

Reading the Way Guidelines



Reading the Way Steering Group,
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The thinking behind Reading the Way

Reading the Way is a mission to create spaces in prisons to practise and enjoy reading and listening, and to talk with each other about reading and what we read. Crucially, these spaces are reading groups, and not education sessions. *Reading the Way* is, though, the product of careful thinking about adult literacy education (as well as about reading groups). Here are **six** interrelated areas which we think are helpful for those interested in facilitating groups to reflect upon: reading, confidence, emergent readers, adult learning, the prison context and reading groups.



Thinking about reading

- Reading is using or making sense of written text in some way. This could be about understanding it word for word, or more as a whole, or it could be more about using or appreciating that text in some way. Think about how reading a well-known prayer aloud is different from reading a letter from the council (in the case of the former, you may know exactly what it says and have read it thousands of times already; in the latter you might have no idea and need to know – in both cases, that’s the point of the text). ‘Reading’ can include a number of quite different practices, in different contexts and with different purposes (these ideas are based on a theoretical approach often known as ‘Literacy as Social Practice’).
- Written language is an encoded version of spoken language. And the ‘code’ involves punctuation, formatting and emojis as well as (in the case of English) sound-symbol relationships linking letters to sounds.
- When we talk about learning to read, this includes equipping ourselves with the knowledge/skills to decode written language back into spoken language.
- This requires knowledge about the ‘code’ of written English. On the word and sub-word levels, graphemes (letters or groups of letters) represent phonemes (sounds); this is what phonics instruction covers. On the sentence level this involves how words work together to make meaning, including word-order and punctuation, and on the level of a whole text, this includes conventions of genre and lay-out, and for longer narrative texts, how meaning is built up over paragraphs.
- This means that reading involves a wide range of skills and knowledge. What it means to be ‘good’ at reading aloud a list of names at an awards ceremony is different from what it means to be ‘good’ at reading an online gas bill. Most people develop these skills through practise, particularly through having a go at reading different sorts of texts for different purposes.
- Even with all the ‘tools’ of reading in your pocket, there will be times when any of us may feel unable to make meaning, not necessarily because we can’t decode individual words but because we are not part of the group that knows about this particular literacy practice (think about a knitting pattern to a non-knitter!)
- When we are reading longer narrative texts (stories or novels, etc.), we are usually decoding individual words, understanding how the words in that sentence work together to create meaning, and then reading the next sentence with that meaning in mind, and gradually building up a larger and larger meaning, often about a story, place and characters. This larger meaning shifts (slightly or dramatically) as we read more. To do this sort of reading, we need knowledge around word-decoding, about the meanings of words, about syntax and punctuation, about paragraphs, about people, motivation, the world etc. Each of these quite different bits of knowledge can help us in distinct ways, and each can present challenges. Very few people are good at it all. When we read together in a group, we support each other by each contributing different bits of expertise to help with the overall endeavour.
- We can participate in reading in different ways: reading aloud to others, reading silently to ourselves, listening to others read, listening to recordings of reading, talking about what has been read and offering different insights or interpretations. All of these forms of participation are important, and they are all part of reading.

Why does this matter?

These ideas can help us, as facilitators, with our understandings of where different reading group members may be in their reading development/reading journeys. For example, is someone having trouble decoding individual words? Or is someone ok with decoding individual words but may find it harder to build up meaning across a sentence or series of sentences? Or does someone find it challenging to remember the last paragraph as they move on to read the next one? Perhaps more importantly, these ideas about reading are things we can discuss with the group – thinking together about what reading is or involves, what makes it challenging in different ways for different people and how reading can be different in different contexts for different purposes – all moving us away from the idea that person x is good at reading while person y is not.

Thinking about confidence

- It is very hard to learn anything if you lack confidence; we can all probably think of examples of this in our own lives.
- With reading, the relationship between confidence and learning is heightened because part of what we are doing when we read is making judgements – judgments about which spoken word a written word represents, judgements about how the meanings of several words work together, judgements involving interpretations around what we have and haven't been told. All this requires confidence. When reading stories, poems and novels, this is even more acute as the writer will usually leave larger 'gaps' or 'question marks' to be filled in by the reader – and to make these judgements requires confidence.

Why does this matter?

We felt it was worth emphasising that confidence is crucial to literacy use and development. This is why it is so important to try to build from what participants can do and emphasise the idea that everyone brings important expertise to the table. Again, this could be worth bringing into discussions with the group members about what we are doing when we read.

