

How to Lead a Bible Study

What a privilege it is to lead a Bible study! And what joy and excitement await you as you delve into the Word of God and help others to discover its life-changing truths. If God has called you to lead a Bible study group, I know you'll be spending much time in prayer and planning and giving much thought to being an effective leader. I also know that taking the time to read through the following tips will help you to navigate the challenges of leading a Bible study discussion group and enjoying the effort and opportunity.

The Leader's Roles

As a Bible study group leader, you'll find your role changing back and forth from *expert* to *cheerleader* to *lover* to *referee* during the course of a session.

Since you're the leader, group members will look to you to be the *expert* guiding them through the material. So be well prepared. In fact, be over-prepared so that you know the material better than any group member does. Start your study early in the week and let its message simmer all week long. (You might even work several lessons ahead so that you have in mind the big picture and the overall direction of the study.) Be ready to share some additional gems that your group members wouldn't have discovered on their own. That extra insight from your study time—or that comment from

a wise Bible teacher or scholar, that clever saying, that keen observation from another believer, and even an appropriate joke—adds an element of fun and keeps Bible study from becoming routine, monotonous, and dry.

Second, be ready to be the group's *cheerleader*. Your energy and enthusiasm for the task at hand can be contagious. It can also stimulate people to get more involved in their personal study as well as in the group discussion.

Third, be the *lover*, the one who shows a genuine concern for the members of the group. You're the one who will establish the atmosphere of the group. If you laugh and have fun, the group members will laugh and have fun. If you hug, they will hug. If you care, they will care. If you share, they will share. If you love, they will love. So pray every day to love the women God has placed in your group. Ask Him to show you how to love them with His love.

Finally, as the leader, you'll need to be the *referee* on occasion. That means making sure everyone has an equal opportunity to speak. That's easier to do when you operate under the assumption that every member of the group has something worthwhile to contribute. So, trusting that the Lord has taught each person during the week, act on that assumption.

Expert, cheerleader, lover, and referee—these four roles of the leader may make the task seem overwhelming. But that's not bad if it keeps you on your knees praying for your group.

A Good Start

Beginning on time, greeting people warmly, and opening in prayer gets the study off to a good start. Know what you want to have happen during your time together and make sure those things get done. That kind of order means comfort for those involved.

Establish a format and let the group members know what that format is. People appreciate being in a Bible study that focuses on the Bible. So keep the discussion on the topic and

move the group through the questions. Tangents are often hard to avoid—and even harder to rein in. So be sure to focus on the answers to questions about the specific passage at hand. After all, the purpose of the group is Bible study!

Finally, as someone has accurately observed, “Personal growth is one of the by-products of any effective small group. This growth is achieved when people are recognized and accepted by others. The more friendliness, mutual trust, respect, and warmth exhibited, the more likely that the member will find pleasure in the group, and, too, the more likely she will work hard toward the accomplishment of the group’s goals. The effective leader will strive to reinforce desirable traits” (source unknown).

A Dozen Helpful Tips

Here is a list of helpful suggestions for leading a Bible study discussion group:

1. Arrive early, ready to focus fully on others and give of yourself. If you have to do any last-minute preparation, review, re-grouping, or praying, do it in the car. Don’t dash in, breathless, harried, late, still tweaking your plans.
2. Check out your meeting place in advance. Do you have everything you need—tables, enough chairs, a blackboard, hymnals if you plan to sing, coffee, etc.?
3. Greet each person warmly by name as she arrives. After all, you’ve been praying for these women all week long, so let each VIP know that you’re glad she’s arrived.
4. Use name tags for at least the first two or three weeks.
5. Start on time no matter what—even if only one person is there!
6. Develop a pleasant but firm opening statement. You might say, “This lesson was great! Let’s get started so we

can enjoy all of it!” or “Let’s pray before we begin our lesson.”

