



Guide for Reading Group Hosts Bookstore Owners, Managers and Staff

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.

One of the great challenges to on-going, potentially contentious, but crucially necessary discussion has become finding neutral spaces. Bookstores are ideal “third spaces,” separate from home and work where people can interact with others who hold different views.

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

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.

Create Space for Conversation

It is important to work with the book group facilitator to prepare the space for discussion. The layout sets a certain tone and expectation—much of this is accomplished by subtle acts and gestures.

- Think about the spaces in your bookstore. Can you create a conversation space that feels definable and separate? Sensitive political discussions might not be the best for a front-and-center space in your store.
- Can you arrange seating in a way that invites 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.
- Can you provide food or other refreshments to help create a hospitable and welcoming atmosphere?
- Can you provide additional incentives to encourage participants to return?

Think about printing the Ground Rules on small cards for participants, along with one of a selection of discussion questions to get people thinking as they take their seats.