Thinking about the term **emergent readers**

- Though not perfect, the term 'emergent reader' is often considered preferable to 'beginner reader' as it acknowledges that all adults living in literate societies have some knowledge of reading and writing and are rarely at the very beginning of a learning-to-read journey.
- Further, the term 'emergent' carries with it a recognition of the range of barriers experienced by those who feel they cannot read or can read very little, as well as the complexity of the relationships between past experiences, confidence and the ability to read a particular text on a particular occasion.
- We are aware of the complications of assessing reading, of 'levels', of the fact that those who feel they cannot read may have significant existing reading skills, and of the impact of an individual's reading confidence and self-image.
- An emergent readers' group is therefore most usefully understood as a group for people who feel they cannot read or can read very little ('I am not a reader') and would like to practise in a supportive environment.

Why does this matter?

Reading the Way group members may have been asked to complete formal assessments in relation to prison educational provision (or not), but either way, the level produced by the assessment matters less than the individual's own sense of themselves as a reader, and their desire to practise in a supportive environment. For this reason, we are also recommending that recruitment includes someone able to 'walk the wings' and talk to prisoners one to one, as well as Shannon Trust mentors, librarians, teachers and instructional officers.

Thinking about **adult learning**

- Most ideas on adult learning highlight that when learning, adults bring all sorts of expertise to the table.
- As adults, we also all bring our past experiences to any new learning situation. These experiences can help or challenge us (i.e. we may have been told that we are not good at something, or even that we are 'useless,' and it can be hard to get over this).
- Adults usually learn best when we are involved in making decisions about our learning.
- Adult learning theorists also often emphasise that it can sometimes be harder for adults to learn because our minds are full of adult worries, and this is likely to be particularly acute for those in prison.
- Many traditions of adult education argue against the deficit model of seeing adult learners only in terms of *needs* or what they cannot do, and instead focus on universal *right* to educational opportunities, and the importance of understanding the power relations and contextual factors which may have prevented someone from learning something or gaining qualifications in the past.
- Most adult education pedagogic approaches (including critical pedagogy), stress mutual respect, co-creation, collaboration and the importance of choice and discussion.

Why does this matter?

This is useful, we feel, as reading groups are forms of informal adult learning, and *Reading the Way* is very much within the collaborative, democratic, critical traditions of adult learning. These ideas could also be the foundation for how we work with co-facilitators and may be valuable to discuss with reading group members.

Thinking about the prison context

- We are reminded that we cannot hope to understand the reading group members' daily lives or their past experiences.
- We are aware that there may be topics which shouldn't be discussed, or which need careful thought if raised, and that these may be different in men's and women's prisons and in different categories of prison or for prisoners on different wings.
- We know that there is a prison economy and factors such as pay for time spent in reading groups will need to be considered.
- Reading glasses and other reading aids, like coloured overlays, are not always easy to access for prisoners.
- Consistency in reading group membership over time is not always possible in prison settings.

Why does this matter?

This is a reminder for us all (but especially for those who mainly work outside of prisons) that we must always consider the specific nature of the prison context, and this is why it is important that at least one facilitator has extensive prison experience.

Thinking about Reading Groups

- Reading groups (sometimes called 'reading circles') have been around for as long as people have been reading and they happen all over the world.
- They are collaborative and centre on the mutual exchange of expertise.
- Some reading groups involve reading aloud and some don't, but discussion is always core.
- Members join for all different reasons and get different things out of them – for companionship, to develop reading, to enjoy the discussion. This is part of their magic: a group activity which is also highly individualised.
- Reading groups sometimes have explicit or implicit educational purposes (for example, there is a history of women's and working men's reading groups in contexts where educational opportunities were denied to these groups) but are primarily social.
- Reading groups are about supporting each other and creating space to talk and think.
- Reading groups often involve explicit discussions about 'ways of working' and turn-taking, which may include giving everyone time to speak (but not having to speak) and the importance of listening to others and respecting others' views. For *Reading the Way* groups, these discussions may also include the idea that no one has to read aloud, but everyone can if they want, and how the group would like to handle someone struggling to decode a word. It may be useful to use Daniel Pennac's 'Rights of the Reader' (from the book of the same name) as a frame here, for example his reminders of 'the right to skip,' 'the right to be quiet,' 'the right to read out loud' and, crucially, 'the right not to read'.

Why does this matter?

Talking to *Reading the Way* group members about what they know about reading groups, and discussing some of this tradition, including the mutual exchange of expertise and the importance of discussion, may help to reassure. It will also be important to discuss and establish ways of working, and crucially, to emphasise that this is not 'education' (remedial or otherwise); this is a reading group.

Who should facilitate and what experience might help?

