

SHARED INQUIRY™



HANDBOOK

for DISCUSSION LEADERS & PARTICIPANTS

The Great Books Foundation



SHARED INQUIRY HANDBOOK



The Great Books Foundation
A nonprofit educational organization

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What Is Shared Inquiry?

The educators Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer Adler established the Great Books Foundation in 1947, after many years of leading Great Books seminars at the University of Chicago. Their purpose was to expand opportunities for people to read and talk about the significant works of the Western intellectual tradition. To help explore, interpret, and evaluate the complex and challenging ideas in these works, the Great Books Foundation developed a discussion method known as Shared Inquiry.[™] Many of the Foundation's reading and discussion programs and publications for grades K–12, colleges, and adult book groups are based on this method.

This handbook provides practical information and advice about how Shared Inquiry works that will help Great Books groups as well as many other kinds of book groups have more rewarding discussions.

HOW SHARED INQUIRY WORKS

Shared Inquiry promotes an intellectually stimulating interpretative discussion of a work—a group exploration of meaning that leads to engaging and insightful conversation. It helps participants read actively, articulate probing questions about the ideas in a work, and listen and respond effectively to each other. And it is based on the conviction that participants can gain a deeper understanding of a text when they work together and are prompted by a leader's skilled questioning.

In Shared Inquiry discussion, each participant engages in an active search for the meaning of a work that everyone in the group has read. With the energy and encouragement of the group, participants articulate and develop their ideas, support their assertions with evidence from the text, and consider different plausible meanings. The discussion leader provides direction and guidance by asking questions about the text and about the comments of the participants. The participants in the group should look to the leader for questions, not answers.

Shared Inquiry discussion is most rewarding when the leader and participants come to it well prepared. This preparation often involves reading the text more than once and making notes of questions that occur while reading.

A Shared Inquiry discussion typically begins with the leader asking an opening interpretive question—that is, a question that has more than one plausible answer based on the work that is the focus of the discussion. This question should reflect genuine curiosity on the part of the leader about some aspect of the text. In addition to asking an opening question, the leader uses follow-up interpretive questions to guide the exploration of the work.

GUIDELINES FOR SHARED INQUIRY DISCUSSION

The following guidelines will help keep the conversation focused on the text and assure all participants a voice:

- 1. Read the selection carefully before participating in the discussion.**

This ensures that all participants are equally prepared to talk about the ideas in the work.

- 2. Discuss the ideas in the text and explore them fully.**

Reflecting on what the text means makes the exploration of both the text and related issues more rewarding.

- 3. Support interpretations of the text with evidence from the work.**

This keeps the group focused on the text and builds a strong foundation for introducing insights and related issues based on personal experience into the discussion.

- 4. Listen carefully to other participants and respond to them directly.**

Shared Inquiry is about the give and take of ideas, the willingness to listen to others and converse with them respectfully. Directing comments and questions to other group members, not always to the leader, will make the discussion livelier and more engaging.

- 5. Expect the leader to mainly ask questions rather than offer his or her own interpretations of the text.**

The leader of a Shared Inquiry discussion asks an opening question and follow-up questions about participants' comments. This encourages everyone to participate. Group members can enrich discussion by striking a balance between making assertions and questioning others, including the leader, about their ideas.

CHOOSING READINGS FOR DISCUSSION

The Great Books Foundation publishes anthologies of readings of enduring interest that lend themselves to rewarding group discussion. Over the years, these readings have included many of the significant works of the Western intellectual tradition and, in recent years, both classic and contemporary works from around the world. Readings are chosen because they address questions that people in all times and places have pondered, such as the nature of the good, the true, and the beautiful; the relationship of the individual to society; the meaning of justice; and the implications of mortality. The readings represent an ongoing conversation among authors across time and space that today's readers can join by discussing these works. They all share a complexity of meaning that provides rich possibilities for rewarding Shared Inquiry discussion.

To determine whether reading material is suitable for Shared Inquiry, use the discussion preparation guidelines outlined in this handbook. A reading that does not present complex issues and suggest interesting interpretive questions may not reward discussion, no matter how polished or appealing the writing. In fact, our affection for a reading is often not a reliable indicator of how successfully it can be discussed.

