

# Shared Inquiry™ Handbook



The Great Books Foundation

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Chicago, Illinois  
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ISBN 978-1-880323-72-4

First Printing  
9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Published and distributed by

**The Great Books Foundation**  
*A nonprofit educational organization*  
35 East Wacker Drive, Suite 400  
Chicago, IL 60601  
[www.greatbooks.org](http://www.greatbooks.org)

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# **Shared Inquiry and the Great Books Foundation**

Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer Adler established the Great Books Foundation in 1947 after many years of leading Great Books discussion seminars at the University of Chicago. Their purpose was to expand the opportunities for people in other settings to read and talk about many of the most significant books in the Western intellectual tradition.

To help discussion participants explore, interpret, and evaluate the sometimes complex and challenging ideas in these works, Hutchins and Adler developed a method of seminar discussion that has come to be known as Shared Inquiry™. All of the Foundation's reading and discussion programs for grades K–12, colleges, institutes for continuing education, and book groups use this method. Through its anthologies and training programs, the Foundation promotes the reading of classic and contemporary works from diverse disciplines. Although this handbook cannot replicate the experience of a training workshop conducted by Great Books Foundation staff or cover the full range of Shared Inquiry activities and topics, it does provide an overview of Shared Inquiry practice. As such, it will be particularly helpful to those who do not have the opportunity to attend a workshop.

## **Principles of Shared Inquiry**

Shared Inquiry discussion is an intellectually rigorous group

activity that focuses on the interpretation of meaning in written texts. It is Socratic in style and firmly text-based. It makes use of questioning techniques that help participants read actively, pose productive questions of their own about the ideas in a text, and listen and respond effectively to others.

The Shared Inquiry method does not propose a formula for finding truth, and its purpose is not to determine the conclusions that an individual or discussion group might reach. 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 the process, participants enjoy the benefit of diverse points of view, focused exploration, and common discovery.

Reading a challenging piece of writing and thinking about its ideas cannot be a passive process. Each participant is engaged in an active search for the meaning of the selection at hand. With the energy and encouragement of the group, participants articulate ideas, support assertions with evidence from the text, and grapple with different possibilities of meaning. Often, this results in individuals learning how to build on one another's insights and perspectives.

A discussion typically begins with the leader asking a basic *interpretive question*—that is to say, the sort of question likely to generate more than one answer based on the passage that everyone has read. Usually this question reflects some unresolved problem of meaning in the leader's mind; it is not rhetorical but genuine. The leader's role is to carefully question the participants, focusing on their ideas and generally not offering or suggesting a

personal opinion. As participants respond, the leader follows up by asking how their comments relate to the initial question, to other ideas put forward by the group, and to the reading.

It is important to state that Shared Inquiry is not a freewheeling exchange of opinions or testimonials; discussion and interpretation must remain grounded in the reading. In this way, participants can develop their initial thoughts and reactions, clarify their ideas, and build a network of interpretive possibilities.

Both the leader and participants need to prepare in order to make the process work. It is strongly recommended that prior to gathering, participants read the selection at least twice and take notes on their reading. The leader prepares in much the same way, locating important problems of meaning in the piece and refining the interpretive questions to be asked.

The section of this booklet headed *How Shared Inquiry Works* (page 7) will help everyone in your group prepare for, lead, and take part in Shared Inquiry discussions.

## **Guidelines for Shared Inquiry Discussion**

In Shared Inquiry, participants help one another search for answers to questions raised by a work that they have all read. The discussion leader provides direction and guidance by asking questions that reflect genuine doubt about the text. Rather than regard the leader as an expert, the group should look to the leader for questions, not answers.

Participants come to the discussion with their own unique views about the selection, then build on this understanding by

sharing ideas. The leader focuses discussion on an interpretive question about the text, a question that has more than one possible answer based on evidence from the piece. As participants respond to the question, the leader asks follow-up questions to help participants clarify and support their ideas and consider proposed interpretations.

These are the basic guidelines for Shared Inquiry discussion:

- 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. Support your ideas with evidence from the text.** This keeps the discussion focused on understanding the selection and enables the group to weigh textual support for different answers.
- 3. Discuss the ideas in the selection and try to understand them fully before exploring issues that go beyond the selection.** Reflecting on the ideas in the text and the evidence to support them makes the exploration of related issues more productive.
- 4. Listen to other participants and respond to them directly.** Directing your comments and questions to other group members, not always the leader, will make the discussion livelier and more dynamic.
- 5. Expect the leader to only ask questions.** Effective leaders help participants develop their own ideas, with everyone gaining a new understanding in the process. Participants should look to leaders for questions, not answers.

