



Discussion Guide for *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott

What Is Shared Inquiry?

Shared Inquiry is an active and collaborative search for answers to questions of meaning about a text. Rooted in the Socratic method, Shared Inquiry is distinct in its focus on high-quality texts and the skilled questioning of the leader.

Shared Inquiry discussion engages all participants in reading closely, asking questions, and building answers. Discussion leaders use questions to help participants develop ideas, explain evidence, and respond to each other. Because discussion focuses on interpretive questions that have more than one reasonable answer, the goal is not consensus, and the leader does not offer answers. Participants weigh multiple ideas and come to their own reasoned conclusions.

Shared Inquiry Discussion Guidelines

Great Books participants of all ages use the guidelines below to keep discussions productive and civil.

- 1. Read the text (or listen to it) carefully before the discussion.** This ensures that all participants are prepared to support opinions with evidence from the text and respond to others' ideas.
- 2. Discuss only the text that everyone has read.** Talking at length about personal experiences or unfamiliar texts can exclude some participants and cause discussion to drift off topic.
- 3. Support your ideas with evidence from the text.** Evidence enables everyone to weigh the validity of different ideas, rather than merely agreeing or disagreeing.
- 4. Listen to other participants and respond to them directly.** Shared Inquiry is about learning from each other, so participants should feel free to speak directly to one another rather than only to the leader.
- 5. Expect the leader to only ask questions.** The leader models a willingness to hear what everyone thinks by asking questions rather than sharing ideas and answers.

Using the suggested discussion questions and note-taking prompts

The discussion questions are designed to be used after readers have completed the novel.

Each group of discussion questions includes a focus question in bold and a number of related questions. The focus question concerns a large issue in the text, making it ideal to explore in depth. The related questions highlight specific parts of the novel that address the focus question. There is no need to ask all the related questions—introduce a few naturally into the discussion, particularly to bring up aspects of the book that haven't been considered.

The note-taking prompt suggested with each group of questions is designed to prepare readers to answer the focus question. Having readers compare how they marked a few specific passages can be an effective prediscussion activity.

Leading Shared Inquiry discussion

- If possible, arrange seating so that everyone can easily see and hear each other. This encourages participants to talk to each other, not just to the leader.
- Give participants time to reflect on the focus question, look through the text for evidence, and write down a provisional response on the Building Your Answer page before starting discussion. You may choose to give the question in advance, or allow five to ten minutes for individual reflection at the beginning of the discussion session.
- Focus on listening and asking follow-up questions about participants' ideas, support for those ideas, and responses to others' statements. Slow down discussion if it is going too fast to ask follow-up questions. (See below for more about follow-up questions).
- Try making a seating chart and tracking participation using check marks each time a participant speaks; you may also wish to jot down notes about specific ideas offered in discussion.
- Close discussion when the group has addressed the focus question in depth. This is also a good time to ask quieter participants to share their thoughts.

Asking follow-up questions

Follow-up questions are spontaneous questions based on participants' ideas and comments. Leaders use follow-up questions to help participants extend their thinking in three essential areas.

IDEA: Asking participants to generate, clarify, and develop answers to the focus question keeps the conversation focused and invites new insights.

- *How did you respond to the focus question?*
- *Does anyone have a different idea about that passage?*
- *What do you mean by that word?*

EVIDENCE: Asking for evidence from the text throughout the discussion is vital to deepening consideration of ideas.

- *Where do you see that in the text?*
- *What page is that on? Would you please read us that passage?*
- *How does that part of the text support your interpretation?*

RESPONSE: Asking participants to agree, disagree, or build on one another's ideas creates a dynamic conversation and fosters meaningful collaboration.

- *What is your response to the idea [participant's name] shared?*
- *Have you heard an answer you agree with?*
- *How does your idea relate to the idea [participant's name] offered?*

Little Women Discussion Questions

Focus Question 1 Why does Jo give up her writing career to raise children and run a school with Professor Bhaer?

- Why does Jo fall “into a vortex” and give herself up to a “writing fit” when she works on her stories? (Chapter 27)
- Why does earning money by writing make Jo “feel herself a power in the house”? (Chapter 27)
- Why does Jo go against her father’s advice and publish her novel?
- Why does Alcott say that Jo’s pursuit of material for her stories leads her to “unconsciously . . . desecrate some of the womanliest attributes of a woman’s character”? (Chapter 34)
- After Professor Bhaer calls sensational stories “bad trash,” why does Jo think that her stories “are trash, and will soon be worse than trash if I go on”? (Chapter 34)
- Why is Jo able to write successful, non-sensational stories once she starts writing for her family, with “no thought of fame or money”? (Chapter 42)
- After her marriage, why do Jo’s previous ambitions seem “selfish, lonely, and cold” to her? (Chapter 47)
- Why does Jo tell her mother and sisters that she hasn’t “given up the hope that I may write a good book yet”? (Chapter 47)

Suggested note-taking prompt: Mark a P where Jo’s writing ambitions are presented as having a positive effect and an N where they are presented as having a negative effect.

