



## Guide for Facilitators

Welcome to the **Open Discussion Project**, from the National Coalition Against Censorship in partnership with the American Booksellers Association and the National Institute for Civil Discourse.

The **Open Discussion Project** promotes civil conversation at a time when Americans are deeply divided. We hold different values and beliefs, and have different faiths, needs, and priorities. And yet we must continue to engage with one another on intentionally political subjects. Our democracy depends on it.

Key to civil conversation is remembering what that means: a discussion with mutual respect. We all want our views to be heard and fully understood and considered. But only when we actively listen to another person and their ideas, and they really listen to us, can we avoid fruitful discussion becoming winner-take-all debate.

**Open Discussion Project** conversations begin with books. They are essential to creating the marketplace of ideas on which our democracy depends.

The purpose of the **Open Discussion Project** is to re-open true, vibrant, face-to-face discussion between people of opposing views. We want people to express their views freely. At the same time, we want to maintain a civil dialogue that avoids personal attacks and does not become a debate rather than a discussion.

Having such conversations is a fundamental way to understand one another—and ourselves. However, these don't happen by themselves. Facilitators provide structure and a process for robust and meaningful discussion.

**Your role as a facilitator is of crucial importance to the success of the Open Discussion Project.**

With your support, the **Open Discussion Project** facilitates face-to-face discussion about the issues that divide Americans. We will continue to disagree about many things, but our conversations will bring us out of our echo chambers, allow for forward movement and strengthen our democracy.



## Creating Space for Conversation

As the facilitator, it is important to work with the hosts (generally bookstore staff) to prepare the space in which the conversation will occur. It is important to set a certain tone and expectation—much of this is accomplished by subtle acts and gestures.

- Work with the bookseller to locate where the group will meet. Can the space be defined and separate? Sensitive political discussions might not be the best for a front-and-center space.
- Can seating be arranged in a way that is as inviting as possible for an intimate conversation? Try to reduce barriers between people, such as tables. Make people feel as comfortable as possible while also encouraging them to be in close proximity with one another. All you really need is chairs.
- Is it possible to provide refreshments to help create a hospitable and welcoming atmosphere?
- Are there other incentives to encourage participants to return?

## Notes on Facilitating

At its best, facilitation creates an environment for others to speak, listen and engage. The following pages provide a structure for the facilitated conversation, including language to help achieve a discussion rather than a debate. You'll notice before each step, there are instructions to the facilitator to READ certain statements or questions. There will also be a place at the end of the discussion for participants to WRITE DOWN final thoughts and reflections. These capitalized instructions serve as a guide for each step. You are welcome to deviate as appropriate, but this structure is designed to keep the discussion moving without getting lost or confused.

Finally, it is important to recognize that *facilitating* a discussion is not *leading* a discussion. While lecturing or interjecting your perspective might be familiar and most comfortable to you, you are encouraged *not* to do so. You are a neutral facilitator. Think of yourself as a guide along the path of conversation. This is important, especially as the chosen books are intended to encourage expression of diverse political opinions.

## Conversation Structure

- Framing the discussion and ground rules
- Introductions
- Questions for consideration
- Wrapping up and moving forward



## Facilitator Conversation Guide

### Framing the Discussion and Ground Rules (5 minutes)

**READ:** Today we're going to talk about our responses to [title of book]. We're excited to have you all here and expect that you will all have different, unique views. That's why we're here and we want to hear those views. But let's all remember: We are not just here to speak. We are here to listen and learn from one another, especially those whose views differ from ours.

**READ:** First, let's talk ground rules. Please:

1. No personal attacks. That's #1. Let's break that down.
2. Listen respectfully and thoughtfully;
3. It's OK to disagree! We are here to explore conflicting viewpoints.
4. What's said here, stays here;
5. Try not to dominate the discussion, give everyone opportunity to speak;
6. Try using "yes, and...", to build on other ideas, instead of negating those ideas with language like "yes, but..." It may seem small, but it's an important distinction.
7. Please respect time limits.

**READ:** What else should we add to our ground rules?

**TO DO:** Make note of these rules on a large flip chart or handout, if possible, so they're visible.

### Group Introductions (10 minutes)

**READ:** Before we talk about [title of book], let's introduce ourselves by saying our names, where we're from, and what brought us to this conversation. I'm ...

**TO DO:** Make sure not to rush through this process. Encourage people to speak slowly and intentionally, building space between each person speaking.

**READ:** We don't have to change our values and beliefs to act civilly and respectfully. But by listening to each other, we can enhance our understanding of different values. Let's get going!



Open  
Discussion  
Project

### Questions to Consider in Conversation (1 hour)

**NOTE: This is not a checklist. If conversation flows naturally, let it flow. These questions are intended as guides to spur discussion, to re-route it if it starts to take a turn that seems unproductive and to build context around the comments that people may make. Participants may respond to the books, or ideas, emotionally. These questions can help create conversational direction when responses are so personal as to exclude the participation of others.**

**People want to tell their stories. And it's important to let them, so that they can explain the genesis of their perspectives and opinions. But it's also important to gently, but firmly, keep the conversation on the issues raised by the book. That should help provide an organizing principle to steer away from the deeply personal when necessary.**

1. What is the central premise of the book? What are the problems or issues raised? Are they personal, religious, societal, cultural, global, political, economic, etc?
2. What does the author celebrate or criticize?
  - a. Does the author wish to preserve or reform the status quo of the book?
3. How does the culture, context, and/or setting differ from yours?
  - a. What surprised or intrigued you most? What were you challenged by?
    - i. Why?
  - b. Have you gained a new perspective?
    - i. In what ways?
    - ii. Why or why not?
4. Are the book's issues controversial? How so? And who is aligned on which sides of the issues? Where do you fall on the issue?
5. Did the author support his/her assertions? How did the author build his/her argument? Did you buy it?
  - a. Does he/she use personal observations? Facts? Statistics? Opinions? Historical documents? Scientific research? Quotations from authorities?
  - b. Is the evidence convincing? Is it relevant? Does it come from authoritative sources? Is the evidence speculative...how speculative?
  - c. What convinced you? What didn't? Why do you think that was your reaction?

6. What was your reaction to the author's language? Did you find it objective or subjective? Did it feel polemical? Why do you think that?
  - a. Does the language help or undercut the author's premise?
    - i. How?
7. What are the book's implications for the future?
  - a. Are there long- or short-term consequences to the issues raised in the book? If so, are they positive or negative? Affirming or frightening?
    - i. Why?
8. Does the author—or can you—offer solutions to the issues raised in the book? Who would implement those solutions?
  - a. Does the author make a call to action to readers—individually or collectively? Did it speak to you? Why or why not?
  - b. Is that call realistic? Idealistic? Achievable? Would readers be able to affect the desired outcome?
9. Did you learn something new? Did it change your perspective about a personal or societal issue?
  - a. Why or why not? How has your perspective changed?

### Wrapping Up the Discussion (15 minutes)

**READ:** Let's go around the group. Do you have any final thoughts or comments that you would like to share? Is there something you feel like you want to say before the discussion concludes?

**WRITE DOWN:** Invite participants to write a "take way note." This is a brief opportunity to silently reflect on the experience of reading the book and then participating in this discussion. Ask them to write down what they've learned from this experience. These can be shared anonymously with the facilitator and serving as an opportunity to gauge participant interest and feedback.

**READ:** Thank you for participating in this Open Discussion conversation! We appreciate that these conversations are not easy, so thank you for your commitment to discussion. Let's all remember that this is the beginning of the conversation. Let's all try to keep it going! We hope to see you next time [state date and time] when we'll be talking about [book title].