

Athenaeum Protocol

Meeting Logistics

1. Traditionally we meet from 7-9:30pm on the 2nd Saturday of the month. COVID has forced us to bump that up to 6pm temporarily.
2. One person is moderator for the meetings; it is the same person every month. He is responsible for calling to order the meeting precisely on time, directing and tabulating the proposals for the next book in a special logbook, but otherwise that person is no more important at the meeting than anyone else. If that person is out of town, he solicits someone else to chair the meeting.
3. Good venues are hard to find. It needs to be relatively quiet. We require good draft beer and food. We also require a space that allows smoking, which limits us quite a bit because of the smoking ban in Austin. To provide for cigars, pipes, and cigarettes, we meet outside year round. At present, our venue has no rain covering, so when it rains we have to meet at a member's company warehouse where we BYOB and order in pizza.
4. We meet even if it is Valentine's day. We do not delay or change the meeting schedule just because the leader is out of town. (We did do this when the group was small. With a large group it is not possible.) Many of us come early to eat and drink before the meeting. Both eating and beer drinking continue throughout the meeting.
5. We are a men-only group. This is because some members find some literature awkward to discuss in mixed company (e.g., *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, etc). Also, the guys cherish the opportunity to be with other guys. Years ago we settled this by vote.
6. We have steadily grown from the founding 4 to where we have as many as 15+ in attendance every month. We have debated whether to limit attendance. With 15, it is hard for everyone to hear and guys are constantly tempted to get into multiple discussions at once at different parts of the table. When this happens, we call for order and for everyone to stay together.

Discussion

7. We begin promptly at the designated time with an essay read by the person who nominated the book. So as not to be intimidating, we say that preparing an essay is optional, but everyone does it. We aim for 750 words, and ideally the essay is a critical study. However, in practice many members rely heavily on author biography and plot summary. (Plot summaries are inappropriate for such a group, but it is common for people to think that it's what's called for.) It is common for members to read and refer to secondary literature, biography, other works by the same author, etc, to enrich the discussion. Our discussions are deep, and it helps to have people involved who know how to engage in literary criticism. We discuss, themes, symbolism, authorial intent, structure, historical context, etc. For very difficult works (e.g. Joyce's *Ulysses*), we prepare by reading other works in advance, identifying appropriate annotated guides to recommend to each other, etc. We have an unwritten rule that referring to movies during the discussion is frowned upon. We always identify particularly valuable passages to read aloud.
8. Those who do not finish the book are still welcome to come and participate fully, with the humbling awareness that their comments must be somewhat provisional.
9. We take a 10-min bio-break midway through. At 10 minutes before the end, we go round the table and give everyone a 60 sec parting comment. After these comments, we move directly to nominations.

Book Selection

10. The book vote is for the month after next. On meeting day, we already know what the selection is for next month. This gives everyone 1 month to get the book and 1 month to read it.
11. For nominations, we go round the table. If 8 or fewer are present, we allow 2 nominations per person, but it is rare that someone comes with two books in mind. It is, however, permitted (and again, rare) to nominate a 2-fer (two-for-one): two short books, short stories or plays read and discussed together. Once we did a 3-fer of essays by Camus. Members can pass on nomination if they wish. With the nomination is usually a short persuasive speech to sell the nomination to the group. If a particular translation is better than others, this should be part of the nomination, or perhaps discussed after the voting if the selection wins the vote. Any book from any genre can be nominated. If it wins the vote, it wins. Most of us incline toward classics or otherwise significant works, so new or highly specialized works are unlikely to win.
12. If you are present, you can nominate, including guests.
13. During the nominations, the moderator lists them down the left side of a page in the club journal. He writes the names of those present across the top of the page. This makes a grid to record the voting.

	Member	Member	Member	Member
Book	x		x	x
Book	x	x		x
Book		x	x	

14. After the nominations, the moderator read through them twice so everyone can decide on their choices. He then calls out the titles one by one, marking each vote under the person's name. Everyone gets to vote twice, but not for the same book. We always remind everyone to get their hands up in a prompt, manly fashion, rather than first trying to see what others will vote for.

In the event of a tie...

15. In the event of a tie, we have a runoff. In the event of a tied runoff, we decide by coin toss.
16. Sometimes people hang around afterward and talk over another beer. Running a tight schedule is very important. People need to know the schedule will be adhered to strictly, because discussions like this can go on forever. If meetings run late, some people will stop coming. And everyone in our group knows that I start the meeting at the stroke of 7, so we don't have much problem with late comers.
17. A day or two after the meeting the moderator send an email reminding the group of the selection for next month, and informing all of the new selection for two months hence. That keeps the no-shows informed of the book voted on in their absence and gives everyone a written record of the selections.

The Austin Athenaeum Blog

18. We maintain a reading history, which you can see on our website. <http://austinathenaeum.com> During the discussion, Jeffrey sometimes makes notes so he can create a blog entry about the meeting on the website. These are really good and are fun to look back on. Having a blogger to document the meetings is valuable, but we have not always had a person willing to do it.