The role of the facilitator is an important one. The idea is that a *Reading the Way* group is as collaborative and member-run as possible, but there needs to be a facilitator or, ideally, facilitators, to organise, model and, at least initially, lead.

In our pilot projects, each reading group was facilitated by a team of two or three from our planning group, including at least one person who regularly works within that prison and one adult literacy expert. We see **joint facilitation** as an important form of collaborative working where facilitators complement each other's existing skills, knowledge and experience, learning from one another. It also means that if one person is absent on any particular week, the group is still likely to be able to run. Longer term, joint facilitation means that we can aim for a model of cascading expertise, where, potentially, an experienced facilitator is joined by a newer facilitator and so continuity is maintained, experience harnessed, and expertise developed sustainably.

Crucially, this model also recognises that facilitation involves **multiple areas of relevant and important expertise**:

- reading processes and practices
- adult literacy teaching/learning/development
- adult learning or education
- reading groups
- the prison context
- a love of books and stories (or as some of the pilot participants put it, 'intrigued by stories').

It is unlikely that any one person will come with experience of all of these (and this certainly isn't the expectation), but rather, a potential facilitator may have experience of one or more of these areas, and be working with another facilitator who brings complementary experience of others. Facilitators can build up the rest over time, through *Reading the Way* support (see below), through working with additional facilitators, and through the larger *Reading the Way* Community (sharing ideas, links, resources, etc.) It may be helpful to see these areas of expertise as pieces of a jigsaw (and there may be more areas to add) which can be built up collaboratively over time.

The facilitators, working alongside other prison contacts/collaborators (for example from the library, Shannon Trust or Education) also organise the time and space for the *Reading the Way* group, along with resources (including tea, coffee and the photocopies - see below), and, crucially, will start off modelling the reading, asking and answering questions and discussion. Over time, it is hoped that the group members will do more reading, asking and answering questions and leading the discussion themselves, as it becomes more clearly 'their' group.

Resources

As noted in the pilot report, there are different sorts of resources which we can think about. We noted how holding the reading groups in a library and/or re-arranging tables and chairs

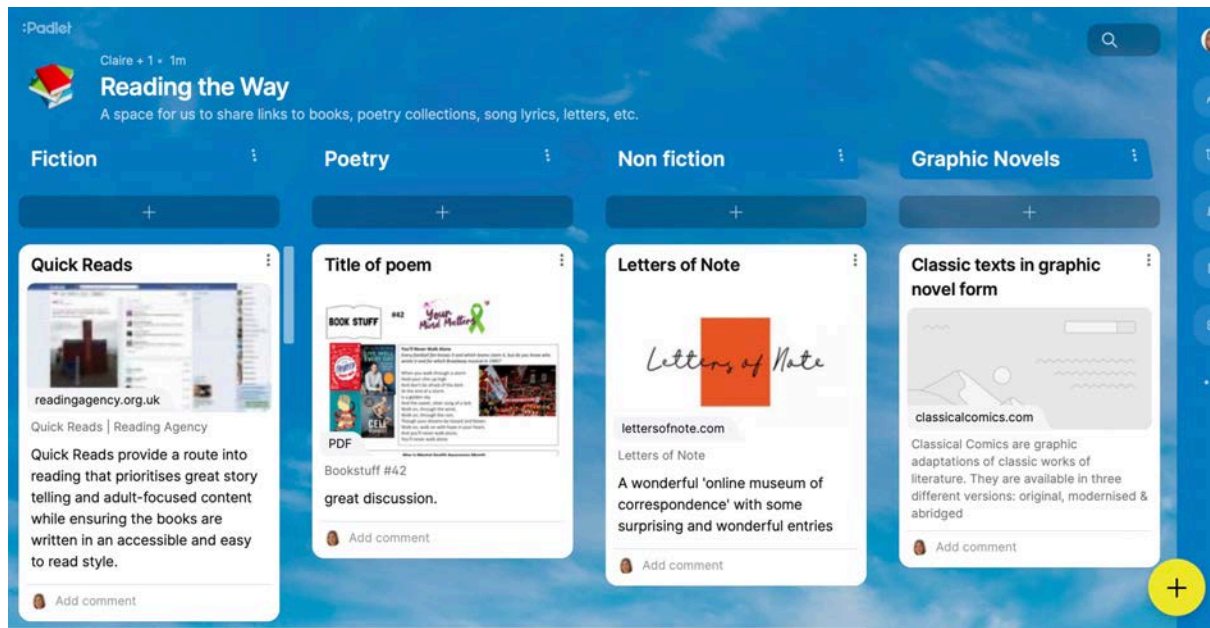
into a circle can help ensure the group feels less like 'education' and more like a reading group. We also noted that starting with tea, coffee and nice biscuits made a difference and that having inexpensive reading glasses, overlays, notebooks and pens to give to the group members was greatly appreciated.

