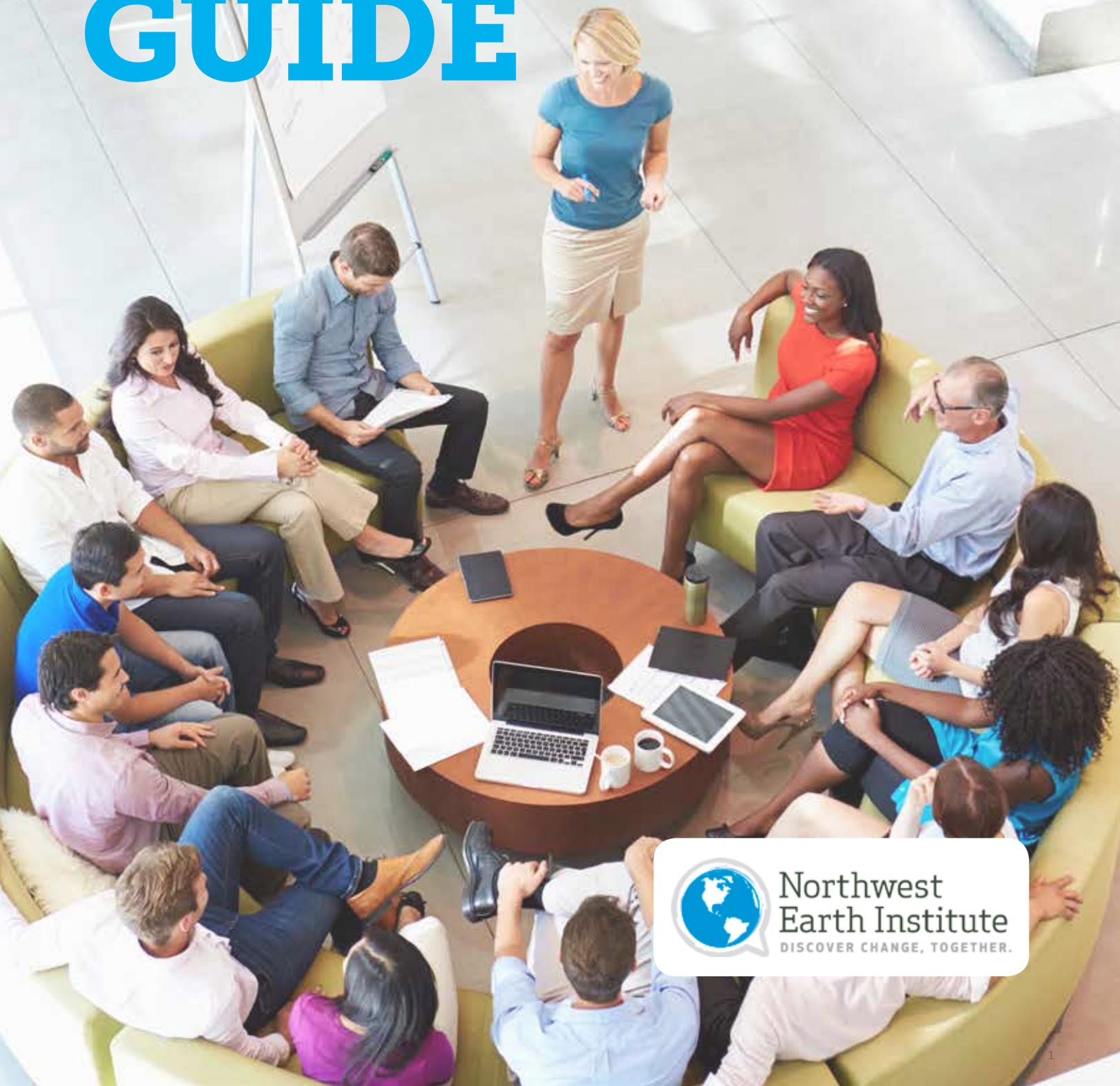


# COURSE ORGANIZER'S GUIDE





## CONTENTS

*Introduction*

*Our Model*

*Role of the Organizer*

*How to Organize a Discussion Group*

*Course Organizer Checklist for*

*First Session*

To order discussion course books,  
call the NWEI office directly or order  
online at [www.nwei.org/store](http://www.nwei.org/store)

