

Tips for Studying a Book

in a Sunday school class, small group, or as a congregation



We've all been in that dreaded Sunday school discussion where you're supposed to be reading a book together but no one has done the assigned reading for the week. Everyone sits and stares at their hands. And yet we do want to read and talk together. Below are some ideas to get the most out of book studies in your congregation.

- **Appoint a good leader.** Don't ask someone to lead just because that person will say yes. Choose someone who is good at facilitating discussion—at getting people to speak up—and at making sure those who want to talk are given the opportunity. Choose someone who is good at welcoming others and who helps group members feel comfortable opening up with each other. Encourage this person to use simple language that doesn't sound “churchy.” Don't choose someone who doesn't know how to be quiet and listen to others. A good leader is key to your group's success.
- **Appoint a promoter.** This person's job is to promote the discussion to both the group and the wider congregation. This person will need the book's cover image, the author's photo and name, and should create bulletin or PowerPoint announcements on an ongoing basis to get people excited about the study and to remind them that it's coming up or still happening.
- **Appoint someone to send a midweek reminder.** If your group meets weekly, such as during Sunday school, ask someone who might not otherwise be the leader to send a midweek email to the group, reminding everyone of the discussion the last week and what to read for the following week. Congregational book groups easily get off track because participants miss a week and then aren't sure what to read for the next week.
- **Choose a book that the group will connect with.** Know the group, and choose a book that the group would enjoy. Make sure to preview it yourself first. Never choose a book “because we just need to choose one” or “because we need to study something.” Don't waste people's valuable time on just any book. If you choose one specifically with your group in mind, the group will notice. And talk with the group about why the chosen book is a good fit for them. “Because the pastor said so” is a sure reason to get no one to read the book.
- **Decide what will be read each week, and create a handout with the plan.** Handouts should include the name of the book and clearly list what is to be read for each week. Hand out copies on the first week and email it later as well. We all know it's easy to lose papers handed out at church.
- **Start a closed Facebook group.** If you think the group would be engaged online, start a closed Facebook group and invite everyone to post thoughts about the reading throughout the week. Someone might make a connection between the reading and something that happened on Monday. Allowing people to make comments throughout the week may help the group stay engaged.
- **Invite personal stories.** Personal stories are a great way to keep people engaged. Invite people ahead of time to share a personal story or example from their own lives that relates to that week's reading. For example, if a chapter is on baptism, invite someone to share a story of being baptized as a way to open the discussion. You could rotate responsibility for this in a smaller group or, for larger groups, assign a wide variety of people to share their stories. Let's face it: not everyone will do the weekly reading. So starting with personal stories not only provides a great lead-in to discussion but also makes those who haven't done the reading feel able to catch on.
- **Encourage advance reading.** We have all prepared the night before Sunday school, or even on the way to church. But encourage everyone to read through the chapter several days ahead of time, to give themselves time to reflect on the material and pick up stories and examples from their own lives. For leaders, this is especially important and will help you lead the discussion. Mark or highlight passages you want to refer to as you prepare, and jot down page numbers on notes for the discussion. If group comments lag, you can always read a quote from one of your highlighted items in the book and ask for reactions.
- **Create a study guide to guide the reading.** Some books have discussion questions in the book; others have online discussion guides; for others you'll need to create your own. Look online to find what's available. Provide these from the start, or email the questions each week to help guide people's reading. But a good leader should never feel bound by study questions or a study guide. Always make sure the discussion questions make sense for your group, and tailor the discussion to the group.
- **Find information on the author:** In one of the first gatherings, share information about the author—perhaps even email the author ahead of time. A group will likely be more invested in reading a book if they feel a connection to the author. Find out why the author wrote the book, and for whom. Perhaps the author's favorite snack is M&M's, so you could provide those as you introduce the book.