The Shared Inquiry method was developed primarily for the discussion of written works. However, experienced Shared Inquiry participants will find that the method can be used to discuss other kinds of works, including film and visual art. As with written texts, the most important criterion for choosing a work for discussion is its ability to suggest questions of interpretation that prompt more than one plausible answer.

Shared Inquiry Basics

The practice of Shared Inquiry is very similar for both leaders and participants: both look closely at the reading before the discussion and both drive the discussion forward through close, inquisitive attention to the text, its possible meanings, and its broader implications. Many discussion groups alternate their leaders from session to session and some designate co-leaders who help each other prepare questions for discussion. However a group arranges its leadership, an effective Shared Inquiry leader cultivates the same skills that an effective participant develops.

PREPARING FOR SHARED INQUIRY DISCUSSION

Read the Text Twice

To prepare for Shared Inquiry discussion, read the text at least twice, taking notes and forming questions as you read. Read a text first just to comprehend its overall scope.

During your second reading, concentrate on specific portions of the work that interest or puzzle you, analyzing and relating them to its argument or story as a whole. For a work of fiction, ask yourself why its characters act as they do, why events or conclusions follow one another, and what the author thinks or feels about them. For a work of nonfiction, sort out the terms and structure of the author's argument.

Practice Active Reading

In preparing for Shared Inquiry discussion, active reading is essential. Locate passages that sum up the author's argument, provide examples illustrating an idea, or eloquently express an idea that seems central to the text.

Jot down your insights, questions, and arguments with the author. The following are suggestions on how to note your responses to the reading:

- Mark passages you find especially interesting, noting the ideas and questions they suggest to you.
- Pencil in your own titles for sections, paragraphs, or pages so that you can follow the text more easily and refer to it more readily in discussion.
- Review the text, numbering the major points and identifying examples and arguments that support them, so that the margins are marked like an outline.
- Draw rough diagrams or charts to help you make sense of complex passages or the overall plot or structure of the text.
- Underline any term that the author seems to use in a special way. Trace the term throughout the text in order to understand what it means in different contexts.

QUESTIONS IN SHARED INQUIRY

Shared Inquiry is driven by questions and distinguishes between three basic kinds of questions—interpretive, factual, and evaluative.

Interpretive Questions

Interpretive questions are of central importance to Shared Inquiry discussion. An interpretive question is a question of meaning that has more than one plausible answer based on the text. Because multiple answers are possible, interpretive questions usually lead to a variety of opinions. The following questions are interpretive:

- *Why do the signers of the Declaration of Independence proclaim that the equality of all people is “self-evident” and their rights “inalienable”?*
- *Why do the colonists feel a need to proclaim to the world their reasons for declaring independence?*

The leader’s opening question should be interpretive because its focus on the text’s meaning will help participants begin a substantive discussion. The interpretive question is the leader’s primary technique for moving the discussion forward. A leader should encourage participants to bring their own interpretive questions to each discussion.

Factual Questions

Factual questions can also be helpful in Shared Inquiry discussion. Since the aim of Shared Inquiry is to understand a work’s meaning, the “facts of the matter” are those in the text. A question of fact, unlike an interpretive question, has only one correct answer. The following question is factual:

- *According to the text of the Declaration of Independence, who endows humans with “certain inalienable rights”?*

Factual questions can bring to light evidence in support of an interpretation and can clear up misunderstanding about the details of a reading. However, facts about the text's historical background and influence, scholars' remarks about the text, and details of the author's life should be used sparingly in the discussion, to keep it focused on the meaning of the text as much as possible.

Evaluative Questions

Evaluative questions ask us to judge whether what an author has written is true in light of our own experience, knowledge, and other works we may have read. They are typically broad and often range beyond the text being discussed. Evaluative questions help us apply to our own lives the insights gained through discussing great works. The following questions are evaluative:

- *Is the Declaration of Independence still relevant today, or is its interest mainly historical?*
- *Does there come a time when violent revolt is justified?*

Evaluative questions tend to be more rewarding if they are grounded in the work being considered and based on sound interpretations developed during the discussion. Although they can arise at any time, a leader will often set aside time at the end of the discussion to consider them once the interpretive problems of a text have been explored.