107 SE Washington  
Suite 240  
Portland, OR 97214

phone: 503.227.2807  
fax: 503.227.2917

[contact@nwei.org](mailto:contact@nwei.org)  
[www.nwei.org](http://www.nwei.org)

[www.facebook.com/  
northwestearthinstitute](http://www.facebook.com/northwestearthinstitute)  
[www.twitter.com/nwearth](http://www.twitter.com/nwearth)  
[www.vimeo.com/nwei](http://www.vimeo.com/nwei)

# Introduction

*WELCOME FROM THE NORTHWEST EARTH INSTITUTE!*

Northwest Earth Institute was founded in 1993 with a simple objective: to give people a framework to talk about our relationship with the planet and to share in discovering new ways to live, work, create and consume.

And (as more than 160,000 NWEI participants worldwide have discovered since then) it turns out that within that simple objective is a recipe for powerful change.

When you break big issues into bite-sized pieces, and talk through them with the people who matter to you, you discover insights and inspiration. You learn, together. You build a personal network of shared stories and support that makes it easy to take action. In short, you become part of a community for change.

---

Thank you for joining Northwest Earth Institute as we pursue our mission of inspiring people to take responsibility for Earth. Together, we can make positive change.

NWEI discussion courses all begin with a course organizer and their desire to create a community of change. We provide a wide range of support tools, including this guide, our organizer training webinar, how-to videos, registration forms and an informative website. Course organizers choose one of NWEI's discussion course books and invite others to join them to discover change, together.

Some people find the term "organizer" to be a bit daunting. But it needn't be intimidating. There is no expectation that organizers have reached any specific level of wisdom, learning or environmental perfection. Organizers are simply people who are motivated to help others commit to sustainability action through the discussion course experience. Engaging in our Course Organizer webinar training will provide some extra support and tips for you as you explore organizing a discussion course.

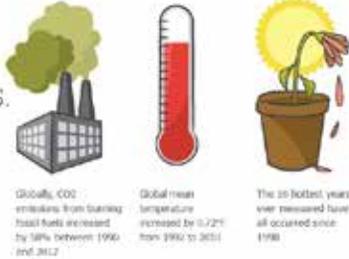
This guide contains some helpful information, based upon years of experience, for use by NW Earth Institute Course Organizers in organizing a successful discussion course group. If you have questions about the process or suggestions to improve these materials, please contact Liz Zavodsky, NWEI's Director of Membership and Engagement, at (503) 227-2807 or [liz@nwei.org](mailto:liz@nwei.org).



In some ways, the world has changed a lot in the past 20 years.

**0.02%** of the global population were internet users. 1999

**34.4%** of the global population are internet users. 2019



But has it changed for good?

How can we do better in the next 20 years? Our hearts are in the right place...



...But there's a big difference between **saying** what we believe and **doing** what we believe.



■ What Americans say they value  
■ What Americans actually "live" or "live" do.

Behavior change experts call this the "say-do" gap.



# Our Model

NW Earth Institute discussion courses are designed to encourage systems thinking and inspire participants to make positive changes in their own lives. All of the NW Earth Institute's programs are centered around three important elements of transformative learning: collaborative discovery, personal reflection, and opportunity for action.

## CONNECT: SHARED DISCOVERY

An important aspect of NW Earth Institute programs is the collaborative construction of knowledge that happens when participants share their own stories with each other. Program participants bring their own unique experiences and perspectives to the learning process and share their insights and knowledge with each other. Together, they construct an idea of what sustainability means for them in their time and location. This collaborative learning process is rich and social — learning is easier and more fun when it happens as a community. More than 90% of surveyed NW Earth Institute discussion course participants report that the group process and support inspired them to make personal changes.