Focus Question 2 What do the fates of Meg, Beth, and Amy suggest about Alcott’s view of the options available to American women at the time?

- At the beginning of the book, why does Mrs. March suggest that all the girls play *Pilgrim’s Progress* “in earnest”? (Chapter 1)
- While staying at the Moffats’, why does Meg tell Laurie, “I’m not Meg, to-night; I’m ‘a doll,’ who does all sorts of crazy things”? (Chapter 9)
- Why does Beth’s illness make Meg appreciate “the real blessings of life”? (Chapter 18)
- Why does Amy resolve to be less selfish so that she will “be loved and missed by a great many friends”? (Chapter 20)
- When she is married, why does Meg bring so much “love, energy, and cheerfulness” to the work of housekeeping? (Chapter 28)
- Why is Amy determined to “be great, or nothing” in art? (Chapter 39)
- Why are we told that Beth’s life represents “the true success which is possible to all”? (Chapter 40)
- Why is Amy happy being married to Laurie?
- Why does Amy mostly give up art after her marriage, except for modeling a figure of her child? (Chapter 47)

Suggested note-taking prompt: Mark a W where a character is presented as being wise and an F where a character is presented as being foolish.

Focus Question 3 Does *Little Women* present money more as a force for evil or for good?

- Why do the girls immediately agree to give their Christmas breakfast to the Hummels, even though they were sighing about being poor earlier?
- Why doesn't the difference between poverty and wealth keep the Marches and Mr. Laurence from being "neighborly"? (Chapter 6)
- Why does Meg's visit to the Moffatts make her feel that "she was a very destitute and much injured girl"? (Chapter 9)
- Why does Mrs. March tell Meg and Jo that "I never want you to think it [money] is the first or only prize to strive for"? (Chapter 9)
- Why does Aunt March tell Meg that "it's your duty to make a rich match"? (Chapter 23)
- After reading one of Jo's stories, why does her father tell her to "aim at the highest, and never mind the money"? (Chapter 27)
- Why does the violet silk dress haunt Meg "like the ghost of a folly that was not easily laid"? (Chapter 28)
- Why does Amy refuse Fred Vaughn's proposal when she had decided earlier to accept it?
- Why does the novel end with all of the main characters except Amy in roughly the same financial position they started in?

Suggested note-taking prompt: Mark a G where money is presented as a force for good and an E where money is presented as a force for evil.

Focus Question 4 How does the power of the male characters in *Little Women* compare to the power of the female characters?

- Why does Alcott construct the book so that Mr. March is absent for half of it?
- Why is Laurie accepted by the Marches as virtually another member of the family?
- What qualities lead Meg to fall in love with John Brooke?
- Why does Mr. Laurence call Jo "a sly puss" but add that "I don't mind being managed by you and Beth"? (Chapter 21)
- Why does Alcott have Mr. March give his judgment of how each daughter has progressed during the year he was gone?
- Why does Alcott say that "to outsiders," the March women seem to rule the house, but Mr. March "was still the head of the family"? (Chapter 24)
- Why is it Professor Bhaer who convinces Jo that her sensational stories are "bad trash"? (Chapter 34)
- Why does Laurie stop sulking about Jo's rejection when Amy tells him he needs to "set about another task"? (Chapter 39)
- Are we intended to believe that Amy will "rule" Laurie, as Jo says? (Chapter 43)

Suggested note-taking prompt: Mark an S where a male character is presented as strong and a W where a male character is presented as weak.

About the Great Books Foundation

The Great Books Foundation is an independent, nonprofit educational organization that has been creating reading and discussion programs for over 70 years. We believe that literacy and critical thinking form reflective, knowledgeable citizens and that open inquiry into the world's enduring texts advances the ultimate promise of democracy—participation for all. Through our publications and our teaching of the Shared Inquiry™ method of learning, we seek to:

- Inspire students to explore essential ideas and learn to read and think critically
- Equip teachers to lead engaging, inquiry-focused explorations of challenging texts
- Build communities of lifelong learners and engaged citizens
- Expand access to inquiry-based learning through partnerships and outreach programs

Building Your Answer in Shared Inquiry Discussion

Name: _____

Text: _____

Focus question: _____

Your answer before the discussion: _____

How did the discussion affect your answer? Did it change your mind? Provide additional support for your answer? Make you aware of additional issues? _____

Your answer after the discussion: _____

What in the text helped you decide on this answer? _____