Forming Interpretive Questions

Use your own uncertainty. Some questions will occur to you spontaneously as you read; some may start out only half-formed—just a question mark scribbled in the margin. By the end of your second reading, you will have resolved some of the questions and realized that others are unlikely to work well for discussion. Your remaining questions are worth pursuing further.

Focus on the important ideas. Trust your own sense of what is significant. The phrases, sentences, and passages that you have underlined are likely to lead to issues that explore important problems of meaning.

In works of fiction, think about beginnings, endings, moments of crisis or decisive change, and passages in which characters reflect upon their situations. In nonfiction, focus on statements of the author's aim, definitions of terms, summaries, and conclusions. Authors may repeat the ideas that are most important to them by drawing parallels, developing contrasts or variations on a theme, and making restatements or summaries.

Explore complexities and contradictions. In fiction, a conflict of motives in a character or an intricate chain of events in the plot often calls for interpretation. The author's attitude toward a character or the reliability of the narrator may also raise interpretive questions.

In nonfiction, steps in the argument that you don't follow, examples that seem inappropriate, and passages in which the author presents an opposing view can all be the basis of

interpretive questions. Try first to resolve inconsistencies, but if you cannot, express the problem in a question.

Trust your subjective responses. Your immediate subjective response to a text can help you identify its important interpretive issues. Maybe you feel intensely sympathetic toward a character in a text, or you feel annoyed by a statement in an argument; trust such responses. Try to justify the opposing view. When you can see the other side of the issue clearly, you can more effectively pose an interpretive question. Challenge the author's argument—but keep an open mind and continue to focus on the text.

Characteristics of Good Interpretive Questions

Interpretive questions call for a careful assessment of what the author means in a work. To decide whether a question is interpretive, use this simple test: you should be able to write at least two different answers to it, supporting each answer with evidence from the text. Interpretive questions should also:

- Express genuine doubt and curiosity. Your honest doubt encourages others to take the questions seriously.
- Relate to the specific text under discussion. If the question can be asked, with only minor changes, about other written works, then it is probably too general. For example, the question, “*Why does Antigone have a sad ending?*” is not sufficiently specific. But, “*Is Antigone doomed because she is the daughter of Oedipus, or does she determine her own fate?*” is more specific and therefore easier to address.

- Use simple and direct language. If other participants don't seem to understand your question, either rephrase it or retrace the thinking that led you to it.

PARTICIPATING IN SHARED INQUIRY DISCUSSION

The following suggestions will help both leaders and participants develop practices that make Shared Inquiry more rewarding.

Concentrate on the text. Refer frequently to the text to support statements with quotations and paraphrases. The discussion will be more rewarding if it is based on specific material rather than vague impressions of what is in the reading. Avoid referring to other books or articles that not everyone has read.

Address the question. A leader's questions are intended to focus on important issues in the work. Speak to the issues the leader is currently addressing. If different issues are intriguing, raise them separately.

Speak up. State opinions and be ready to explain them. Ask others to clarify their ideas when necessary.

Disagree respectfully. Disagreement can bring out the contradictions in an opinion or reveal the complex nature of a question. The leader should ask that participants support their different interpretations with evidence from the text.

Listen carefully. Listen to what others say and pursue the implications of others' thoughts. Participants will learn more

when their ideas are challenged, supported, and modified by others in the group.

Revisit the text. Examine an important or difficult passage line by line, or even word by word, paraphrasing the text and noticing how it relates to the rest of the work.

LEADING SHARED INQUIRY DISCUSSION

The best foundation for becoming a skillful leader is to participate regularly in Shared Inquiry discussions. The Shared Inquiry leader prepares interpretive questions to initiate the discussion, then moderates its course by challenging responses, following responses with more questions, asking for evidence from the text, and inviting further response. If participants digress from the main points, the leader redirects the group's attention with questions. A leader must also be able to recognize when no new ideas are being added to the conversation. At that point, the leader should pose a new interpretive question.