## REFLECT: PERSONAL REFLECTION

A second key component of NW Earth Institute programs is personal and critical reflection. By reflecting on their own values and experiences, participants understand themselves, their peers, and their world better. The critical aspect is vital to transformation — participants must become critical of their own assumptions in order to transform their unquestioned frame of reference. NW Earth Institute discussion courses encourage transformative learning by posing questions targeted at personal and critical reflection.

## ACT: POSITIVE ACTION

NW Earth Institute programs are designed to facilitate community and develop relationships. When program participants have built-in support from their own community of change, taking action feels easier and more rewarding. Taking action encourages feelings of inspiration and empowerment, an important antidote to the feeling of being overwhelmed that commonly occurs when presented with new and challenging information about the current crises we face.

Participants are encouraged to start to take action where they are, with small actions that make sense in their own lives. From changing an incandescent light bulb to an LED bulb, to planting a garden, participants take small and achievable steps toward sustainable living. Collectively, those steps lead to real impact. The feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction help participants feel encouraged to take more positive actions.

## AFTER taking a course with NWEI



## SUPPORT THE NORTHWEST EARTH INSTITUTE

*NWEI was founded on the belief that the solution to many of the Earth's biggest challenges lies in the power of collective change: by taking small steps in our own lives, each of us contributes to a world of impact.*

*We strive to help people create change (both personal and global) by helping them connect with their communities, share learning and inspiration, and take action, together.*

*To date, we have helped more than 160,000 people change for good, in ways both small and large. But this is only the beginning. With your help, we will inspire more people to discover change, together.*

*As a nonprofit, we rely on generous contributions like yours to support our work. Your donation helps us build communities of change across the globe and allows us to keep our course books up-to-date. Call us at 503-227-2807, or visit [www.nwei.org/donate](http://www.nwei.org/donate) to make a tax-deductible contribution..*

Northwest Earth Institute  
107 SE Washington  
Suite 240  
Portland, OR 97214  
phone: 503.227.2807  
fax: 503.227.2917  
[contact@nwei.org](mailto:contact@nwei.org)  
[www.nwei.org](http://www.nwei.org)

## JOIN NWEI'S EFFORTS IN CREATING A MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

*We have helped people – in local communities, on college campuses, within faith communities, at work and through the EcoChallenge – change for good, in ways both small and large. Through shared learning, shared stories and shared action, our courses help foster a spirit of community and inspire change. Thousands have abandoned old habits to embrace more sustainable ways of living – from “buying local” and using reusable bags, to joining bike-to-work challenges and shopping second-hand.*

*NWEI is always looking to collaborate via organizational and community partnerships. If you would like to discuss more formal partnerships and collaborations, please contact us at (503) 227-2807. To see a list of our current partners visit our website and see the link at the bottom of the home page.*

# Role of the Organizer

Put simply, the Course Organizer starts the discussion course group and serves as the primary contact. There are 8 steps to organizing a successful NWEI discussion course (Step 5 is optional). We'll explain each of these in the next section of this manual, but for now they are:

- ▶ *Step 1. Choosing the right course*
- ▶ *Step 2. Advertising/recruiting participants*
- ▶ *Step 3. Scheduling your first meeting*
- ▶ *Step 4. Purchasing books*
- ▶ *Step 5. Facilitating the first session*
- ▶ *Step 6. Celebration and Call to Action*
- ▶ *Step 7. Evaluation*

Another important job of the Course Organizer is to model and communicate the following inclusive sustainability values:

**Learning in a NWEI course is collaborative and self-directed.** It is nobody's job in the course to be an expert, a teacher or a preacher. We believe that people will learn in a way that has the most profound impact when they learn through self-discovery and by sharing with and listening to each other.

**Endeavor to make visible the invisible.** NWEI discussion courses are designed to help participants, through critical reflection, to make visible their invisible assumptions about the way the world works and their places in it. The readings, discussion questions and activities will bring to light societal and personal assumptions and help participants question and dismantle them. This can be a challenging process, and it's important that participants are willing to be vulnerable and that the course organizer and subsequent facilitators create a safe and open space for this process.

