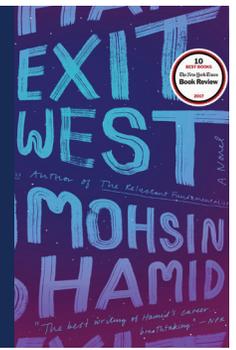


Exit West by Mohsin Hamid

BOOK DISCUSSION TIPS



TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL BOOK DISCUSSION

To establish

- **Meeting logistics:** Will you be meeting once or regularly? For how long? If regularly, how often?
- **Group dynamic:** Who will be involved in your discussion? Will one of you be leading? Will that rotate? How many of you are there? (Hint: 6–10 people is a good size to aim for!)
- **Expectations and behavior:** It is a good idea to take time, either before your meeting or at your first meeting, to establish not only the answers to the questions above, but to lay out a behavior agreement that everyone contributes to. Use this to figure out your group priorities and figure out what your readers need to feel respected. Such an agreement might include, “don’t be on your cell phone while we’re talking” or “do listen actively and respectfully when someone else is talking.”

Reading the book

There is no one way to read in preparation for a book discussion; some readers find that they will enjoy the discussion more if they have spent some time interrogating the text beforehand, and some readers find that this analytical style takes the joy out of reading. It may take several tries for each individual to determine whether a more active “reading with a pencil” style is conducive to a better book discussion experience. For many people, a sort of happy medium can be achieved, wherein while reading a book in preparation for a discussion they endeavor to maintain a certain mindfulness that is not required when reading to read alone.

This presence of mind can come in the form of noticing:

- When you find yourself asking questions
- When something about the book doesn’t seem quite right
- When something about the book resonates with you deeply
- The themes that the author is using
- How the author builds/breaks characters
- How the book is structured
- When you draw comparisons to other books you’ve read or to real-world conflicts/history

Discussion leaders do have a responsibility to put more time and analysis into reading the book, preparing contextual information, and preparing discussion questions.

Leading the meeting

It is wise to have someone who leads or moderates the discussion. At a minimum, this person should be in charge of communicating with the group before the meeting and time keeping during the meeting. If you are meeting more than once, you may have the same leader every time or rotate the role between group members.

The moderator's role is to:

- Keep the meeting on track – digressions are fine, but if the conversation strays too far off topic it is your job to bring it back.
- Introduce a new topic of discussion if the conversation seems to be flagging.
- Make sure that everyone feels that their voice has been heard and that no one person's voice is heard too much (and that includes your own!).
- Keep things civil – it would not be much of a discussion if everybody agreed, but it is important that people express their alternate opinions in constructive ways that open a point up for discussion rather than disrespectfully squashing the opposition.

For this list and more tips on leading book discussions, visit www.bookbrowse.com/bookclubs/advice/index.cfm/fuseaction/moderating_meetings

It is a good idea for the discussion leader to come prepared with background information about the book and author and questions and topics to inspire conversation. Many books that are popular book club reads have discussion guides that are available through the publisher and/or your local library or independent bookstore.

Writing your own discussion questions? Check out BookBrowse's tips for DIY discussion guides: www.bookbrowse.com/bookclubs/advice/index.cfm/fuseaction/diy_guides

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON *EXIT WEST* & MOHSIN HAMID

For background information on *Exit West* and its author, Mohsin Hamid, check out these resources, along with those listed throughout this resource guide.

Mohsin Hamid's website: www.mohsinhamid.com

British Literature Council biography and bibliography of Mohsin Hamid: www.literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/mohsin-hamid

2017 rave review for *Exit West* by Jia Tolentino for The New Yorker: www.newyorker.com/culture/jia-tolentino/a-novel-about-refugees-that-feels-instantly-canonical

Exit West page on the Penguin Random House website: www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/549017/exit-west-by-mohsin-hamid/

DISCUSSION EXERCISES FOR *EXIT WEST*

If your discussion group would prefer a more structured format, try some of these exercises from “A First Year and Common Reading Resource Guide to *Exit West*” by Chris Gilbert, available courtesy of Penguin Random House Academic Marketing. (Note: because this is an academic resource, the guide refers to “students,” but any group of readers looking for a more rigorous discussion can benefit from these exercises.)

1. Student Generated Questions (QAR)

When students are able to generate their own questions, they are typically more invested in the analytical process. Allow them to take ownership of inquiry and explore *Exit West* through this activity.

QAR refers to Question-Answer Relationships, and this activity works well in terms of encouraging both close analysis and personal connections.

These types of questions include:

- **Right there questions:** answers to these questions are found explicitly in the text. (How do Nadia and Saeed meet?)
- **Think and search questions:** answers lie in the text, but may only be found by examining several different sections and piecing them together. (What are some of the high and low points of Nadia and Saeed’s relationship?)
- **Author and you:** answers require personal interpretation based on textual evidence. (How do you think the narrative would have changed if Saeed’s mother had not been killed?)
- **On my own:** answers connect personal experience with themes of the text. (Have you ever had to leave your loved ones behind? If so, what was this experience like for you?)

Have students work independently or in pairs to generate several questions per category for a specific section of the book.

After these questions are generated, instructors have several options:

- Have students trade and answer each other’s questions in writing
- Have students pose their questions during small group discussions

2. Compare and Contrast Refugee Experiences

After reading *Exit West*, have students access the two sources below. Each one details the experiences of a number of refugees.