A leader should not pose questions that are really statements in disguise and should resist the temptation to guide the group on a fixed course through the text. Also, a leader should refrain from readily offering personal opinions.

Asking Questions During the Discussion

One of the central responsibilities of the leader is to think of stimulating questions during the discussion, since it is these questions that drive forward the inquiry. The leader comes to the discussion with some interpretive questions prepared

but must also remain open to other questions that emerge as the discussion progresses. During discussion the leader—and participants—can ask a variety of spontaneous questions about the ideas that emerge. Such questions can:

Clarify a comment. Ask the person to explain further or to rephrase a comment that is unclear or confusing.

Get textual support for an opinion. Asking participants to explain where in the text their opinions are supported can help them reflect more closely on their own opinions.

Solicit additional opinions. Encouraging additional opinions can help participants think about the relationships between ideas and can also help draw quieter participants into contributing. For example: *Do you agree or disagree with that? Do you have another idea about that part of the text?*

Test an idea. Ask participants to consider the implications of their opinions in light of specific parts of the text. Bear in mind that such questions are not intended to prove that any speaker is “wrong.” For example: *How would you explain this part of the text, given your answer?*

Readings with Discussion Questions

GETTYSBURG ADDRESS

Abraham Lincoln

November 19, 1863

Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Opening Interpretive Question

- What is “the unfinished work” to which Lincoln says his audience should be dedicated?

Follow-Up Interpretive Questions

- Why does Lincoln begin his speech by reminding his listeners of the intentions of the founders of the United States and the length of time that has elapsed since the nation’s beginning?
- Why does Lincoln say that the war will not only test whether the United States can endure but also whether “any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure”?
- What does Lincoln mean when he expresses the hope that the nation will have “a new birth of freedom”?

Evaluative Questions

- Did the Union victory in the Civil War prove Lincoln’s claim that “government of the people, by the people, for the people” can endure?
- How should those who have died fighting in a civil war be honored and commemorated?
- How can civic values and principles best be passed on from one generation to another in a democratic society?

THE VETERAN

Stephen Crane

Out of the low window could be seen three hickory trees placed irregularly in a meadow that was resplendent in springtime green. Farther away, the old, dismal belfry of the village church loomed over the pines. A horse meditating in the shade of one of the hickories lazily swished his tail. The warm sunshine made an oblong of vivid yellow on the floor of the grocery.

“Could you see the whites of their eyes?” said the man who was seated on a soapbox.

“Nothing of the kind,” replied old Henry warmly. “Just a lot of flitting figures, and I let go at where they ’peared to be the thickest. Bang!”

“Mr. Fleming,” said the grocer—his deferential voice expressed somehow the old man’s exact social weight—“Mr. Fleming, you never was frightened much in them battles, was you?”

The veteran looked down and grinned. Observing his manner, the entire group tittered. “Well, I guess I was,” he answered finally. “Pretty well scared, sometimes. Why, in my first battle I thought the sky was falling down. I thought the world was coming to an end. You bet I was scared.”

Everyone laughed. Perhaps it seemed strange and rather wonderful to them that a man should admit the thing, and in a tone of their laughter there was probably more admiration than if old Fleming had declared that he had always been a lion. Moreover, they knew that he had ranked as an orderly sergeant, and so their opinion of his heroism was fixed. None, to be sure, knew how an orderly sergeant ranked, but then it was understood to be somewhere just shy of a major general’s stars. So, when old Henry admitted that he had been frightened, there was a laugh.

“The trouble was,” said the old man, “I thought they were all shooting at me. Yes, sir, I thought every man in the other army was aiming at me in particular, and only me. And it seemed so darned unreasonable, you know. I wanted to explain to ’em what an almighty good fellow I was, because I thought then they might quit all trying to hit me. But I couldn’t explain, and they kept on being unreasonable—blim!—blam!—bang! So I run!”

