

COMMUNITY FACILITATION GUIDE - *Draft*

A Lesson Before Dying

by Ernest J. Gaines

The Big Read Community Project

Purpose: A practical, trauma-aware guide for bringing community members together around the novel's questions of dignity, justice, education, faith, courage, and collective responsibility.

Designed for adult and intergenerational community groups

Six weekly conversations | 60-90 minutes each | Chapters 1-31

Facilitator: _____ Dates: _____

Facilitator Guide at a Glance

Section	What it provides
1. Big Read purpose	Shared goals, outcomes, and facilitator role
2. Before the first meeting	Preparation checklist, accessibility, and outreach considerations
3. Community agreements	A respectful framework for challenging conversations
4. Six-week reading schedule	Chapter groupings, themes, and preparation prompts
5. Session plans	Ready-to-use agendas, questions, and activities
6. Facilitation tools	Question ladder, handling tension, and trauma-aware practices
7. Appendices	Character guide, participant reflection, evaluation, and planning pages

Spoilers note: This facilitator guide discusses the novel's full arc, including its ending. Participants should receive only the schedule and session-specific prompts if they wish to avoid spoilers.

1. Purpose of the Community Read

Heart of Illinois Community Foundation and its partners' participation in The Big Read creates a shared space where the community members can encounter a significant American novel, listen across differences, and connect the text to local questions of belonging, justice, opportunity, and responsibility.

The facilitator's role is to invite inquiry—not to deliver the one correct interpretation.

Desired outcomes (these are the desired outcomes of the project)

- Build connection among participants from different backgrounds and generations.
- Explore how systemic injustice and personal choices shape the lives of individuals and communities.
- Examine dignity, manhood, courage, education, faith, love, and moral responsibility in the novel.
- Practice listening with curiosity and responding to ideas without devaluing people.
- Identify ways communities can bear witness, support human dignity, and act with courage today.

Facilitator stance

- Be a guide, not the expert in the room.
- Ask open questions, make space, and gently redirect when one voice dominates.
- Keep the text central while welcoming relevant lived experience.
- Do not require participants to disclose trauma, experiences of racism, loss, incarceration, or faith.
- Distinguish productive discomfort from harm; pause or redirect demeaning language.

2. Before the First Meeting

Facilitator preparation checklist

- Read the full novel and mark pivotal scenes by chapter; page numbers vary by edition.
- Confirm the audience, meeting dates, session length, location, accessibility, parking, and virtual option if offered.
- Provide the reading schedule before the program begins and explain that unfinished readers are still welcome.
- **Plan seating in a circle or small clusters; avoid a lecture-style in front of the room when possible.**
- Prepare name tents, pens, index cards, chart paper, and a visible copy of the community agreements.
- Identify a quiet space and a community support contact should a participant need to step away.
- Decide how late arrivals, confidentiality, photography, and public storytelling will be handled.
 - NOTE: a confidentiality statement, photography form should be signed by all participating parties.

Content note

The novel includes racist language, dehumanization, capital punishment, wrongful conviction, death, grief, religious conflict, alcohol use, and references to violence. Name these themes before discussion. Invite participants to care for themselves by pausing, passing, stepping out, or returning later. A content note is preparation—not a request to avoid honest dialogue.

Language guidance: When discussing racist language in the novel, participants can refer to 'the slur' or 'racist language' rather than repeating it aloud. The facilitator should not ask Black participants or any individual to explain or represent an entire group.

3. Community Agreements

Review these at the first meeting and briefly revisit them each session. Ask the group what, if anything, should be added. *This should be a handout to each participant & visible at all discussions.

Agreement	What it looks like
Speak from your own perspective	Use 'I' statements; avoid speaking for a whole community.
Listen to understand	Notice the urge to prepare a rebuttal while someone else is speaking.
Share the air	If you speak often, make room; if you speak rarely, contribute when ready.
Challenge ideas, not dignity	Disagreement is welcome; contempt, stereotyping, and personal attacks are not.
Honor the right to pass	No one must answer a question or share personal experience.
Respect privacy	Share learning outside the room, not another person's story or identity.

Agreement	What it looks like
Accept repair	If harm occurs, pause, acknowledge impact, clarify, and choose a better way forward.
Stay connected to the text	Use scenes, choices, patterns, and language from the novel as common ground.

4. Six-Week (6-month) Reading Schedule

This schedule groups all 31 chapters into six manageable segments. Because editions differ, chapter numbers—not page numbers—are the common reference. Each meeting discusses the reading listed for that week. A participant handout version appears in Appendix A.

