

Guidelines for the Let's Talk About It Scholar

Thank you for your active support for public humanities in North Carolina! In the Let's Talk About It discussion program the scholar functions as a critical humanities link between the book and the reader. The role of a scholar is: (1) to provide a critical perspective on the materials, (2) to inspire participants to relate their experiences and insights to the materials, and (3) to facilitate interaction as participants share their interpretations with the discussion group. The scholar should provide the context and academic groundwork for the discussion text while maintaining active group discourse and preventing any one person's perspective to dominate the discussion.

Scholars for this discussion series are selected based on their knowledge of the selected reading or film and experience working with adult audiences. As this program may be different from others in which the scholars have participated, we provide the following guidelines:

- Let's Talk About It is an adult, public program and we encourage participation of a broad cross-section of North Carolina society. Adult audiences bring their own life experiences to the discussion which can be broad and profound. However, participants will vary in their familiarity with literary analysis and could be shy in expressing their interpretations of the text. It is essential that the scholar recognize and encourage the participants' intellectual curiosity and unique contributions.
- The catalyst for the session's discussion should be the scholar's initial introduction to the text and their discussion questions. The format of this program generally follows that of a reading seminar, with the scholar promoting participant engagement and highlighting the significant themes in the piece. **Please note: This is not a lecture program**, scholars function as the discussion facilitators and provide scholarly analysis and background information during a contextualizing introduction of the author and the work.
- Each of the Let's Talk About It series has a theme. Each scholar in the series should relate their assigned text to the overarching theme of the series. The first scholar in the series might need to place more emphasis on the series theme to set the tone for participants as they begin to engage with the readings.

We strongly recommend that scholars connect with the librarian before the program to clarify expectations. The instructions provided above are general guidelines for this program and groups will vary in their experience and interests. For example, some groups might prefer a more structured format with a longer introduction lecture much while others prefer more organic discussion time. North Carolina Humanities Council evaluations from both librarians and participants continually demonstrate that the Let's Talk About It scholar is the critical element which connects the series to participants' lives in relevant and meaningful ways while building the capacity of participants' literary skills.

Let's Talk About It The Role of the Scholar

Facilitating Discussion

❖ Scholar Introduction of the Text

The program is designed to “talk about” each book and to situate that work within the context of the series relate it to the lives and interests of participants. The time allotted for the scholar’s introductory presentation is intended to facilitate discussion and critical analysis on the part of the participants. The scholar should offer relevant social, political and economic context on the time period, the author and provide a general analysis of the book that emphasizes its relation to the series’ theme.

As this is a program designed to encourage public participation, scholars should be prepared to address a range of participants. Eager participants may have read reviews and critical articles, while more inexperienced participants may have not completed the reading or lack the context necessary for analysis. If educators are present, they may have experience teaching the text to their students.

When discussing a novel, the method of narration and the overall structure of the work (plot development if appropriate) often provide good starting points. Setting and character analysis may be strengthened by references to particular passages (perhaps read aloud) cited as specific evidence particular themes or points of view. References to the author’s use of irony or humor or any other literary device might be illustrated in a similar manner. Participants should be encouraged to discuss elements such as imagery, symbolism, and thematic development or to expand on other ideas introduced by the scholar in the opening presentation.

➤ Developing Series Connections

The first speaker in a series is responsible for giving an overview of the series’ focus or subject. If, for instance, a group has chosen the series “Not for Children Only,” the first scholar should provide a brief summary of children’s literature during as it relates to the selected books. The scholar may also make recommendations for additional print or electronic resources. More than any speaker in the series, the first scholar must balance general background information with specific information about the particular book.

Subsequent scholars should highlight the connections between the text for their session and the series’ focus and themes. This provides continuity for the series and allows both participants present for every session, as well as those who may have been absent, to understand the connections between the selected books and series topic.

❖ Group Discussion

The North Carolina Humanities Council highly recommends that scholars send discussion questions to the librarian two to three weeks prior to a session to help participants think critically about the text as they read it independently. These questions can also serve as a starting point for discussion. It is the scholar’s responsibility to make sure that all who wish to comment have the opportunity and, that these comments are heard by the entire group.

Following the scholar’s introductory presentation there are two basic discussion formats for this program:

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- *Small Group Breakouts* – One design of the program includes small group break-out discussions for about thirty minutes to ensure that all voices can be heard. The small groups then reconvene and share their comments analysis with the whole group. If the group is large (30+), some participants might not offer comments or ask questions. By breaking into smaller groups for part of the discussion participants will have more opportunity (and often greater comfort) to express their opinions on the text.
- *Whole Group Discussion* - Many libraries, particularly those with a smaller group, prefer to remain together for the discussion. These larger discussions group can sometimes be dominated by one participant with a strong personality. The scholar should be aware of the group's dynamics and intervene to redirect the conversation when needed so that all participants have an opportunity to share and the discussion stays on topic.

Participants may disagree with one another and even with the scholar. These disagreements often stimulate further discussion and can lead to a deeper understandings of the text. If a participant disagrees with the scholar or a particular academic interpretation, the scholar should share the reasons for that particular understandings and the methods of critical analysis. Disagreement can often be an opportunity for participants to build capacity by using critical thinking skills and put literary analysis into practice. However, if disagreements in the discussion between group members become heated or personal the scholar should redirect the group to the text being discussed or engage the assistance of the librarian/project director when appropriate.

❖ Possible Program Structures

Small Group Breakout Format

- 7:00 PM Introductory Presentation by scholar
- 7:45 PM Break & Refreshments
- 8:00 PM Discussion Group(s)
- 8:40 PM Wrap-up (different groups report, final questions and responses between scholar and audience)
- 9:00 PM Departure

Whole Group Discussion Format

- 6:00 PM Introductory Presentation by scholar
- 6:30 PM Break and Refreshments
- 6:45 PM Group Discussion
- 7:45 PM Departure

Program Evaluation and Additional Resources

❖ Program Follow Up

Scholars are required to **complete the North Carolina Humanities Council's evaluation form** and return it to the Program Coordinator. Scholars are also able to offer informal, constructive remarks to the local librarian or Friends of the Library Committee members organizing the program. The North Carolina Humanities Council **must be informed** if there are any serious complications, incidents or issues that occur during the series. If the scholar has suggestions, comments or concerns regarding the Let's Talk About It program please direct those to the Program Coordinator.

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The North Carolina Humanities Council collects evaluations of each session from participants and the local librarian/project director which assess both the speaker and the evening's program. All feedback is important to the Council and is utilized both for state and federal reporting as well as when designing new programs.

❖ **Additional Resources**

For new scholars starting out with the program the North Carolina Humanities Council's Program Coordinator can connect veteran Let's Talk About It scholars to new scholars to answer questions and share successful strategies and experiences. It would be advantageous for a scholar to attend a Let's Talk About It program prior to facilitating one to gain a solid foundation before facilitating programs.

One of the best resources for scholars preparing for a Let's Talk About It series session is to connect with the local librarian or site director. This exchange of expectations and information on the group's interests will be critical as scholars prepare for sessions and develop relevant discussion topics. This collaboration also ensures that the themes of a selected series and books are presented to participants in meaningful ways.