



# Book clubs build empathy

## Why set up a Book Club?

School book clubs help pupils develop empathy by exposing them to characters and experiences that may be very different from their own. Through discussion and shared reflection, pupils learn to understand multiple perspectives and appreciate how others might think and feel.

At the heart of any successful book club is **book talk**: structured but informal discussion where pupils share opinions, question ideas, and respond to what they've read. When pupils come together to talk about books, they engage in rich, purposeful talk that **strengthens speaking, listening, and thinking skills**. They also **discover new books, authors and illustrators** and **build connections with each other, increase confidence** and **start to understand their identity as a reader**.

Books offer a vehicle for discussion about **challenging or sensitive topics** (e.g. bullying or anxiety) or current affairs (e.g. climate change or immigration) where the issues can be discussed in a fictional context that offers a degree of distance and allows for a more open discussion.



## How to set up a Book Club

### Who is your Book Club for?

*Start by deciding who your book club is for. Are you trying to get everyone reading more or are you targeting a specific group?*

Book Clubs are very flexible. Some schools run them across whole year groups with every pupil taking part. They can also be for targeted pupils or just a small group.

We recommend running it for a **whole year group** – taking turns over the year, if necessary. A whole year approach makes it easier to use book clubs to **embed reading enjoyment** across the year group and forms a **structured enrichment activity** that everyone benefits from.

## When and where to run Book Club?

You can run your book club in form time, lunchtime, library classes and before or after school clubs. Form or registration time clubs work well if you are involving a whole year group and assign a regular weekly form time to book club.

Book Clubs are most successful in engaging more reluctant readers if they are held within the core school day. Before and after school clubs can work if the club is aimed at supporting enthusiastic readers to become more adventurous.

You need somewhere with **enough space for your group to sit around in a circle to support face to face discussion**. If you have multiple groups in one room, you need enough space to ensure everyone **can hear each other**. If you are going to use a space such as a hall or the library, just make sure that you have it booked and that you won't be moved too regularly when it is needed for other uses.



## How often and for how long?

Having a **regular slot** is important to make your Book Club part of school routine. Once a week is best, but if a Club that takes place in a fortnightly timetabled lesson that can work well too. A monthly Club can work if you have enthusiastic readers who prefer to read the whole book and then discuss it.

You need at least **20 minutes for discussion** for a book club to work. **30-40 minutes** works best, with pupils doing the reading between the meetings.

## Who is going to lead your Book Club?

**Peer-led Book Clubs** offer a great opportunity for pupils to take on leadership roles in organising and leading the group. They can be led either by older pupils or from pupils within the group. Being peer-led **makes it clear that Book Club is different from normal lessons**. It gives the Book Club leaders opportunities to volunteer and develop their leadership skills and is a better format to support informal book talk.

Where it is more appropriate for an adult to lead the group, we recommend that the group is still run much more **informally** than a normal lesson would be run to make it clear that Book Club is different from normal lessons.

Training materials, including a **lesson plan** and **video** plus **booklets for leaders** are available on the [Book Clubs in Schools website](#)

When thinking about who to recruit as older Book Club Leaders, **enthusiasm is the key**. It is not necessary for the Book Club Leaders to be prefects, A\* students, or doing A-level English.

Book Club leaders can come up with their own questions and activities – **the best questions focus on making connections with the characters** (What would you have done? What advice would you give them? What are they thinking or feeling?) rather than straight recall or comprehension. Or you can use the full question and activity guides for books created by Book Clubs in Schools and available for free on their website.

## Choosing the books

**Pupil choice is important.** Research consistently shows that **choice supports reading motivation** – we are all much more likely to read a book we have chosen. We therefore strongly recommend that you **build choice into your book club offer**.

To make choice manageable, putting forward a shortlist of around **six books** works well. You can ask your Book Club leaders to help with this. If you don't have copies of all of the books, present the key information that pupils may need to choose (book cover, blurb/short synopsis, information about the author and a brief extract of the opening pages).

A **wide range of books** works for book clubs – there is always something to talk about. Shape your shortlist around any known interests in the group and at an appropriate reading level so everyone can access the book. You can **vary the choice of books** each week or month to keep things fresh, including fiction, non-fiction, graphic novels, picture books or poetry.

## Evaluating the impact

Evaluating the impact of your Book Club can be done through **simple questionnaires**. **Focus on attitudes to reading rather than skills** (as you most likely measure this elsewhere and you **want to avoid it being another assessment**). Book Clubs in Schools has an online survey you can use and request your school's results (no personal data collected).

If running a Book Club sounds like a great idea, but a lot of work, there is **help** available to make it **easy, sustainable and research-informed**. Bringing 10 years of experience, Book Clubs in Schools offers **free resources** to all UK state schools during the National Year of Reading. They have a full guide to setting up a book club on their website: [bookclubsinschools.org](http://bookclubsinschools.org)