As in any reading group, though, perhaps the biggest question is around which text or texts to read.

One decision is whether to aim to read one longer text (a short story perhaps, as we did in the pilot groups) gradually, in five or six chunks over as many weeks, or use different texts each week. We decided to work through one longer text, as we felt that the skill of building up a longer text over time is an important one to practise and the satisfaction from doing so is worth experiencing. We also decided, though, to use a number of shorter texts each week too, so that a) there would be a variety of text types for group members to experience and topics to appeal, and b) we could use each week's discussions to generate ideas for shorter texts to bring in the following week, and therefore incorporate a crucial and explicit element of choice. Choice could also be brought into the selection of a longer text to be read over weeks, with blurbs shared, a group discussion and a vote. Choice is important in any reading group but particularly so in the prison context where group members are denied choice in many aspects of their prison lives and so value choice of texts all the more.

It is also important to think about which types of texts might 'work' better with a group for emergent readers (*might* is an important word as you never know how a text will go down, and you just have to be ready to try and switch if needed). We were reminded of the 'grade the task not the text' mantra from language teaching, which argues that any text could potentially be used with any group, as long as the activity (what you are doing with the text) is adapted to suit the group. In the pilot groups, we considered how we could read a text aloud ourselves and encourage those who felt confident to read, and others could listen and follow along in the text – and everyone could take part in the lively discussions. With all this in mind, for the pilot groups we chose a story which we thought would be engaging and without overly complex syntax or vocabulary, but not a story particularly designed for 'beginner readers.' We did, however, take care to include additional texts (such as poems, recipes, song lyrics and short narratives) which we had either adapted for emergent readers or which were simpler in design, structure and the words included. And we were always ready to abandon a text or turn to something else if it seemed not to be working well with a group.

Please see the *Reading the Way* Padlet for ideas and useful places to look for texts, as well as notes from others about what worked well and why. You can access this on our *Reading the Way* Community Page. (Accessible through the main *Reading the Way* web page – see <https://prisonreadinggroups.org.uk/reading-the-way/>.)



A note on **materiality**: in the prison context, where the digital world is largely absent and written texts are in short(er) supply, the importance of the physical paper texts is heightened. For the texts we used in the pilots, we created photocopies, being mindful of layout and blank space to aim for the writing to be less intimidating, and to include photos (and use colour copies) where appropriate. We used off-white paper as this can also be helpful to many readers. We noticed how the group members took care of their copies and welcomed the opportunity to bring these, and other paper texts, back to their cells, to put on their walls and/or share with others.

Further support

We encourage you to sign up for free online mentoring sessions run by members of the *Reading the Way* team.

In order to help us monitor and improve our support, we ask that groups provide feedback at the end of a block of *Reading the Way* sessions. We will send a copy of the feedback form when you register for a mentoring session.

And do join the Jiscmail group. It's a great chance to exchange experience and ideas with others. You can find out about all the above aspects of the *Reading the Way* community on our Community Page (<https://prisonreadinggroups.org.uk/reading-the-way/>).

Quick tips and points to remember

- Invite about eight participants who will really benefit (those who lack confidence in reading and/or do not consider themselves readers; have a look at the 'emergent readers' section above)
- Have two or three facilitators, one of whom has experience working in prisons, all of whom have a love of stories and reading
- Agree ways of working with your participants at the beginning of the first session

- Use an inclusive space where participants will feel safe and which is conducive for discussion
- Choose an initial text that can be separated into five or six sections that can be read and discussed as the sessions progress – please see the *Reading the Way* Padlet for suggestions
- Allow further reading materials to be led by the participants and discussions
- At no point should participants be expected to do anything they feel uncomfortable with, including reading aloud
- Remember that this is not a class or ‘Education’. It’s an opportunity for participants to practise reading, enjoy discussions, gain confidence and discover that they are readers
- Bring good coffee, proper milk and nice biscuits – it makes a difference!

FAQs

If you have a question that is not answered below, you can add it to the Padlet on our Community Page (<https://prisonreadinggroups.org.uk/reading-the-way/>).

Should we run in a classroom or library?/ Where should the groups take place?

This will depend on the local situation and what is possible. Running a reading group in the library can be a good idea as this means the members get to see all the other books around them, and also emphasises that this is not ‘education’ but something different. If it’s not possible, though, to run it in a library, a classroom could work, perhaps with the tables and chairs rearranged so it’s in more of a circle formation and different from classes.