**We are inclusive and nonjudgmental.** We are committed to meeting people where they are. We don't tell participants what to think, or buy, or do. And we believe no change is too small — in fact, those tiny choices we make every day, by rote or by habit (paper or plastic? take or toss? borrow or buy?) are exactly where change is most possible and powerful. Consensus on the “right” action that everyone should take is not the goal. Empowerment and inspiration are key to moving each person forward in a way that works for them.

Having outlined these core NWEI values, we want to note that we encourage all participants to be themselves! Each course organizer and facilitator will have their own unique style. The suggestions presented here aren't intended to regiment the process. The guidelines simply outline a process that has been successful and provide the minimal structure needed to help you get started. The first rule of organizing is “be yourself.” Handle each new situation in a way that is comfortable for you.



# How to Organize a Discussion Group

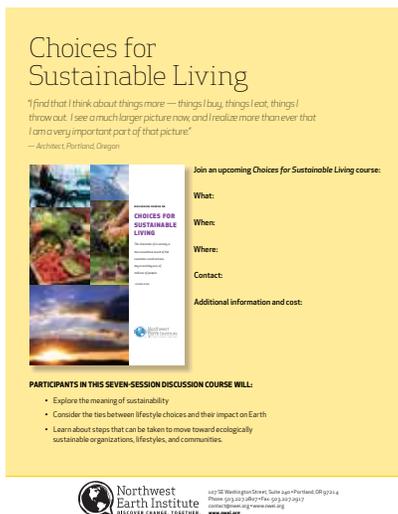
## STEP 1. CHOOSING THE RIGHT COURSE

NWEI discussion courses give people a framework to talk about their relationship with the planet and to share in discovering new ways to live, work, create and consume. NW Earth Institute currently offers nine discussion courses on various sustainability topics. Find descriptions of each of our discussion courses at [www.nwei.org](http://www.nwei.org), or call a member of our engagement team at 503-227-2807 to ask for specific recommendations.

When choosing which course to organize, consider the level of familiarity your potential audience has with the subject matter of each discussion course. If you know who your participants will be before you begin, you might want to take an informal poll about what is interesting to them and what they'd like to take action on in their circles of influence. NWEI does not recommend any particular order for going through the discussion courses — just choose something that sounds interesting to you and your potential participants and get going!

“Action on the environment comes from thinking about it — comes from real conversations about the real facts, our real lives, our real hopes. Northwest Earth Institute courses are one of those places that make those conversations happen, and that’s why they’re a vital part of the change we need to see.”

— Bill McKibben, author, *Deep Economy*



Find a flier to advertise your course at [www.nwei.org/organize-course/](http://www.nwei.org/organize-course/)

## STEP 2. ADVERTISING/RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

If you know the folks you would like to participate, make sure you reach out to them early enough with details of the discussion course (like the name of the book and how they can order it), share the flier with them so they can learn more about the content and focus of the book, set a date and time for at least your first meeting. We also recommend having a location lined up for your first meeting.

If you are recruiting participants that you may not know, it's important to have all of the *what, when, where, and how* details planned out in advance and listed on the flier for folks to know right away. NWEI has a Course organizer flier you can use to communicate all of the details of your course. You can find the flier to advertise your course at <http://www.nwei.org/organize-course/>.

Things you need to decide before you start spreading the word:

- ▶ *Where will you publicize this course so folks will see it, have interest, and sign up? The library? A food co-op? A community center or park? A place of worship? Work? Neighborhood?*
- ▶ **What** discussion course are you asking them to participate in?
- ▶ **When** will your course group meet? What time and day?
- ▶ **Where** will your discussion course meet? At your place of living? In a library community room? At a business? In another community space?
- ▶ *Please also make sure participants know how to sign up for the class, how to order the book and by when they need to have the book purchased (ideally before your first meeting).*

## STEP 3. SCHEDULING YOUR FIRST MEETING

As noted above, you have some options for how to schedule your first meeting, depending on your group. If you know everyone in your group and you want to find a good time that works for everyone, consider using a scheduling poll like [doodle.com](http://doodle.com) to select days and times that will work for everyone.