7. Read the questions, but don’t hesitate to reword them on occasion. Rather than reading an entire paragraph of instructions, for instance, you might say, “Question 1 asks us to list some ways that Christ displayed humility. Lisa, please share one way Christ displayed humility.”
8. Summarize or paraphrase the answers given. Doing so will keep the discussion focused on the topic, eliminate digressions, help avoid or clear up any misunderstandings of the text, and keep each group member aware of what the others are saying.
9. Keep moving and don’t add any of your own questions to the discussion time. It’s important to get through the study guide questions. So if a cut-and-dried answer is called for, you don’t need to comment with anything other than a “thank you.” But when the question asks for an opinion or an application (for instance, “How can this truth help us in our marriages?” or “How do *you* find time for your quiet time?”), let all who want to contribute.
10. Affirm each person who contributes, especially if the contribution was very personal, painful to share, or a quiet person’s rare statement. Make everyone who shares a hero by saying something like “Thank you for sharing that insight from your own life” or “We certainly appreciate what God has taught you. Thank you for letting us in on it.”
11. Watch your watch, put a clock right in front of you, or consider using a timer. Pace the discussion so that you meet your cut-off time, especially if you want time to pray. Stop at the designated time even if you haven’t finished the lesson. Remember that everyone has worked through the study once; you are simply going over it again.

12. End on time. You can only make friends with your group members by ending on time or even a little early! Besides, members of your group have the next item on their agenda to attend to—picking up children from the nursery, babysitter, or school; heading home to tend to matters there; running errands; getting to bed; or spending some time with their husbands. So let them out *on time!*

Five Common Problems

In any group, you can anticipate certain problems. Here are some common ones that can arise, along with helpful solutions:

1. *The incomplete lesson*—Right from the start, establish the policy that if someone has not done the lesson, it is best for her not to answer the questions. But do try to include her responses to questions that ask for opinions or experiences. Everyone can share some thoughts in reply to a question like, “Reflect on what you know about both athletic and spiritual training and then share what you consider to be the essential elements of training oneself in godliness.”
2. *The gossip*—The Bible clearly states that gossiping is wrong, so you don’t want to allow it in your group. Set a high and strict standard by saying, “I am not comfortable with this conversation,” or “We [not *you*] are gossiping, ladies. Let’s move on.”
3. *The talkative member*—Here are three scenarios and some possible solutions for each.
 - a. The problem talker may be talking because she has done her homework and is excited about something she has to share. She may also know more about the subject than the others and, if you cut her off, the rest of the group may suffer.

SOLUTION: Respond with a comment like: “Sarah, you are making very valuable contributions. Let’s see if we can get some reactions from the others,” or “I know Sarah can answer this. She’s really done her homework. How about some of the rest of you?”

- b. The talkative member may be talking because she has *not* done her homework and wants to contribute, but she has no boundaries.

SOLUTION: Establish at the first meeting that those who have not done the lesson do not contribute except on opinion or application questions. You may need to repeat this guideline at the beginning of each session.

- c. The talkative member may want to be heard whether or not she has anything worthwhile to contribute.

SOLUTION: After subtle reminders, be more direct, saying, “Betty, I know you would like to share your ideas, but let’s give others a chance. I’ll call on you later.”

4. *The quiet member*—Here are two scenarios and possible solutions.

- a. The quiet member wants the floor but somehow can’t get the chance to share.

SOLUTION: Clear the path for the quiet member by first watching for clues that she wants to speak (moving to the edge of her seat, looking as if she wants to speak, perhaps even starting to say something) and then saying, “Just a second. I think Chris wants to say something.” Then, of course, make her a hero!

- b. The quiet member simply doesn’t want the floor.

SOLUTION: “Chris, what answer do you have on question 2?” or “Chris, what do you think about...?” Usually after a shy person has contributed a few times, she will become

more confident and more ready to share. Your role is to provide an opportunity where there is *no* risk of a wrong answer. But occasionally a group member will tell you that she would rather not be called on. Honor her request, but from time to time ask her privately if she feels ready to contribute to the group discussions.

In fact, give all your group members the right to pass. During your first meeting, explain that any time a group member does not care to share an answer, she may simply say, “I pass.” You’ll want to repeat this policy at the beginning of every group session.

5. *The wrong answer*—Never tell a group member that she has given a wrong answer, but at the same time never let a wrong answer go by.

SOLUTION: Either ask if someone else has a different answer or ask additional questions that will cause the right answer to emerge. As the women get closer to the right answer, say, “We’re getting warmer! Keep thinking! We’re almost there!”

Learning from Experience

Immediately after each Bible study session, evaluate the group discussion time using this checklist. You may also want a member of your group (or an assistant or trainee or outside observer) to evaluate you periodically.

May God strengthen—and encourage!—you as you assist others in the discovery of His many wonderful truths.