

Let's Talk About It: A Planner's Manual

This manual is designed to make it as easy as possible for you to implement a Let's Talk About It Reading and Discussion series with your group.

What is Let's Talk About It? (LTAI)

Let's Talk About It was created to promote the development of reading and discussion programs in America's public libraries. However, it is not your average book club! Connecting interested readers with classic literature, resonant themes, and scholarly interpretation, LTAI creates an exciting discussion forum where ideas and insights abound! LTAI is a program for adults that consists of 4 or 5 books or films on the same topic or theme, which participants study with the help of scholar facilitators who add depth and breadth of understanding. As with all the humanities, the reading and discussion of books offer us ways to ask our most fundamental questions about the meaning of what we say and do, about who we are.

The American Library Association launched Let's Talk About It with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities. In South Carolina, it is a project of The Humanities Council^{SC} and the South Carolina State Library. Organizations can apply to The Humanities Council^{SC} for a grant to assist with funding of the series, and the SC State Library loans books free of charge.

How do we get started?

It is important to have the support of staff, the board, and The Friends of the Library, if they are an active group. From these people, a Project Director should be chosen who will plan and implement the program. There should also be a fiscal officer who will handle the transfer of grant funds. The Literary Arts Partnership (LAP) Coordinator at The Humanities Council^{SC} will act as a resource and an advisor.

The librarian or Project Director should contact the Literary Arts Partnership Coordinator at The Humanities Council^{SC} (803-771-2477) for a list of series or to find out which series are available. The LAP Coordinator will answer any questions and explain how the program is run. The Project Director should contact The Humanities Council^{SC} well in advance of when they want to have the series so that they have time to recruit scholars, recruit participants, publicize the event, and receive and distribute the books.

There are over 40 series, but, because of a limited number of books, most of the series can only accommodate one library at a time, so call early if you are interested in a particular one.

How do I apply?

A grant application can be downloaded from The Humanities Council^{SC} website at www.schumanities.org or it can be sent to you. The grant application should be in The Humanities Council^{SC} office at least six weeks prior to the beginning of the program; however, it is important to talk to the LAP Coordinator as soon as you know you want to sponsor a series. The Coordinator will reserve the particular series that you want and fully explain the procedure. After reserving a series, contact with scholars can begin. The Project Director is responsible for scheduling the events with scholars; however, if you have trouble finding scholars, the LAP Coordinator will be glad to assist you in identifying scholars in your area of the state. When scholars have been secured, the application can be returned, and the grant process can begin.

What are the financial obligations?

The organization applies to the South Carolina Humanities Council for a grant of \$500. This grant pays for a \$100 honorarium given to each of the five scholars. In order to receive the grant, the organization must show on their application an equal or greater **cost share**. In other words, the organization must show that they are paying \$500 or more towards the program. However, your cost share does not have to be in cash; most of it can be in-kind and should be calculated based on both actual and theoretical costs. For example, you should estimate the value of time spent putting together the program, the rental value of the space where the program will be held (even if this number is theoretical), cost of telephone calls and making copies, etc. All this should easily equal or exceed our contribution. If you have any questions regarding cost share, please contact the LAP Coordinator.

Beyond the cost-share obligations, the organization has very few other financial obligations. The organization should offer to cover **travel expenses of the visiting scholars** and any other expenses incurred by the program, including refreshments, if they choose to have them.

The books are provided free of charge by the South Carolina State Library and will be shipped to the host organization. The host organization is responsible for the **shipping of the books back to the State Library**.

How long does an LTAI series last?

There are usually five sessions in each Let's Talk About It series. A session generally takes place every two weeks, making the series run a total of nine weeks. A two-week gap is advised because it gives the participants enough time to read each of the books but not enough time to grow tired or bored with the program. However, there are a few series with very dense, historical books that may take some patrons longer than two weeks to read. Consider the length of the books when planning how many off-weeks you will have.

There are also a few series with less than five books/videos and a few series with more than five books/videos. You may consider these series if you want a shorter or longer program. Essentially, you can choose your series based on how long you want it to run.

How are the books provided to the library and to the participants?

The South Carolina State Library will send the books to your organization. This could take up to three weeks, so please request your books well in advance. You will be asked to estimate how many people will participate and let the LAP coordinator know, so that the correct number of books will be sent.

The participant gets the first book when they sign up for the program. After the first session, they turn in that book and receive the second book. It is best not to give out all five books at the beginning of the series because it is only natural that some people will drop out.

Please keep a record of who has the books, so that books are not accidentally lost. Each LTAI book has a number for tracking. A tracking form will be included in your packet when you sign up for the program. Impress upon the participants the importance of returning the books in a timely manner.

When are the best dates and times to offer LTAI?

Most libraries offer the program between the months of September-November and January-April. Summer months are not usually very popular. It is advisable to avoid holidays. However, it is up to your discretion to choose the dates for your series based on your community's needs. Some resort and retirement areas have specialized schedules.

Most libraries find that an evening program from 7-9 p.m. works well; however, some programs are successfully held on Sunday afternoons. Weekday afternoon programs are another option, although they eliminate working people. Once again, it is up to your discretion to choose the times based on the audience you would like to attract.

Where will the program be held?

The LTAI program is offered to libraries, and it is expected that the programs will be held there. In some cases, small libraries will not have a room large enough to accommodate the program. If it is necessary to use an outside public space, it should be accessible to anyone who wishes to attend.

What is the role of the scholar?

The scholar is usually a professor in a university, college, or technical college and is known to be very knowledgeable in his or her field of study. (A scholar does not necessarily have to be attached to a university if they have other impressive qualifications in their field of study.)

The role of the scholar is two-fold: 1) to provide a critical perspective on the materials considered and 2) to inspire LTAI participants to relate their experiences and insight to the materials and share their responses with the discussion group. Most Project Directors say that the scholar makes a big difference in the success of the program. They bring the book to life with insights and background on the author, raising questions and creating catalyst that sparks discussion.

The scholar should speak for about 30-40 minutes. If the group decides to remain as one discussion group, then the scholar leads that discussion. Otherwise, if there are multiple groups, the scholar should visit each group and then lead a brief wrap-up at the end of the evening.

If possible, the Project Director should obtain a brief biography of each of the scholars so that she/he can appropriately introduce them at the beginning of each session.

Who do you recruit to participate?

LTAI is a book discussion group for adult participants. The ages of participants vary; however, the majority are out of school adults who have the time and interest for reading and enjoy an experience that challenges and educates them.

Libraries should actively publicize the program and recruit participants. They can target their active patrons, their Friends of the Library group, local book clubs, centers for senior citizens and retirement homes.

What does a typical evening look like?

This is merely a suggested schedule. Each organization can adapt the schedule to their special needs and participants. The program can be shorter than 2 hours if necessary.

6:30 p.m.-Project Director opens room, makes sure that enough chairs are set up, and sets out any refreshments that may be provided.

6:45 p.m.-Project Director sets out the books for the next session so that early arrivals can sign out the next book in the series.

7:00-7:10 p.m.-Participants sign out the next book in the series. (It is best to do this before the program as participants are often ready to leave when the program is over.)

7:10 p.m.-Program Director introduces scholar.

7:10-7:40 p.m. Lecture/Presentation by scholar

7:45 p.m.-Break/Refreshments

8:00 p.m. Discussion Group(s)

8:40 p.m. Wrap-up (Different groups report, final questions between scholar and audience.)

9:00 p.m. Departure (Participants should drop off their finished books on the way out.)

