

# Guidelines For Preparing Text Study<sup>1</sup>

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Text study is an integral part of The RE-IMAGINE Project. The medium is the message. The project examines Jewish education in the synagogue, so it is imperative to model learning as a core value.

Jewish texts have been selected for each of your Task Force meetings. However, you may want to select a different text or you may be selecting a text study for your Leadership Team meetings.

When preparing a text study for a Task Force or Leadership Team meeting, the following steps are helpful:

- Identify the purpose(s);
- Select the text(s);
- Articulate questions to ask about the text(s);
- Choose a format for text study;
- Assign a facilitator (or facilitators);
- Prepare a handout; and
- Practice (with a small group, if possible).

## Identify the Purpose(s)

Think about the purpose of your meeting:

- What significant issues will be discussed;
- What challenges may arise;
- How does the discussion add to the larger goal(s)?

Text study can add meaning to significant issues, add understanding in moments of challenge and serve to keep focus on larger goals. Text study can set a tone for a meeting and help a group work together as a community.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from “Guidelines for Developing a Text Study” developed by Jewish Day Schools for the 21st Century, a Project of the Rhea Hirsch School of Education supported by a grant from the AVI CHAI Foundation



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If you are creating a text study to substitute for the suggested one in the Guidebook, consider how you will achieve the purpose of the original text study. This may be through the new text study or in a different way. Your consultant can help you with this.

## Select the Text(s)

Connect your text selection to the purpose(s) you identified for the meeting. Ask yourself, “What will this text add to our discussions?”

Consult classical as well as modern sources. Check the **ECE Online Resource Center** for texts to consider or go online to other helpful sites like [www.MyJewishLearning.com](http://www.MyJewishLearning.com); read your local Jewish paper for the Torah portion of the week, check your synagogue’s library for collections of Jewish text based on topical issues. Consult your rabbi, cantor, or educational director for suggested texts. You may want to look at Biblical or rabbinic texts (e.g., Talmud or Midrash), medieval sources, the writings of modern thinkers, and articles by observers of contemporary Jewry.

A text should be complex enough to elicit the interest of the group, but not so complex it leads to confusion and discomfort (especially for the novice participant). A certain amount of tension within the text is also desirable as tension can lead to sharpened thinking and more nuanced (less simplistic) responses. At times, you might want to select two texts that address the same topic but draw different conclusions.

## Articulate Questions to Ask About the Text(s)

It is helpful to think about the following questions when preparing a text study:

- **Background:** Where does it come from? Who wrote it? When was it written? These questions can be addressed by the facilitator in brief introductory remarks—all the others call for the participants to interact with the text and with one another.
- **Comprehension:** What does the text say? Are there conflicting explanations of what the text says? Are there difficult concepts that need “unpacking?”
- **Analysis:** What does the text mean? How do the parts relate to each other? What is the deeper significance of the text and its message?
- **Application:** How can the text help us understand an aspect of our school, congregation, or Jewish education in a deeper way? What does the text contribute to the issues or challenges we face? How can we imagine the text informing our work in the school or how we work together as a group?



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## Choose a Format for Text Study

A text study may include one or more of the following configurations:

- Pairs (*chevruta*);
- Small groups; and/or
- Whole group.

For example, a text study might begin as a whole group with the leader providing background on the text. The group might then be broken up into *chevruta* pairs during which time the text is read and one or two questions discussed. The whole group might then come back together and answer one or two additional questions (perhaps the application questions). At times, the facilitator might want to wait to give the background of a text until some discussion has occurred. The background could then be used to provide an element of surprise or deepen the issues and understanding that arise from the text.

## Assign a Facilitator (or Facilitators)

One or two individuals should assume responsibility for leading the text study. They may want to consult with others who might have greater familiarity with the text, but facilitation skills are more important than sheer knowledge.

The facilitator should remember that the study is not about finding the “right answers.” It is important to create an atmosphere where all participants (novice and experienced) feel comfortable to speak. Every person’s contribution should be valued.

The facilitator can sum up the key points expressed during the session. Or the facilitator may ask summarizing questions to bring some closure to the discussion. Application may serve as a helpful way to conclude the study session.

## Prepare a Handout

Prepare a handout that includes:

- The *bracha* for text study;
- The text itself—Hebrew and English if appropriate;
- The questions for discussion; and
- Instructions for any small group or *chevruta* study.



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## **Practice (with a small group, if possible)**

It is always helpful to do a “practice run” of a text study to see how well various parts work and, in particular, to be sure the questions are clearly worded to elicit the type of discussion that is envisioned. If this is not possible, at the very least the person who has written the questions and instructions should share them with someone else to make sure they are clear.

We would appreciate the opportunity to share your original text study/questions with other congregations. Email them to Cyd Weissman at [cweissman@huc.edu](mailto:cweissman@huc.edu) and we will consider including them in the resource center for ECE congregations.



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