If you do not know the folks in your group and you are inviting anyone who might be interested, it's best to have your meeting days, time, and locations scheduled before the first meeting.

It is a good idea to plan for the first session to be 1 and ½ hours long, as introductions, registration and planning for the next sessions can take up several minutes.

## STEP 4. PURCHASING BOOKS

Purchasing books is easy, but it does take some planning ahead to make sure you receive them on time for your first meeting. As the course organizer, you have the option of ordering the books for your entire group at once and having them all shipped to you to distribute to your group; or you can have everyone in your group order their own books by going to [www.nwei.org](http://www.nwei.org) or calling 503-227-2807.

### Notes:



## FIRST SESSION MATERIALS CHECKLIST

- opening
- course book
- NWEI registration sheet for names and addresses of class participants.

## STEP 5. FACILITATING THE FIRST SESSION

### TAKE THE FOLLOWING MATERIALS WITH YOU TO THE FIRST SESSION:

1) Course book 2) NWEI registration sheet for names and addresses of class participants.

### HAVE A ROUND OF INTRODUCTIONS.

Introductions serve several important functions, even if the group is already well acquainted. Participants begin to know each other on a personal level and provide an opportunity to “get each person’s voice into the room.” A person who has spoken and been listened to early in the session is more likely to participate in the rest of the session. Ask participants to say their names and something about themselves. As the organizer of your group, you should give your answer first to model the length and content.

### DESCRIBE THE GROUP PROCESS.

NWEI programs are designed to encourage discussions that clarify personal values and attitudes. Consensus is not the goal, and the group should not seek to reach agreement at the expense of diversity of opinion.

Each discussion course book is divided into sessions. Most groups meet for an hour to an hour and a half for each meeting. Each session will be led by a volunteer facilitator from the group. Point out the “Guidelines for the Weekly Facilitator” near the front of the course book.

### CALL ATTENTION TO THE EVALUATION FORM IN EACH COURSE BOOK.

Encourage participants to fill out the form and share any feedback with NWEI. Participants can mail feedback directly to NWEI, complete the form online at <http://www.nwei.org/evaluations/>, or you as the organizer may choose to collect evaluation forms and send them to NWEI.

### CIRCULATE THE REGISTRATION SHEET.

Once completed, please mail back to NWEI, or submit the online form at <http://www.nwei.org/registration>. We use this information to keep accurate participant records and for grant reports. This information is for NWEI use only, and is not shared with any other organization.



## FIRST CLASS SESSION — DESCRIBE/PRESENT THE OPENING

Each session should begin with a brief and informal opening (2-5 minutes) by one of the group members. The purpose of the opening is to provide a transition into discussion. A simple, authentic opening will best encourage participation in discussion. Consider sharing a personal story, reading a poem or quote pertaining to the topic at hand, or sharing a passage from a related book or current news story.

For example, an opening might capture a person's:

- ▶ *Connection to food or experience gardening (Menu for the Future or Hungry for Change)*
- ▶ *Experience facing news of climate disruption (Change by Degrees)*
- ▶ *Concern for future generations (Choices for Sustainable Living)*
- ▶ *Attraction to simplicity (Voluntary Simplicity)*
- ▶ *Attachment to a place (Discovering a Sense of Place)*
- ▶ *Appreciation for nature (Reconnecting with Earth)*
- ▶ *Interest in bringing sustainability to your workplaces (Sustainable Systems at Work)*
- ▶ *Views on their personal health (World of Health)*

## FIRST CLASS SESSION — FACILITATING THE DISCUSSION

### **READ "GUIDELINES FOR THE FACILITATOR, OPENER AND NOTETAKER."**

Before the first session, carefully review the "Guidelines for the Facilitator, Opener and Notetaker," located in the course book.