## **Criteria for Great Books Selections**

Since its inception, the Great Books Foundation has published anthologies that present readers with works of lasting value and that lend themselves to rewarding group discussions.

The writings included in Great Books Foundation anthologies range across many fields of knowledge and include both classic and contemporary works. They often raise fundamental and enduring questions about the human experience. Many of these writings were chosen because they have shaped the way people think about perennial concerns such as the nature of justice, truth, and beauty. In addition, each selection is a significant part of an ongoing conversation across time and place that readers can enter into by reading these works and talking about them. (See page 27 for more information about Great Books Foundation anthologies ideally suited for Shared Inquiry discussion.)

The purpose of Shared Inquiry discussion is to provide the opportunity for inquisitive and rewarding examinations of literature rich in language and ideas. Selections that can support extended interpretive discussion must raise genuine questions of meaning for the reader.



# How Shared Inquiry Works

Shared Inquiry discussion is likely to be most successful if all involved—leaders and participants—receive some formal training in the method by participating in one of the Great Books Foundation’s workshops. If this is not possible, the following sections will be helpful for both leaders and participants in learning how to put the theory into practice.

At its core, Shared Inquiry is a method of learning carried out through asking and responding to questions. It is useful to distinguish between three kinds of questions: *factual*, *interpretive*, and *evaluative*. Generally, a factual question asks what an author has written; an interpretive question asks what an author’s words mean; and an evaluative question asks whether what an author writes is true.

## Interpretive Questions

Many of the questions raised in Shared Inquiry discussion are interpretive. They are called interpretive because they ask for the possible meaning of some aspect of a written work about which there is likely to be a variety of opinion. Interpretive questions are grounded in the text being discussed and usually refer to something specific in it.

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 unalienable?*
- *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 specific reference to details in the piece will help focus the attention of the participants on the text and the author's meaning. *The interpretive question is the leader's primary tool.*

A stimulating interpretive question should be of genuine interest to the person asking it. Composing interpretive questions is the best preparation for discussion, because it forces readers to engage with the piece and helps them form preliminary ideas about its meaning. A leader should encourage participants to bring their own interpretive questions to each discussion.

See page 21 of this booklet for a sample Shared Inquiry discussion reading as well as some interpretive questions a leader might ask.

### *Characteristics of 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.
- The question should express genuine doubt and curiosity. You may have several answers in mind which seem equally compelling, or you may believe that satisfying answers will be found through Shared Inquiry discussion (if you've been unable to discover them on your own). Your honest doubt encourages others to take the question seriously.

- The question should be specific to the 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.
- The question should be clear, and easy for another person to grasp immediately. Use simple and direct language. If the group you are leading doesn't seem to understand your question, either rephrase it or retrace the thinking that led you to it.

### *Genuine Doubt*

Use your own uncertainty as the starting point for questions. Some questions will occur to you spontaneously as you read; some may start out only half-formed—just a question mark or an exclamation point you have scribbled in the margin of the text. By the end of your second reading, you will have eliminated some of these questions as unworthy of fruitful discussion, and be ready to pursue your remaining ones further.

### *Important Ideas in the Text*

Trust your own sense of what is significant in a selection. The phrases, sentences, and passages that you have underlined are likely to lead to issues of interpretation 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.

### *Complexity and Apparent Contradiction*

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 (if it is ambivalent or unclear) may also raise interpretive questions.

In addition, the narrator (if any) may be a source of questions, especially if the narrative point of view is complex. Does the narrator speak for the author, or not? Are the narrator's statements accurate and reliable?

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 bring the selection's issues into focus so that you can formulate questions. If points in an argument seem to contradict each other, try first to resolve the contradiction; if you can't, express your puzzlement in a question.

### *Your Subjective Responses*

Your immediate, subjective response to a work 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. Your reaction suggests that the author has raised an issue that is important to you. Step back and consider just what that issue is, and then how it is developed throughout the work. Appreciate and try to justify the opposing view. When you can see other sides 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.

### *Details of Language*

Unusual combinations of words, vivid images, metaphors, rhetoric, and narrative tone can reveal important problems of meaning in a text. If a detail attracts your attention, stop to ponder it. Ask questions about it, relating it to the larger meaning of the work.