Two little triangles of wrinkles appeared at the corners of his eyes. Evidently he appreciated some comedy in this recital. Down near his feet, however, little Jim, his grandson, was visibly horror-stricken. His hands were clasped nervously, and his eyes were wide with astonishment at this terrible scandal, his most magnificent grandfather telling such a thing.

“That was at Chancellorsville. Of course, afterward I got kind of used to it. A man does. Lots of men, though, seem to feel all right from the start. I did, as soon as I ‘got on to it,’ as they say now; but at first I was pretty well flustered. Now, there was young Jim Conklin, old Si Conklin’s son—that used to keep the tannery—you none of you recollect him—well, he went into it from the start just as if he was born to it. But with me it was different. I had to get used to it.”

When little Jim walked with his grandfather he was in the habit of skipping along on the stone pavement in front of the three stores and the hotel of the town and betting that he could avoid the cracks. But upon this day he walked soberly, with his hand gripping two of his grandfather’s fingers. Sometimes he kicked abstractedly at dandelions that curved over the walk. Anyone could see that he was much troubled.

“There’s Sickles’s colt over in the medder, Jimmie,” said the old man. “Don’t you wish you owned one like him?”

“Um,” said the boy, with a strange lack of interest. He continued his reflections. Then finally he ventured, “Grandpa—

now—was that true what you was telling those men?”

“What?” asked the grandfather. “What was I telling them?”

“Oh, about your running.”

“Why, yes, that was true enough, Jimmie. It was my first fight, and there was an awful lot of noise, you know.”

Jimmie seemed dazed that this idol, of its own will, should so totter. His stout boyish idealism was injured.

Presently the grandfather said: “Sickles’s colt is going for a drink. Don’t you wish you owned Sickles’s colt, Jimmie?”

The boy merely answered, “He ain’t as nice as our’n.” He lapsed then into another moody silence.

One of the hired men, a Swede, desired to drive to the county seat for purposes of his own. The old man loaned a horse and an unwashed buggy. It appeared later that one of the purposes of the Swede was to get drunk.

After quelling some boisterous frolic of the farm hands and boys in the garret, the old man had that night gone peacefully to sleep, when he was aroused by clamoring at the kitchen door. He grabbed his trousers, and they waved out behind as he dashed forward. He could hear the voice of the Swede, screaming and blubbing. He pushed the wooden button, and, as the door flew open, the Swede, a maniac, stumbled inward, chattering, weeping, still screaming: “De barn fire! Fire! Fire! De barn fire! Fire! Fire! Fire!”

There was a swift and indescribable change in the old man. His face ceased instantly to be a face; it became a mask, a gray thing, with horror written about the mouth and eyes. He hoarsely shouted at the foot of the little rickety stairs, and immediately, it seemed, there came down an avalanche of men. No one knew that during this time the old lady had been standing in her night clothes at the bedroom door, yelling: “What’s th’ matter? What’s th’ matter? What’s th’ matter?”

When they dashed toward the barn it presented to their eyes its usual appearance, solemn, rather mystic in the black night. The Swede's lantern was overturned at a point some yards in front of the barn doors. It contained a wild little conflagration of its own, and even in their excitement some of those who ran felt a gentle secondary vibration of the thrifty part of their minds at sight of this overturned lantern. Under ordinary circumstances it would have been a calamity.

But the cattle in the barn were trampling, trampling, trampling, and above this noise could be heard a humming like the song of innumerable bees. The old man hurled aside the great doors, and a yellow flame leaped out at one corner and sped and wavered frantically up the old gray wall. It was glad, terrible, this single flame, like the wild banner of deadly and triumphant foes.

The motley crowd from the garret had come with all the pails of the farm. They flung themselves upon the well. It was a leisurely old machine, long dwelling in indolence. It was in the habit of giving out water with a sort of reluctance. The men stormed at it, cursed it; but it continued to allow the buckets to be filled only after the wheezy windlass had howled many protests at the mad-handed men.

With his opened knife in his hand old Fleming himself had gone headlong into the barn, where the stifling smoke swirled with the air currents, and where could be heard in its fullness the terrible chorus of the flames, laden with tones of hate and death, a hymn of wonderful ferocity.