### **EXPLAIN THE ROLE OF THE ROLES OF THE FACILITATOR, OPENER AND NOTETAKER.**

Tell the group that you will help keep the discussion personal, focused, and balanced among the participants. Show them where to find the "Guidelines for the Facilitator, Opener and Notetaker," at the front of their course book. Encourage each person to review these before taking their turn at these roles.

### **FACILITATE THE CIRCLE QUESTION.**

Following the opening, the first step is for each person to answer the Circle Question. The question provides a focus for the day's discussion.

## FIRST CLASS SESSION — CLOSING

Watch the time, and stop discussion a few minutes before the session is scheduled to end. Decide who will be the opener, facilitator and notetaker for the next session if you haven't already. Confirm the time and place for the next meeting. Be sure to end the class on time. This shows respect for the participants, and demonstrates that their time commitment is predictable.



## DURATION OF NWEI

**PROGRAM:** Your group will meet one to seven times, depending on which discussion course you choose. Each session will be led by a rotating member of the group. Note the “Further Reading” and “Putting it into Practice” lists, and Action Plans at the beginning or end of the sessions for ideas on further educational opportunities as well as tips for applying the learning into your life.

## STEP 6. CELEBRATION AND CALL TO ACTION

The final session of each course is an optional celebration, and is an opportunity to:

- ▶ *Celebrate the completion of the program and evaluate your experience.*
- ▶ *Discuss ideas for continuing as a group, consider goals and follow up on action items.*

The final session is often a potluck and sometimes held at a different location from where the class took place. As part of the final meeting, ask each participant to reflect on their experience and what they will take away from it.

During this meeting, collect the written evaluations from each participant, or encourage participants to complete the online evaluation at [www.nwei.org/evaluations](http://www.nwei.org/evaluations).

Discuss possible next steps for your group. These can include participating in other NWEI programs, including our annual EcoChallenge or another discussion course, or continuing with a group action project or regular action meetings. If the group would like to become more involved with offering NWEI programs, any member can contact the NWEI team to discuss ways to be involved. If you found value from your experience in the discussion course, we encourage you to make a contribution to NWEI to support our work. We thank you for your participation and support.

## STEP 7. EVALUATION

Please promptly return your paper evaluations, if you collected them, to NWEI. You can mail them to NWEI, 107 SE Washington St., Suite 240, Portland, OR 97214. Or you can email them to our Curriculum Director at [lacy@nwei.org](mailto:lacy@nwei.org). We greatly appreciate your feedback — your input helps us create the best possible programs for all participants.



# Frequently Asked Questions

## How can I connect with other Course Organizers?

We encourage you to join our Facebook group to connect with other course participants and organizers: search for “Northwest Earth Institute” in the search bar on Facebook and then find the listing that says “Closed Group” and you can request permission to be added to the group. Or follow this link: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/824523730931011/>

If you'd like to talk to someone who has a specific experience, or who has organized courses in a specific context, post your question in the Facebook group or call our office at 503.227.2807.

## How much time commitment is required to organize a course?

Your time commitment for organizing a course will be a minimum of the number of hours required to read and attend each session: for example, for a course of 6 sessions, each participant will commit 12 hours total to the course — 1 hour to read the materials for each session and 1 hour for each group meeting.. Publicizing the course, recruiting participants and coordinating with your group will add approximately 4 hours, bringing the total time commitment to about 16 hours for a 6 session course.

## If I'm not an expert in the course topic, how can I effectively facilitate the course?

Effective facilitation requires listening and making sure everyone has a chance to speak. You do not need to be an expert in the topic or to be able to answer everyone's questions. Having the role of the facilitator rotate each week helps everyone feel ownership of the course and promotes the idea that no one needs to be the “expert.” Each person's knowledge, experience and perspective contribute to the discussion. Consult the “Guidelines for the Facilitator, Opener and Notetaker” at the front of your course book for some additional helpful tips for facilitation, and see the facilitator video on our website.