Week	Read before meeting	Primary lens	Carry-in question
1	Chapters 1-5	Judgment, dehumanization, power, and obligation	Where do people in these chapters have power, and how do they use it?
2	Chapters 6-11	Institutional barriers, education, place, and constrained choices	What does Grant believe education can—and cannot—change?
3	Chapters 12-17	Relationship, resistance, identity, and the first movement toward trust	What helps a person reclaim dignity after it has been denied?
4	Chapters 18-23	Community care, music, faith, hope, and competing ideas of what Jefferson needs	When does care become control, and when does it become liberation?
5	Chapters 24-28	Courage, responsibility, manhood, witness, and transformation	Who is teaching whom at this point in the novel?
6	Chapters 29-31	Voice, death, grief, legacy, solidarity, and change	What is the lesson—and who receives it?

Flexible pacing options

- Three meetings: combine Weeks 1-2, 3-4, and 5-6. Use 90 minutes and select only four core questions per meeting.
- Seven meetings: add a 45-60 minute orientation before Week 1 for historical context, agreements, and expectations.
- Drop-in format: begin with a two-minute, spoiler-aware recap and choose questions that do not penalize unfinished readers.

5. Standard Session Flow

Time	Purpose	Facilitator move
0-10 min	Welcome and settle	Revisit agreements; invite a one-word check-in or brief opening prompt.
10-20 min	Reconnect with the text	Offer a concise recap; ask for one scene, image, or question that stayed with readers.
20-55 min	Explore	Use 3-5 core questions. Move from observation to interpretation to connection.
55-75 min	Activity or small groups	Use the session activity; invite patterns, not a report from every person.

Time	Purpose	Facilitator move
75-85 min	Synthesize	Ask: What became more complex? What are we still carrying?
85-90 min	Close	Preview the next reading; offer a final word, written reflection, or right to pass.

For a 60-minute meeting, use the welcome (5), text reconnect (10), three core questions (30), and closing reflection (15). Save the activity as an optional community event or take-home reflection.

Complete: 'Dignity is threatened when...' or pass.

Reading invitation

As you read Chapters 6-11, notice spaces: the plantation house, school, jail, church, and road. What does each space permit or restrict?

Facilitator notes

What surfaced: _____

Voices or questions to return to: _____

activity

Listening for Need. Choose one tense exchange. Identify the spoken position, the possible underlying need, and a response that could preserve dignity without pretending the conflict is solved. Keep answers grounded in the scene.

Closing reflection

Complete: 'Trust begins when...'

Reading invitation

As you read Chapters 18-23, notice what different people believe Jefferson needs and how they try to provide it.

Facilitator notes

What surfaced: _____

Voices or questions to return to: _____

1. What pressures are placed on Jefferson to represent more than himself?
2. How does the novel complicate the idea that strength means emotional control?
3. What do Grant and Reverend Ambrose misunderstand about each other? What truth does each hold?
4. Who is teaching whom now—and what evidence supports your answer?
5. How might we discuss dignity without tying it narrowly to gender or a single model of manhood?

6. Facilitation Tools

The question ladder

Level	Purpose	Examples
Observe	Establish shared evidence	What happened? What did you notice? Which detail stayed with you?
Interpret	Explore meaning	Why might the character respond this way? What pattern is emerging?
Complicate	Make room for tension	What else could be true? Whose perspective is absent? What does this reading overlook?
Connect	Relate text and community	Where do we recognize this dynamic today? What is similar—and importantly different?
Act	Consider responsibility	What does this insight ask of a witness, educator, institution, or community?

When one person is speaking too much

Thank the person, summarize the contribution, and widen the circle: 'You have given us several ideas to work with. Let us pause and hear from someone who has not spoken yet.' You may also use a written minute, pairs, or a round with the right to pass.

When the room goes quiet

Do not rush to rescue the group. Allow several seconds, then narrow the question: 'What single moment comes to mind?' Invite writing before speaking, pair conversation, or a choice between two prompts. Silence can be reflection, emotion, uncertainty, or caution—not disengagement.

When disagreement becomes tense

- Pause and name the process without shaming: 'We are moving quickly into positions. Let us slow down.'
- Return to a community agreement and ask each speaker to identify the text evidence or value behind the view.
- Separate intent from impact: good intent does not erase harm, and harmful impact does not require assuming the worst motive.
- Ask a complicating question rather than declaring a winner.
- If language devalues a group, interrupt clearly, restate the boundary, and invite repair before continuing.

