

ASHLAND NEW PLAYS FESTIVAL

GROUP LEADER GUIDE

Our Mission

Ashland New Plays Festival assists playwrights in the development of new works through public readings and offers an educational forum to the community through discussions and workshops.

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Overview

The Mission of ANPF is to assist playwrights in the development of new works through public readings and to offer educational forums to the community through discussions and workshops.

The Reading Committee is the largest volunteer group within ANPF. Readers with a variety of backgrounds are recruited from the community at large. Some of our readers are former community thespians, playwrights, and directors. Other readers join ANPF because of their overall passion for the theatre or general interest. Some readers have experience with critical analysis; others will need your guidance in learning how to evaluate and score plays.

As a Group Leader, your overriding responsibility is to be an ambassador for ANPF. For many volunteers, you are the face of ANPF. Make sure you are well versed in the Readers Handbook, know the timelines for Rounds One and Two, and know how to respond to readers' questions and concerns.

In addition, a Group Leader acts as an organizing agent to facilitate discussion and exploration of the assigned plays for your group. You will be responsible for the following:

- ensuring that all the **assigned plays are read**
- scheduling and implementing **regular meetings** to discuss plays
- monitoring that **each play is scored** by all assigned readers
- overseeing that **scores are submitted by each reader** to meet deadlines

Although you will be reading and scoring plays yourself, it is not your responsibility to ensure agreement of the readers, nor to sway anyone to your point of view. You may advocate for a play based upon your perspective, like any other member of the group. However, be careful to ensure that your opinion is but one of many. The goal of meetings is that all perspectives are heard and respected.

As a leader, you need to provide clarity and consistency to readers as they discuss plays and scoring. Make sure you clearly understand the scoring guidelines and can describe them to readers.

Responsibilities of Group Leaders

- Act as an informal ambassador for ANPF.
- Schedule, plan and facilitate group meetings to discuss and score plays in Round 1 and Round 2.
- Attend group leader meetings (typically one in each round) to share best practices, identify issues, and provide feedback to Reader Committee co-chairs.
- Attend Reader Training, Kickoff meeting, Final Reader Meeting and Reader Appreciation Party.
- Ensure readers submit their scores for Rounds 1 and 2 and ratings in Round 2 within the deadlines.
- Read plays and participate as a group member.
- Provide feedback and suggestions for improvements to the Reading Committee co-chairs.

Logistics

- Managing Distribution of Plays
 - Email – as soon as the URLs are provided by Penny, forward the list to your group, with instructions regarding which plays to read.
 - Print – if you are facilitating a group that reads paper copies, coordinate with Penny to get your copies. Provide an accessible waterproof box where readers can sign scripts in and out. Typically, a covered front porch is sufficient. You may want to include a pen/pencil and flashlight in the box.
 - PDF – some readers prefer to receive PDF copies. Download the plays from Dropbox URLs into PDF format and send to readers.
 - Other technology – Kindle (thanks to Chris Mock)

How to install a play pdf file on your Kindle device

- Download the pdfs for each play to your computer.
 - You will need to determine your “send-to-Kindle” email address. The address can be found by logging into your Amazon account.
 - At the top of your Amazon screen, there should be a menu bar with a number of options. Choose “Manage Your Content and Devices”.
 - The “Manage Your Content and Devices” page is divided into three sections: Your Content, Your Devices, and Settings.
 - Open “Your Devices”, and you will see pictures of all your Kindle devices.
 - Select the device you want, and make a note of what address is given next to the “E-mail:” heading. It will always end with @kindle.com.
 - Once you know the address. Select one of the play pdfs from your downloads. Using your regular email address in the “from box”, type your “send-to-Kindle” address in the “to box”. It is not necessary to include a subject.
 - Use the “attach” paper clip icon to find and attach the play pdf to your email and send.
 - You **cannot** attach more than one pdf at a time. You will need to send a separate email for each play.
 - The plays will automatically be loaded onto your Kindle device, in the same manner that a book is loaded.
 - Note: Allow a minute or so between each emailing. The Kindle may not install a follow up play until the previous one has been installed. If this happens, and a play doesn’t appear, you will need to send it again.
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- Remote Readers – Skype
 - Ensure you have the reader’s Skype address (and they have yours).
 - Test your system and “connect-ability” before your meeting (e.g. day before).
 - Connect with the Skype reader 5-10 minutes before the start of the meeting.

- Remind the readers to speak up and ask questions of the reader who is participating by Skype. Make sure to stop any side conversations, as it is difficult for the Skyping reader to more than one person speaking at a time.
- Scores
 - During Round 1, send the play numbers and titles of the "all-read" plays to Penny as soon as possible.
 - Only the scores for Round 1 "all-read" plays should be sent to Penny.
 - During Round 2, all readers must read and score all plays. If a reader read a play in Round 1, they should read it again in Round 2.
 - Remind readers to copy you on their scoring email to Penny. (This is important, as Penny maintains the reader data based upon the group leader.)
 - At the end of Round 2, all readers need to send in their top 6 plays, in rank order to Penny. Again, copying their leader.
 - Once the top 6 plays have been submitted to Penny, they may not be changed.
 - The ranking process will determine the top 12 plays to be submitted to the Artistic Direction team.

Facilitation of Meetings

- First Meeting

Schedule a separate meeting, lengthen your first meeting or send an email prior to your first meeting to cover/discuss the following:

- Calendar for meetings for Round 1 and Round 2.
- Review salient sections of Reader's Guide, e.g. evaluation of plays, scoring.
- Review ANPF Mission – "...assists playwrights in the development of new works...."