- “Refuge” from The Washington Post: www.washingtonpost.com/sf/syrian-refugees/story/refuge/
- “Humans of New York: Refugee Stories” by Brandon Stanton : www.humansofnewyork.com/tagged/refugee-stories

To begin, have students browse both sources. Next, ask students to select one narrative to compare and contrast with a specific refugee experience detailed in *Exit West* (students could focus on the collective or individual experiences of Nadia and Saeed, or they could examine a secondary character).

To facilitate this process, instruct students to use a Venn diagram. In one circle, students should note unique aspects of the refugee experience depicted in their chosen narrative; in the other circle, they should note unique aspects of their selected character's experience. In the middle section of the Venn diagram, students should record similarities. Have students pair up and share their analysis before transitioning to a whole class conversation.

3. Paideia Seminar

A Paideia Seminar is a student-centered, Socratic discussion. In it, the teacher serves as facilitator by providing students with open-ended questions, prompting students to respond, and linking student comments.

There are three main question categories: opening questions, core questions, and closing questions.

Opening questions identify main ideas from the text (What larger points does the book make about love and loss?). **Core questions** require students to analyze textual details (How do Nadia and Saeed's early experiences affect the trajectory of their relationship?). Finally, **closing questions** personalize textual concepts (What sort of lessons did you learn from the book? What makes it such a timely text?). Construct multiple questions like these and have students gather in a large circle.

Establish group goals for the discussion and have students create individual goals as well. Some group goals could include practicing active listening strategies, disagreeing constructively, and having each participant express at least two thoughts. Individual goals could include referring to specific passages, building on another's comment, and making consistent eye contact with others. Facilitate the conversation and concentrate on eliciting student responses. When the discussion concludes, have students self-assess and provide feedback on the seminar. Note that many of the discussion questions in this guide can be used during this activity.

For more information, consult www.paideia.org/about-paideia/socratic-seminar.

The following are useful resources for extending a study of *Exit West* and its related subjects:

- Discussion with Mohsin Hamid on The Guardian Books podcast: www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2017/mar/21/being-a-radical-optimist-with-mohsin-hamid-books-podcast-exit-west
- Interview with Mohsin Hamid on NPR's Fresh Air: www.npr.org/2017/03/08/519217991/from-refugees-to-politics-mohsin-hamid-writes-the-change-he-wants-to-see
- Brief interview with Mohsin Hamid on NPR's Morning Edition: www.npr.org/2017/03/06/518743041/mohsin-hamids-novel-exit-west-raises-immigration-issues

- Video of Mohsin Hamid reading from and discussing Exit West at the Politics & Prose Bookstore in Washington, D.C: www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVM7xEMJPK
- Information on a recent study by UNHCR (The UN Refugee Agency) and Accenture regarding refugees and the importance of mobile phones and internet access: www.unhcr.org/afr/news/latest/2016/9/57d7d4478/mobile-connectivity-lifeline-refugees-report-finds.html
- Information from the United Nations regarding refugees: www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/refugees
- Information on Human Rights Watch's Refugee Rights Program: hrw.org/topic/refugee-rights
- A selection of TED Talks on the topic of refugees: www.ted.com/topics/refugees
- "The Displaced," a virtual reality film from The New York Times: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ecavbpCuvkl&t=64s

To read Penguin Random House's "A First Year and Common Reading Resource Guide to Exit West" by Chris Gilbert in its entirety, visit www.penguin.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Exit-West-FYE-013018a-online.pdf

For more information on book discussions and/or starting a book club, check out **BookBrowse**, a book recommendation and discussion information resource that is available for free with your Menlo Park Library card. They have done extensive research on what makes a good book discussion, and their Book Club Advice pages include "everything you need to start and run a successful and fun book club, including the critical steps you need to take to get your new book club off to a successful start, how to choose books that will stimulate discussion, and trouble-shooting tips for dealing with difficult meeting situations!"

You can access BookBrowse through the Menlo Park Library website: www.menlopark.org/430/Online-resources

The screenshot shows the BookBrowse for Libraries website. At the top, there's a logo for BookBrowse for Libraries, a navigation menu, and a search bar. Below the search bar, there's a section for "This Week's Top Picks" with five book covers. To the right, there's a sidebar with a "Subscribe" button and links to "What's New", "Book Clubs", and "Read-Alikes".

Here are some of our favorite BookBrowse pages:

Ideas for how to set up your book discussion while practicing Social Distancing: www.bookbrowse.com/blogs/editor/index.cfm/2020/3/25/Safe-Book-Club--Ideas-in-the-Time-of-Social-Distancing

Further tips for facilitating a book discussion: www.bookbrowse.com/blogs/editor/index.cfm/2020/4/18/Tips-on-How-to-Be-An-Effective-Book-Club-Facilitator

Top tips for behavior – helpful when establishing your expectations: www.bookbrowse.com/blogs/editor/index.cfm/2013/6/17/Top-Ten-Guidelines-For-How-to-Behave-in-a-Book-Club

Note: BookBrowse is widely available, but there are certain features that are usually available only on-site at Menlo Park Library. However, during the period while readers are unable to access the Library building, they can sign in from anywhere with their library card.

Still looking for more guidance? San Francisco Public Library's website has a guide for book discussion groups called "How to Host a Book Club" that was developed by Jennifer Baker, Eric Riley, and the Washington Center for the Book at The Seattle Public Library. The SFPL page can be accessed here: www.sfpl.org/books-and-media/read/same-page-bannerless/same-page-how-write-autobiographical-novel/how-host-book

COMMUNITY READS @ HOME

***Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid**

Join us for a virtual conversation with Mohsin Hamid

Thursday, June 25, 7:30 p.m.
communityreads.org



**KEPLER'S
BOOKS**



Community Reads @ Home is presented by Kepler's and the Menlo Park Library