### **Factual and Evaluative Questions**

In addition to interpretive questions, factual and evaluative questions are integral to Shared Inquiry discussion.

Factual questions can bring to light evidence in support of an interpretation and can clear up misunderstanding about the details of a reading. By citing or paraphrasing the author's words, such questions help participants recall factual details in the selection. A disagreement over facts can be resolved quickly if participants simply turn to the relevant passage and reread it.

Since the aim of Shared Inquiry is to understand the text's meaning, the "facts of the matter" are the facts in the selection—the author's words, which all participants have in front of them. A question of fact, unlike an interpretive question, has only one correct answer. For example, *According to the text of the Declaration of Independence, who endows humans with "certain inalienable rights"?*

However, facts *about* a selected work—its historical background and influence, the conditions alluded to in it, the remarks of scholars about it, details of the author's life—should be used sparingly in the discussion, to keep it focused on the selection as much as possible. The leader should let background information be introduced only when it seems critical to understanding some vital aspect of the reading.

Evaluative questions ask us to judge whether what an author has written is true in light of our own experience, including other works we may have read. For example, *Is the Declaration of Independence still relevant today, or is its interest mainly historical?* Evaluative questions are typically broad and often range beyond the selection being considered. Evaluative questions help us make connections between the insights gained through discussing great writings and how we live our lives. They tend to be more rewarding if they are grounded in the work being considered and based on sound interpretations developed by participants in the course of discussion. Although evaluative questions can arise at any time, a leader will often set aside time at the end of the discussion to consider them.

## Leading Shared Inquiry Discussions

The leader of a Great Books group prepares interpretive questions to initiate a discussion, then moderates its course. A leader challenges participants' responses, follows those responses with more questions, asks for evidence from the work being considered, and invites further response. If participants digress from the main point, it is the leader's responsibility to redirect attention with a question. A leader must recognize when a question seems to have run its course and then should move the group in a new direction by posing 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 route through the selection. Also, a leader should refrain from readily offering personal opinions or making definitive statements. To do so (or to answer one's own questions) will only make a group less responsive. In addition, the leader may be tempted to turn the discussion into a lecture; such a scenario is exactly the opposite of Shared Inquiry's purpose to give participants the opportunity to develop their own ideas.

Thinking of a stimulating question in the midst of a discussion is a demanding task. A leader needs to devote complete attention to listening to participants and responding with questions that explore the author's meaning. For this reason, it is vital that a leader comes to the gathering with some interpretive questions prepared and remains open

to others that emerge as the discussion progresses.

During discussion, the leader uses follow-up questions to build on interpretive questions and draw out their implications. Effective follow-up questions will:

- **Clarify a comment** (*What do you mean by that?*). If you are uncertain what a participant meant in a previous remark, ask the person to explain further or to rephrase a comment so that everyone accurately understands the opinion being expressed.
- **Get textual support for an opinion** (*Where in the text do you see that?*). Ask participants to explain where in the text their opinion is supported. This can help participants consider which ideas are most convincing and prompt them to reflect more closely on their own opinions.
- **Solicit additional opinions** (*Do you agree or disagree with that? Do you have another idea about that part of the text?*). Encouraging additional opinions can help participants think about the relationships between the ideas being examined; it can also help draw quieter participants into contributing.
- **Test an idea** (*How would you explain this part of the text, given your answer?*). This kind of follow-up question helps participants consider the implications of an expressed opinion in depth and how consistent it is with what the text says. Bear in mind that such questions are not intended to prove that any speaker is “wrong.”

## Participating in Shared Inquiry Discussions

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

**Concentrate on the selection.** Refer frequently to the selection itself to support statements with quotations and paraphrases. When questions are asked, point out in the text the specific paragraphs, sentences, or even words that support the questions, and help others do the same in their responses. The more closely the group follows what the author actually says, the more rewarding the discussion will be, because it will be based on specific material rather than vague impressions of what is in the reading.

**Address the question.** A leader's questions are intended to focus on important issues in the work. Participants should speak to the issues the leader is currently addressing. If different issues intrigue them, they can raise them separately.