He flung a blanket over an old mare's head, cut the halter close to the manger, led the mare to the door, and fairly kicked her out to safety. He returned with the same blanket, and rescued one of the work horses. He took five horses out, and then came out himself, with his clothes bravely on fire. He had no whiskers, and very little hair on his head. They soused

five pailfuls of water on him. His eldest son made a clean miss with the sixth pailful, because the old man had turned and was running down the decline and around to the basement of the barn, where were the stanchions of the cows. Someone noticed at the time that he ran very lamely, as if one of the frenzied horses had smashed his hip.

The cows, with their heads held in the heavy stanchions, had thrown themselves, strangled themselves, tangled themselves: done everything which the ingenuity of their exuberant fear could suggest to them.

Here, as at the well, the same thing happened to every man save one. Their hands went mad. They became incapable of everything save the power to rush into dangerous situations.

The old man released the cow nearest the door, and she, blind drunk with terror, crashed into the Swede. The Swede had been running to and fro babbling. He carried an empty milk pail, to which he clung with an unconscious, fierce enthusiasm. He shrieked like one lost as he went under the cow's hoofs, and the milk pail, rolling across the floor, made a flash of silver in the gloom.

Old Fleming took a fork, beat off the cow, and dragged the paralyzed Swede to the open air. When they had rescued all the cows save one, which had so fastened herself that she could not be moved an inch, they returned to the front of the barn and stood sadly, breathing like men who had reached the final point of human effort.

Many people had come running. Someone had even gone to the church, and now, from the distance, rang the tocsin note of the old bell. There was a long flare of crimson on the sky, which made remote people speculate as to the whereabouts of the fire.

The long flames sang their drumming chorus in voices of the heaviest bass. The wind whirled clouds of smoke and cinders into the faces of the spectators. The form of the old barn

was outlined in black amid these masses of orange-hued flames.

And then came this Swede again, crying as one who is the weapon of the sinister fates. "De colts! De colts! You have forgot de colts!"

Old Fleming staggered. It was true; they had forgotten the two colts in the box stalls at the back of the barn. "Boys," he said, "I must try to get 'em out." They clamored about him then, afraid for him, afraid of what they should see. Then they talked wildly each to each. "Why, it's sure death!" "He would never get out!" "Why, it's suicide for a man to go in there!" Old Fleming stared absentmindedly at the open doors. "The poor little things!" he said. He rushed into the barn.

When the roof fell in, a great funnel of smoke swarmed toward the sky, as if the old man's mighty spirit, released from its body—a little bottle—had swelled like the genie of fable. The smoke was tinted rose-hue from the flames, and perhaps the unutterable midnights of the universe will have no power to daunt the color of this soul.

Opening Interpretive Question

- Why did Fleming run from the battle but not from the fire in the barn?

Follow-Up Interpretive Questions

- Why do the men who are listening laugh at Fleming's story of running from his first battle?
- Why are the men filling the buckets described as “mad-handed”? (p. 20)
- When he arrives at the burning barn, why does Fleming go into it “headlong” and succeed in rescuing the horses? (p. 20) Why aren't the other men capable of doing much to help?
- Why does Fleming go back into the barn to save the colts, even though the men tell him it is “sure death” to do so? (p. 22)

Evaluative Questions

- Was Fleming's behavior during his first battle cowardly?
- Why do people risk their lives even when the risk seems to outweigh the benefit?

Resources for Shared Inquiry

Whether your book group is a Great Books discussion group committed to Shared Inquiry or another kind of book group interested in having more rewarding discussions, the Great Books Foundation has numerous resources for you. The Foundation publishes anthologies of works chosen for their ability to support stimulating Shared Inquiry discussions and provides Shared Inquiry workshops—some online—to help you develop your skills as a discussion leader. In addition, Great Books Discussions, the division of the Great Books Foundation dedicated to adult reading and discussion programs, promotes special initiatives and maintains contact information for Great Books groups and regional Great Books councils and their activities across the country. Please visit **greatbooks.org** for more information.