Trauma-aware facilitation

Principle	Facilitator practice
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Principle	Facilitator practice
Choice	Offer multiple ways to participate: speak, write, pass, step out, or return later.
Predictability	Share the agenda, content note, discussion structure, and closing plan.
Regulation	Use pauses, water, grounding, brief breaks, and an unhurried transition after intense material.
Connection	Welcome participants by name, normalize different responses, and avoid public pressure.
Dignity	Do not turn pain into spectacle or ask individuals to educate the group from personal experience.
Repair	Acknowledge missteps, name impact, apologize when appropriate, and reset the conversation.

Facilitator reminder You are not expected to provide counseling, legal analysis, or crisis intervention. If a participant needs support beyond the discussion, respond with care and connect them privately to appropriate campus or community resources.

Closing a difficult conversation

- Name what the group engaged honestly without declaring the issue resolved.
- Invite a private written reflection instead of requiring a public emotional response.
- Ask participants to identify one source of grounding, connection, or responsibility.
- Preview the next step and remain available briefly after the meeting.

Appendix A. Participant Reading Schedule

Bring the novel and any notes to each conversation. If you fall behind, come anyway; listening and participating are still welcome. Page numbers vary by edition, so this schedule uses chapters.

Week	Reading	As you read, notice...	My meeting date
1	Ch. 1-5	Who has the power to define Jefferson?	_____
2	Ch. 6-11	How place and institutions shape choice	_____
3	Ch. 12-17	Small signs of trust and change	_____
4	Ch. 18-23	Different forms of care, hope, music, and faith	_____
5	Ch. 24-28	Changing definitions of courage and responsibility	_____
6	Ch. 29-31	Voice, witness, grief, and legacy	_____

Reading reflection

A scene I want to discuss:

A question I am carrying:

A character choice I am reconsidering:

A connection to community life:

Appendix B. Character and Relationship Guide

Character	Role in the novel	Questions to track
Grant Wiggins	Teacher and primary narrator; asked to visit Jefferson	What changes his understanding of teaching, courage, and commitment?
Jefferson	Young Black man condemned to death	How does he move from imposed identity toward self-authored dignity and voice?
Miss Emma	Jefferson's godmother	How does love become persistence, advocacy, and expectation?
Tante Lou	Grant's aunt	How does she hold Grant accountable to family and community?

Character	Role in the novel	Questions to track
Vivian	Grant's partner and fellow teacher	How does she challenge and steady Grant?
Reverend Ambrose	Community minister	How does his understanding of faith, truth, and care differ from Grant's?
Paul Bonin	Jail deputy	What does it mean for him to witness Jefferson and speak afterward?
Henri Pichot / Sheriff Guidry	White men with institutional and social power	How are access, permission, delay, and courtesy used to preserve hierarchy?

Appendix C. Facilitator Planning Page

Session/date/location:

Desired outcome for this group:

Three core questions I will prioritize:

Activity/materials:

Content note or accessibility reminder:

Opening and closing plan:

Community or campus resources to have available:

Follow-up after the session:

Appendix D. Participant Feedback

Please use this brief reflection to help Richland Community College strengthen future community reading experiences.

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I felt welcomed and respected.	☐	☐	☐	☐
The discussion helped me understand the novel more deeply.	☐	☐	☐	☐
Different perspectives were invited and handled respectfully.	☐	☐	☐	☐
The facilitator created a clear and supportive structure.	☐	☐	☐	☐
I made meaningful connections between the novel and community life.	☐	☐	☐	☐

One insight I am taking with me:

One question I am still carrying:

What helped the conversation:

What would improve the experience:

A future book, topic, or event I would attend:

Sources and Further Reading

This guide is an original facilitation resource developed for Richland Community College's community reading effort. Facilitators may also consult the following resources:

- Gaines, Ernest J. *A Lesson Before Dying*. Vintage Contemporaries, 1993.

- Penguin Random House. Reading Guide for A Lesson Before Dying.
<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/57454/a-lesson-before-dying-by-ernest-gaines/reading-guide>
- Arts Midwest. NEA Big Read program information and community-engagement resources.
<https://artsmidwest.org/get-support/nea-big-read/>

Note: This guide summarizes themes and discussion pathways without reproducing extended copyrighted text. Facilitators should use legally obtained copies of the novel and follow any official Big Read branding or grant acknowledgment requirements supplied by the program organizer.