- Formats Read
- The Role of Reading Guides

4. Reading, Buying & Borrowing Books

- Reading Books
- Buying Books
- Borrowing Books

5. Channels of Influence

- Book Discovery
- The Influence of Book Clubbers

6. Men and Book Clubs

- Experiences of Men in Book Clubs
- Perceptions of Men Not in Book Clubs

7. Advice and Resources

- Starting a Book Club
- Setting Expectations
- Leading Meetings
- Choosing Books
- Difficult Situations
- Reading Guides
- Inviting Authors

8. Insights from Book Clubs

- Library Book Clubs for Adults
- Library/School Book Clubs for Younger Readers
- Book Clubs that Meet in Bookstores
- All Men and Mixed-Gender Book Clubs



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