



## **How to Host a talkspace:** **Everything you need to kick off your own talkspace on campus!**

Hillel's Joseph Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Learning, in partnership with *Guilt & Pleasure*, is developing materials to support campus based, regularly-meeting discussion groups. The goal is to engage new students in intellectual dialogue around issues and ideas that are relevant to participants' daily lives. Use this guide to help prepare yourself for hosting a talkspace, and then pair Hillel's article-specific Facilitator Guides to help you facilitate conversations based on select texts from *Guilt & Pleasure* ([www.guiltandpleasure.com](http://www.guiltandpleasure.com)).

This guide provides helpful suggestions for how to organize a talkspace, but ultimately no one knows your campus better than you, so always use your judgment and make changes as you see fit.

### **Why host a talkspace?**

A talkspace is the perfect space for engaging a smaller group of students in guided meaningful Jewish conversation based on text. We know that many Jewish students connect Jewishly through cultural opportunities, rather than more traditional offerings. This is a fun, sophisticated, and low-cost way to engage Jewish students who love literature and ideas, coming together to discuss culturally relevant and intellectually interesting texts.

### **Preparing for a talkspace:**

#### **Who do I invite to my talkspace?**

Quite simply, the people who attend will make the talkspace. It may not be the right opportunity for every student, so give some serious thought to which students on your campus would enjoy being invited to join a conversation about culture and literature. There is no science to guest-listing, but it is important is to have as many different kinds of people in the room as possible. Like minds tend to agree, but if you bring together a diverse group you will have a vibrant event, no doubt.

#### **How many people do I invite?**

A talkspace can be as small as five people sitting around having a discussion. Some talkspace facilitators agree the "golden number" is somewhere between fourteen and twenty, which is a big enough group to host many, but small enough so that everyone gets a chance to talk. Once there are more than twenty people, guests need to start raising their hands to speak and the spontaneity is lost. The best thing to do is to start small — say a dozen people — and see what size suits your talkspace best, or how big it becomes on its own.

### **How should I invite people?**

Unlike other programs which you might publicize broadly, talkspace guests should receive personal invitations. After creating a guest list, make personal invites by contacting participants directly. Once a core group evolves, participants can begin suggesting guests, and the crowd may grow organically.

### **How often should we meet?**

A successful talkspace can be built on simple regularity. Students have busy lives and they forget things all too easily, so keep it straightforward: always have your talkspace on the same date (for example, the first Friday of every month), and at the same time.

A week before you meet, email all guests with a link to *Guilt & Pleasure* ([www.guiltandpleasure.com](http://www.guiltandpleasure.com)) article which you would like everyone to read in preparation for the discussion.

Some talkspace groups meet weekly, but a bi-monthly or monthly commitment is more comfortable for most students. Once a month still leaves a short enough period between talkspace discussions to maintain continuity and a sense of community. A talkspace that convenes only every six or eight weeks can have a hard time gaining momentum: if too much time elapses between events, it will be like starting from scratch every time.

### **How do I select a location?**

A good venue is an important consideration; it will define the vibe of your talkspace more than you might think. A great space will be private and have a relaxed, comfortable, and pleasing ambiance. You'll want to be sure that your talkspace is meeting in a place where the discussion will not be disrupted by others. You may choose an off-campus location like a local coffee shop or lounge, or an on-campus out-of-the-way spot like the faculty club or campus museum.

Another great venue may be in student apartments or suites. To get that great home-quality feel at your talkspace, try having students host on a rotating basis.

Unless you have an exceptional Hillel building which you have a compelling reason to highlight, talkspace is an opportunity to connect with students *outside* of your Hillel building.

### **What do I serve at a talkspace?**

A talkspace is not the place to serve the stale Stella D'ora cookies and half-eaten bag of chips sitting in the cabinet at Hillel. Go all out and give your talkspace a classy and sophisticated feel. Be creative. Serve a variety of nice teas or juices and some great coffee. For food, try breads, fruits, cheeses, or great cookies and desserts.

### **Can I host a Shabbat talkspace?**

Definitely. A talkspace is a great alternative to a typical Hillel Shabbat dinner. Students run around all week from one thing to the next and sometimes we all need an opportunity to take a break, pause, and reflect. Shabbat is a time for us to relax, enjoy the world, and renew our sense of self. It is an opportunity to connect with ourselves and others, and what better way to do that than through a relaxed dinner and stimulating conversation.

Try hosting a Friday night talkspace and serve a couple classics like challah and rugelach and invite students to bring the rest of the food for a vegetarian pot-luck dinner. Think about a venue that will set an easy going tone, whether it is a student's apartment or another comfortable space.

## Running a talkspace:

### How do I host and facilitate a talkspace? Can I do both myself?

Hosting and facilitating a talkspace are two significant tasks, and while one person can do both jobs, it may also be wise to have two people split the tasks. As host, your tasks during the talkspace include taking care of refreshments, creating ambience, and making guests comfortable. As a facilitator, your main job is to offer guiding questions to keep the conversation fast flowing and on track. Remember not to talk too much; simply organize the conversation. Add value by drawing out patterns and connections in the others' insights, and by being honest about how the conversation relates to your personal Jewish identity.

This can be harder than it seems: you have to make sure no one is hijacking the discussion and that tangents are not usurping your central topic (although sometimes tangents can become more interesting than the topic originally proposed). In short, facilitation requires a lot of concentration, which can be hard when you are also busy filling glasses or pointing people to the bathroom.

Try to decide which job suits you better. If you are a born host, you may choose to bring in a guest facilitator for a talkspace. Guest facilitators might include a popular Jewish professor, a well-liked grad student, or a local author. If you want to facilitate, assign hosting duties to someone you trust—someone you think will be able to create the appropriate atmosphere. If you want to do both, be aware that it will require some extra juggling.

### How do I successfully facilitate a talkspace?

The texts discussed in your talkspace are likely to elicit many diverse and interesting reactions, which is why it is a great idea to invite people to your talkspace who you know will have things to say about the article. Keep in mind that different people come to the table with different knowledge and lack of knowledge and that it is important to create a space where terms and references are defined and questions are encouraged. Your job as the facilitator is not to push the conversation in any specific direction, but to help the conversation flow naturally and help draw everyone into the discussion. Sometimes great conversation happens on its own, and sometimes it is necessary to pose questions to the group which can spark discussion or advance the conversation after a lull.

Hillel offers Facilitator Guides for select articles and stories from *Guilt & Pleasure*. Use the Facilitator Guide for each text to help you frame an outline for a talkspace.

### How long should a talkspace be?

How long the conversation lasts is really up to the host and facilitator, but 1-1½ hours is about right. A venue where people can hang around long after the official conversation has ended can be great. Sometimes the most interesting ideas can crop up within smaller groups after the discussion has officially closed.

### **How do I keep the energy going after a talkspace?**

E-mail is an excellent way to stay in contact with talkspace participants between events. You should alert them about upcoming talkspace opportunities, and keep the talkspace network connected. Each Facilitator Guide comes with a list of additional opportunities (articles, websites, books, etc.) to share with students based on the topic discussed at the talkspace. Email out this information after the talkspace, and include other relevant opportunities you find, or information on related local events (film screenings, upcoming speakers, etc.).

### **What comes next?**

Once you get to know your talkspace participants and they become comfortable with the group dynamic, empower your students to take ownership over the talkspace. Eventually students will become responsible for inviting new participants, selecting venues, selecting texts for the group to discuss, and even moderating the discussion among their peers, making the talkspace a totally student-driven and student-operated meaningful Jewish experience.