For how many weeks should a Reading the Way group run?

Our pilot study experienced suggested that, for many, a six to eight week duration, with one session a week, can work well, providing enough time to read a longer text and for members to get to know each other and this way of working, and feel they are making some progress with their reading. Some people might find an eight-week activity off-putting and may find a shorter duration appeals. It is also worth thinking about what happens after the designated number of weeks. Will members be referred to forms of education or other sorts of reading groups (if these exist)? Will they be able to continue with another Reading the Way group? Various models will make sense but will need careful thought. It’s also possible to have a Reading the Way group with no specified end-date (as is the case with many other reading groups).

How long should each weekly session last?

Again, this will depend on the local situation and ways of working in your particular prison. Our pilot groups lasted for around 90 minutes, one session a week. Slightly shorter could also work, but less than an hour may not allow enough time for reading and discussion. Slightly longer could also work, though maintaining interest for longer than two hours may be harder.

What’s the best number of participants to aim for?

Seven or eight people usually works well – enough for a lively discussion but not so many that it feels overwhelming. If there's high turnover in your prison, you may want to create a waiting list and replace members who are transferred or released.

What do we do if someone is struggling to sound-out a word or reads it wrong – should we jump in?

We suggest talking about this in an initial 'ways of working' discussion. It may be that many would prefer to be given a bit of time to work out a word, or to self-correct, before others 'jump in' and help, but after a minute may then want help if they still need it. But this will depend on the group, and it needs to be discussed!

Are we teaching reading? Do we need to know about phonics, etc?

A Reading the Way group is not a form of literacy teaching, but rather an opportunity to practise reading in a supported way. However, we do think it's important for facilitators to have some understanding of reading and reading development (including, but not exclusively, phonics) in order to be able to support group members. Please see 'the key ideas' section of this guidance.

Are these groups for ESOL learners or adults who are newer to the English language?

Reading the Way was developed for emergent adult readers, that is, adults who feel they cannot read or who struggle with reading, while being fluent in speaking and listening. It is not aimed at prisoners who are newer to the English language, and who therefore may struggle to read and write, as well as speak and listen, in English. However, if someone has grown up speaking another language, learnt English and now speaks and understands English but feels they need practice with reading in particular, then Reading the Way could be for them. Please get in touch if we can help thinking this through, and also if you are interested in developing reading groups specifically for ESOL learners.

Should we include comprehension exercises, questions and homework, etc?

No, this is not a class. Asking members to do exercises or homework is likely to make it feel less like a reading group and more like 'education'. If members want to do bits of writing, though, this may be an interesting thing to pursue, but we'd recommend being very clear that this is not homework but rather about a group deciding to do some writing.

Who should facilitate?

There are many different people who could make great facilitators, including librarians, teachers, PRG volunteers, prison officers and others. We are also recommending teams of two (or possibly three). Please see the section on facilitators above for a sense of what we feel is the expertise which could be developed and how.

Can you help me find a co-facilitator?

We may be able to help link you up with a volunteer. Please get in touch if we can help. But as a first step we recommend that you make contact with as many people as possible in your prison who have an interest in reading development: Heads of Education, Skills and Work, Education managers and teachers, Shannon Trust facilitators, librarians. Talk together about how the group might run, how to identify and recruit participants, logistics (when, where,

how long, unlock and escort). This will help spread awareness through the prison and make your group part of a joined-up reading culture.

Are there topics that are off limits?

Through trauma-informed lenses, there may well be topics which could be particularly upsetting for those in prison, for example, stories about childhood or raising children. But it may not be easy or desirable to avoid all topics which have potential to be upsetting. Also, there may be topics which are best left alone (mindful it is not advisable to discuss people's crimes). This is why we recommend that at least one facilitator has experience of working in prisons, and ideally in the prison in which the group is taking place, and this can be carefully discussed.

What happens after the Reading the Way group finishes?/ Is there a part two?/ What next, etc?

We'd recommend having a sense (from conversations within the prison, with librarians, the Shannon Trust and Education) of the sorts of options that may be available to members after a reading group. This might include doing some writing or sharing on prison radio, going regularly to the prison library, making time to read every day, taking an education class or joining a PRG reading group. It may also make more sense for someone to join another Reading the Way group if possible. The important thing is that discussions are had and no one is simply 'ticked off' and forgotten about.

What are the costs?

You will need to find a small budget for photocopying and refreshments. PRG can help fund notebooks and inexpensive reading glasses to help welcome participants to the group.