

Say It Out Loud!

Read-Aloud Book Club

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Traditional book clubs, where participants read a book on their own and then come together to discuss, have never really worked for my kids, teens, and families—or for me for that matter. It has always felt a little too “homework-ish.” You know what I mean: “Here’s a book. Go read and absorb, and then we’ll discuss with some prescribed questions.” This is definitely not my definition of fun, and I think book clubs need to be fun to be successful.

Thankfully, at the beginning of my career (thank you to the old Alliance Library system) I was introduced to a more novel way to conduct book clubs. I have been using this basic format for almost eighteen years with much success. It encourages reading for enjoyment. It inspires community, camaraderie, and excitement. It creates a shared experience, revels in fandoms and series, makes reading a true event.

So, what do we do that’s so novel? We read the book out loud together. *Is your mind blown?* Mine was when I first was introduced to it. *Read chapter books out loud? Are you crazy?* Who has time to do that, right?

But it makes a lot of sense. Just about everyone loves to be read to. Babies. Little kids. Big kids. Despite some protests, I firmly believe that teens, too, secretly love to be read to. And yes, even adults. In fact, I have found that families, especially, love to be read to *together*.

Because of the length of most of the books, our book clubs last multiple weeks, with one book club a week lasting forty-five minutes to an hour. The length of the entire book club depends upon a lot of factors. Ultimately, I let the book be my guide.

Sometimes the program goes for four weeks, sometimes six or eight. The longest I’ve hosted is sixteen weeks (for the Harry Potter series). Six to eight weeks is ideal, allowing time for everyone to bond as a group, to invest in the characters, and to experience a sense of momentum, a sort of building to a climactic point of the book as well as of the club.

Room setup is extremely important. It should be comfortable and relaxed. I like to have a large open area with a rug on the floor. Kids and adults can just flop down on the floor and sit or lay or recline where they like. Kids can bring in pillows or blankets to snuggle up with. I usually have a line of chairs at the back for adults who can’t get down on the floor. But everyone is strongly encouraged to be on the floor. I think it helps set the mood.

I also turn the lights down and project the book up on the big screen. In the back of the room, we position tables and chairs for our craft or activity that we will do after our reading. I like to keep the viewing/reading area separate from the craft/activity area if possible. Kids are curious and they’ll want to start on the big project before the reading.



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I always have fun easy “busy work” for the kids to pick up immediately when they come into the room. These items—such as coloring sheets, word finds, crosswords—relate to the book and keep little hands busy during the reading. The kids do a great job absorbing what’s being read to them, but because they are seriously trying to multitask by working on busy work, watching the book on the screen, and listening to the reader, they often refrain from talking or causing any disruptions.

After everyone arrives and gets settled, I introduce (or re-introduce) myself and the basics of book club, we recap any of the readings that we have previously had, and we might chat about a character or event in the story. Sometimes I present a very short video, like a “How to draw” by an illustrator or an author interview.

Then we read ten to fifteen minutes. I project the book, using the ELMO or Wolf Vision, on the big screen and read the book out loud at the same time. I like to use a microphone so I don’t need to raise my voice too much. I have had 30 to 120 people per program, and regular movements can create quite a bit of background noise. After we’re done reading, we break out into activities, games, and/or crafts.

Book choice is probably the most important factor for fun, good attendance, and overall success. Your book should definitely be a great read aloud and geared towards your target age group (my clubs are usually geared for K–4). Your book should comfortably fit into chunks of fifteen minutes or less into the number of weeks you intend the book club to last. The longer the book the more weeks you’ll need to read it. Sometimes I’ll read two books in a series or even more to reach the number of weeks I’d like the program to run.

As far as book selection goes, a popular book is always a good choice. We held our Captain Underpants book club, for example, right before the movie came out. I’ve hosted read aloud book clubs on Harry Potter, Chet Gecko, Geronimo Stilton, Magic Tree House, *How To Train Your Dragon*, *The Strange Case of the Origami Yoda*, Star Wars Academy, Lunch Lady, Squish, Martha Speaks, Captain Underpants, HiLo, Narwhal and Jelly, and Stick Dog/Stick Cat. The kids dove wholeheartedly



Young Katie pretends to “fly” as part of the Captain Underpants book club.

into those clubs, and parents and kids couldn’t help but have an amazing time.

Beyond the choice of book, the key to book club success is planning. Plan the entire event before you start the club, and have each week planned out.

Besides your book and its main cast of characters, the book club will revolve around the reader, and I recommend having one reader for the entire program for consistency. It’s ideal for the reader to be high energy and be able to do different voices (if possible). Be sure to select a back-up reader as well.

You could even ask a community member. For our Geronimo Stilton book club, a local dairy farmer came and explained how cheese was made and brought freshly made cheese curds as a treat. For our Chet Gecko book club, a local police K-9 unit came, the kids were fingerprinted, and we set up a faux crime scene for the kids to investigate and solve.

Book club is a really flexible, adaptable, and low cost program; it can be run with essentially no budget and craft supplies on hand, and if I needed additional funds, our Friends group was able to help. And it will fit in almost any space at any time available.

Each book club has its own personality with its own joys and quirks. And each book club brings a special literary excitement from kids and families that librarians and teachers absolutely live for. &