**Speak up.** Participants should state their opinions and be ready to explain them. A participant who does not understand something another participant has said should say so. Though it may seem to slow down the process, a leader's request for further reasons, examples, or evidence enriches everyone's understanding of the selection being considered. Disagreement can bring out the contradictions in an opinion or reveal the complex nature of a question. If participants disagree with one another, the leader should ask them to state (and to support with evidence from the text) their different interpretations.

**Listen carefully.** Participants will learn more after hearing their ideas challenged, supported, and modified by other participants during discussion. A leader should encourage participants to listen carefully to what others say and pursue the implications of others' thoughts, even if they disagree with them.

**Discuss the author's ideas, not the author's life and times.** Referring to books or articles written about the text being examined can easily lead to futile disagreement, especially because not everyone has equal access to such background knowledge. Facts about a selection—its historical background and impact, remarks of famous scholars about it—may be allowed at the leader's discretion, but are not pivotal to discussing it. The text itself is always central.

Knowing about the specific occasion on which Lincoln's second inaugural address was delivered and the contemporary issues of March 1865 can certainly contribute to an understanding of Lincoln's meaning. Nevertheless, documents that have endured typically have the unique quality of addressing all people at all times as if they are contemporaries. Such documents can be read and discussed rewardingly with a minimum of contextual information.

## **Close Reading in Shared Inquiry**

The quality of a discussion is based on the participants' sound understanding of what a text actually says. If interpretive questions are not eliciting responses, or if participants need to focus more closely on the text, the group can read portions of

the work in careful detail to clarify understanding.

In close reading, the group examines a single passage of a work line by line—and sometimes word by word—raising questions about its meaning. Difficult passages, or ones exceptionally rich in meaning, are good candidates for close reading. You may notice such passages while you are reading a work, or you may find yourself referring frequently to a particular section as you respond to interpretive questions. The following procedure is often helpful:

- 1. The leader asks someone to read the passage in question aloud.**
- 2. The group reviews the context of the passage.** In a work of fiction, identify who is “speaking” in the passage—the author, a fictitious narrator, or a character—and recall what events have occurred in the plot up to that point. In nonfiction, note the position of the passage in the argument as a whole. For example, if the passage is placed at the beginning of the selection, consider its purpose there. Does it provide background information for the argument? Does it introduce assumptions and definitions? Does it take issue with another author? Does the passage state a theory the author hopes to prove?
- 3. The group goes over the passage line by line,** with the leader asking questions about each word, phrase, and sentence that is not clear to participants.

By paraphrasing the text, defining its terms, untangling sentences, and explaining metaphors and examples, the group will clarify the sense of the author’s words. But as you reach

agreement on what this sense is, you may still disagree about its meaning. Close reading can then serve as a springboard to interpretive discussion.

Close reading is worthwhile both for readers who do not understand a work and for those who do. For the first group, it is an opportunity to clarify thought about the reading and probe more deeply into its meaning; for the other, it is a way of collecting initial thoughts about the work.

We recommend that a good dictionary or two be available during discussions. Sometimes interpretations may depend on the precise meaning of a specific word in a text, and a dictionary can be used to settle such questions.

## **Preparing for Discussion**

### *First and Second Readings*

To prepare for Shared Inquiry discussion, read the text twice, taking notes and forming questions as you read. Read a selection first just to comprehend its overall scope. There is no need to understand everything fully at first, provided that you plan to return to the selection and read it more closely a second time.

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.

## *Active Reading*

Active reading is crucial. In preparing for Shared Inquiry discussion, locate passages that seem especially revealing or profound and reflect on them. These may sum up an argument, give advice, offer predictions, provide examples illustrating an idea, or serve as occasions for direct reflection by the author or a character. Or they may simply be a particularly eloquent, beautiful expression of an idea.

Jot down your insights, questions, arguments with the author, and anything else that occurs to you about the selection as you read it. This ensures that such observations will not be lost between reading sessions, and that your understanding will have a greater chance to grow. Moreover, by forcing yourself to write down your responses, you will keep your mind active while you read. Here are some ways to note your responses:

- Mark passages you find especially interesting or puzzling, making brief notes of the ideas and questions they suggest to you.
- Pencil in your own titles for sections, paragraphs, or pages so that you can follow the selection more easily and refer to it more readily in discussion.
- Outline the selection. During your first reading, make check marks in the margin when the author seems to shift subjects. Then review the selection, numbering the major points and noting the 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.
- Underline any term that the author seems to use in a special way. Trace the term throughout the work in order to understand what it means in different contexts.



