

## **Working With a Book in an LLC Class**

There are several key advantages of working with a book:

- There is a built-in structure.
- All participants will have some shared knowledge.
- It makes it easier for some presenters.

There are also several disadvantages:

- Unless you specifically structure your course around the book, there can be extraneous information there.
- You may not be able to perfectly match your course concept to an available book.
- The book may limit the direction the course seems to want to go in.
- Some people may not do the reading. (Too much of a time investment.)

If you do decide to use a book, make sure that you do the following:

- Choose the right reading(s). This usually means serious but non-academic books and articles. Avoid using a college textbook (or its equivalent) for your class—especially if it's old. Locate recent and/or readable books in your subject area that are aimed at the general public. LLC'ers enjoy classes that include or are based on a book (or books) aimed at an interested but general audience.
- Decide whether the book(s) will be recommended or required and if students should read them before the first class or throughout the semester (with pages/chapters assigned on the syllabus for each class.) In general, people prefer to have books that will be used in class, with assigned reading, rather than just be “suggested”.
- Select books that are widely available for a reasonable price. This generally means NOT using brand-new books that have to be purchased as new and expensive hard-covers, and NOT using rare old books that are hard to find.
- If the class will be doing any kind of text analysis/interaction (e.g. in a literature class) it's important to ask everyone to buy the same edition so that when someone says “the poem is on page 372” everyone can find it. If there are many available editions, think about why one would be better than another (bigger print, better footnotes, better critical essays appended, more availability) before making your choice.
- Think carefully about the number of pages you are asking your class to read. You may choose one or more books/articles, but the total number of pages should be manageable. It's hard to give an exact number because it depends heavily on the difficulty level of the reading. (Reading a novel goes a lot faster than reading a dense historical text!)
- Use it in class enough. If you ask people to read a book, and then you don't spend much time on it in class, participants will be frustrated. If they've invested the time in reading the book, they may be disappointed because they read the book, genuinely wanted to talk about it, and weren't given the opportunity.

Here are some of the ways you can use a book:

- You can organize the entire course around the book(s). The course structure will be based on the readings and the sequence of the readings in the book. Almost every class will contain presentations and discussions that augment and expand on the book material, and opportunities for students to discuss the readings.
- You can use a different organizing principle but assign readings that fit and supplement the topics at various points. Assigning the right readings can make for livelier discussions—when a presenter introduces a subject, everyone in the class has one reading in common and can use that reading to inform their discussion points.
- You can assign readings that structure only part of a course. For example, in a course on the history of Santa Fe, the coordinator assigned three short books, and each of these books was discussed for two class hours on two subsequent weeks. (This gave six presenters the option to lead a book discussion rather than “do a presentation.”) The books’ topics included three different historical periods, so these six class hours were fit in during the semester as the course arrived at that time period.
- You can make your own book—using sections of books or other readings which can be delivered to the class in printed form or online.

In every case, if presenters will be presenting on a book (or other readings), make sure that they don’t just summarize the reading in class. Remind them that everyone will have done the reading. If discussion questions will be used, try to distribute them 3-5 days before class so participants have time to think about them. If the presenter does a more formal presentation, encourage them to augment or supplement the information in the book. For example, they might present information on the historical period in which a piece of literature was set or written. Here’s how one course evaluation described it; they wanted to see “presentations that stretched the conversation rather than book reports.”

If you assign chapter readings throughout the semester, try to discourage participants from bringing arguments from later chapters of the book into an earlier class. Here’s a comment from a course evaluation survey: “I would have liked discussion to focus more on the actual chapters of the book. I read along with the schedule but found others had already completed the book, so I was not familiar with the ideas they were referring to.”

If books are to be discussed or assigned, make it clear in your catalog description what the readings are and how you will use them. If you want everyone to use the same edition (see above), that specific edition should be clearly listed in the catalog.

Include specific reading assignments in your syllabus. If you already have your syllabus done by the time the catalog goes to press, put a link to your syllabus in the catalog description so that participants can see right away how the book will be used in class. (LLC can help you do this.) If you don’t have the syllabus ready by then, be sure that it’s ready when registration starts so that you send it to participants as soon as they register.