- Discuss commitment – roughly four to five months of reading and meetings.
 - Review and discuss the scoring process, definition of a 5, 4, etc. to ensure and foster alignment mutual understanding.
 - Discuss the importance of keeping notes for each play to be able to remember the basis for the score.
 - Discuss timeline and pace for reading (e.g. “we’ll need to read roughly 8 plays between meetings, it will typically take 1-1½ hours to read and score a play).
 - Discuss importance of reading plays in numerical order, maintaining the pace of reading, sending detailed feedback if they are ill and can’t attend a meeting, and sending in scores on time.
- Managing the time within meetings
 - In Round 1 spend time discussing the plays with higher scores as well as those that have disparate scores (e.g. 1’s and 5’s). Don’t spend a lot of time discussing low scored plays as they will not be moving on. However, it can be useful to discuss briefly why readers gave a play a low score.
 - Ensure that everyone gets to share their opinion. Ask those who may be more quiet to provide feedback first.
 - Don’t allow anyone to monopolize the conversation.
- Solicit operating agreements within the group (this should be done in person during the first meeting). For example:
 - Asking open-ended questions to foster understanding
 - One person speaks at a time
 - No side conversations
 - Differences of opinion are valid and respected
 - Listening respectfully to the feedback of everyone in the group
 - Collect and distribute contact information during the first meeting.

- If you choose to do so, ask readers to send their scores to you prior to each meeting, so you know which plays will need more time for discussion.
- Some groups like to have some sort of refreshments available during meetings. Ask your group what they would prefer. If appropriate, rotate responsibility around the group.

Between Meetings

- Communicate as necessary with the group.
 - Remind them of the next meeting.
 - Tell them which plays will be discussed and emphasize the importance of reading those plays prior to each meeting.
- Follow-up with any readers who are struggling to maintain the reading pace, missing meetings, etc.
- Remind readers of any changes to the schedule, etc.

Scheduling

- Plan for a minimum of three meetings per round. A meeting every two weeks is suggested.
- Two hours per meeting should be sufficient, if you keep the conversation moving.

Best Practices

- Send agendas prior to meetings, include plays to be read and total scores.
- Spend time discussing scoring in the first meeting and in consequent meetings, as needed.
- Provide a form to organize feedback based upon Reader's Guide.
- Provide readers a scoresheet so they can track the scores for each play.
- Identify all-read plays as you go forward, rather than waiting.
- Discuss personal bias challenges for readers in the first meeting.
- Provide snacks and drinks for readers (responsibility can be rotated).
- Acknowledge reader's comments, thank them for their time and contributions regularly.
- Host a "end of the process" party for reader group.

Challenging Issues

- Assigned a new reader after the play assignments have been sent.
 - Contact your readers as soon as possible as their reading assignments may be changed.
 - Contact the new reader to orient him/her to the process, calendar, etc.
- A "no-show" reader, a reader who begins to miss meetings, and/or falls significantly behind in reading.
 - Try to contact the reader and offer information/help.
 - Maintain a positive attitude when talking with the reader, and see if you can convert to another volunteer role with ANPF.
 - Contact the Reading Committee co-chairs.
 - Determine with co-chairs and/or Penny how to re-distribute plays.
- Reader wants to know why we don't provide feedback to the playwrights.

- Explain that this has been discussed by the Board many times. There are several issues: legal, complexity, organization, etc.
- A reader dominates the conversations and/or talks over others when they try to present their point of view.
 - Interrupt if necessary and state that we need to hear everyone’s perspective. Ask the next reader for their feedback and score. (If this is a pattern, you may need to pull the reader aside and have a discussion reminding them that the goal is to hear all the readers.)
- Two readers get into an argument regarding a play and their different views.
 - If it truly begins to become an argument and both readers have provided their point of view, ask them to stop talking and ask other readers for their perspectives.

Example Timeline: (Please check the website for the latest timeline.)

November – Group Leader Meeting, Determine Reading Groups

December – Kick-Off Meeting, Reader Training

Round 1 Begins – Mid-December

Group Leader Meeting – January

Round 1 Ends – Mid-February

Round 2 Begins – Mid-March

Group Leader Meeting - April

Round 2 Ends – Mid-May

Final Reader Meeting – June

Reader Appreciation Party – June

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Should readers be concerned about plays in which there are a lot of stage directions? After all, in a play reading, that means the audience needs to listen to stage directions rather than dialogue.

A: Our goal is to provide an opportunity for new plays to be produced. Stage directions are a critical aspect of a play. However, stage directions (or the volume of same) should not be a criterion for scoring.

Q: What if a reader thinks that a play will be difficult to appreciate in a reading production?

A: The reader should focus on character, dialogue, and structure. How the play will be produced as a reading will be the responsibility of the director.

Q: What if a reader thinks that a play would make a better movie or television script? For example, there is a lot of technology involved (videos, overlays, digital displays, etc.).

A: Again the reader should focus on character, dialogue, and structure. If in the top ranked plays, the Artistic Director will determine how to address the stage directions for technological aspects of the play.

Q: What if a reader doesn't like the topic of the play, or, is offended by the language in a play?

A: As much as possible, readers should try to put their feelings aside and evaluate the play on its merits. You may need to remind readers of this during the reading cycle.

Q: Why don't we provide feedback to playwrights? It seems like it would be easy to take a few notes and send those to the top 15-20 playwrights.

A: This question has come up multiple times. The Board has discussed this issue with ANPF's Artistic Director and the determination at this time is not to provide feedback to playwrights.

Q: What if a play's structure is so different that readers are confused?

A: Ask questions. How does the structure contribute to a new perspective? How does the structure move the play forward or contribute to the arc of the play? Remind readers that just because something is different, that doesn't mean it should be discounted.