## NOTES:

### I'm interested in and passionate about organizing a discussion course, but I don't have a network to reach out to, or the resources to get started. What should I do?

There are many options for starting a course — feel free to get creative. It might be a good idea to partner with another person or organization: find a local NWEI partner in your area and publicize the course in their network; offer the course through your local library, food co-op, employee green team, yoga studio, farmer's market, faith center, community center or neighborhood association; or start out by co-organizing with a friend. Find fliers to publicize your course (as well as other helpful resources) at <http://www.nwei.org/organize-course/> And post any questions you have about organizing a course to our Facebook group to crowd-source ideas: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/824523730931011>

### What if I am willing to organize a course but don't have a location to host it at?

There are many public spaces where NWEI course have been held in the past: libraries, food co-ops, yoga studios, farmer's markets, parks, faith centers and community centers. Hosting your course in a public location may also give you a means to recruit additional participants — for instance if you're going to be meeting at the local library, hang fliers up in advance so that library users find out about it. Find fliers to publicize your course (as well as other helpful resources) at <http://www.nwei.org/organize-course/>

If a public location won't work, you could also choose to rotate houses, with each group participant hosting a session.

### How long does it take to get my book?

NWEI ships books twice a week using USPS Priority Mail. It takes 3-5 business days for Priority Mail to arrive at your address. Call 503.227.2807 or email us [contact@nwei.org](mailto:contact@nwei.org) to find out our current shipping schedule.





# Course Organizer Checklist for First Session

NOTES:

- Take the following materials with you: 1) your opening, 2) your copy of the discussion course book, 3) the registration form, 4) this checklist.
- Arrive at least 10 minutes early. Make sure the room is set up appropriately, with circle seating the most desirable. Greet each person as they arrive.
- If everyone doesn't already know you, introduce yourself and explain your role as the Course Organizer. If people don't already have your contact information, let them know the best way to get in touch with you.
- Ask for brief introductions around the circle — each person can share their name and something about themselves. Give your answer first to model for others. (It's a good idea to jot down a seating chart with the name of each person in the circle.)
- Suggest how group members can assure the success of the class: 1) Attend every meeting and show up on time. 2) Prepare for each class by doing the readings beforehand. 3) Maintain respect for everyone's opinions. 4) Seek clarity, not consensus.
- Call attention to the course evaluation form in the course book. Stress the value when participants take notes on this form each week as they go through the course.
- Circulate the class registration sheet. This information is not shared with any other groups, and is used only for NWEI's records and grant reporting.

Remember to connect with other members of the NW Earth Institute community in our Facebook community group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/824523730931011/>

- Optionally, participants can register themselves online at [www.nwei.org/registration/](http://www.nwei.org/registration/).*
- Opening — briefly explain what an opening is and its purposes. Demonstrate one.*
- Explain the role of the facilitator — to encourage participation and to keep the discussion personal, focused and balanced among the participants. Show everyone where to find the “Guidelines for the Facilitator, Opener and Notetaker” at the front of the course book.*
- Request a volunteer notetaker for this session.*
- Circulate the course schedule sheet — have participants sign up for the roles of facilitator, opener and note taker for future sessions.*
- Present the Circle Question.*
- Facilitate the discussion.*
- Allow enough time to discuss commitments to action. As this is the first session, people may not have an idea of something they’d like to commit to, and that’s fine. Model an appropriate action item by committing to a simple action yourself for the week.*
- Stop the discussion a few minutes before the class is scheduled to end.*
  - Make sure the Class Registration Sheet is filled out. Take it with you to send to NWEI.*
  - Make sure everyone has a record of the Course Schedule.*
  - Confirm the opener, facilitator and notetaker for the next session.*
  - Confirm the time and place for the next meeting.*
  - End on time.*

Thank you for organizing a discussion course — you and your group will make a difference and will be added to a growing circle of positive impact!

**Please call us at 503-227-2807 if you have any additional questions or if we can help you in any way.**

