# Facilitator's Guide...

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This facilitator's guide was created for use with the 32 studies comprising *Bahá'í Essentials*. This study process has been in development for over thirty years, with the purpose of creating studies that would meet the following objectives:

1. Require minimal training for facilitators.
2. Focus only on subjects designated by the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith and the Universal House of Justice as important for confirming and deepening believers.
3. Thoroughly cover the fundamental verities or basic truths of those subjects designated by the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice.
4. Provide for the greatest possible attendance of believers by attempting to accommodate their complex lifestyles.
5. Move away from the common format for religious study wherein teachers **tell** the believers what the Holy Text means and how they should subsequently believe and behave.
6. Move away from deepening formats cautioned by the Universal House of Justice that are "…a cold analysis approach to learning."
7. Employ proven skills, techniques, and processes that enhance all aspects of adult learning.
8. Help establish the unity necessary for participants to engage freely in the exploration of truth, the search for meaning, and the purposeful application of Bahá'í Teachings.

These studies focus only on the fundamental verities of the Faith. Each lesson (except the first three) contains an application component, in that, participants explore possibilities for new behavior and then make independent plans for action. These studies are primarily designed for groups of individuals, however, it is applicable for individual study as well. Guidelines for independent study are available on the *Bahá'í Essentials* website.

When facilitating the entire series of studies in *Bahá'í Essentials*, it is advisable to proceed in succession with studies one through six first. The rest can follow in any order. Most studies should last no longer than two hours. Communities using this book usually have a study class once a week or every other week.

It is preferable, and strongly advised, that you go through each study either as a participant or independently before facilitating it with a group. This way you will be more familiar with the study when questions arise, and many unpredictable ones will, and you will be more prepared to provide brief answers consistent with Bahá'í principles.

Don't feel you have to know everything, or be able to answer all the participants' questions when they arise. The **study process** is designed in a way that participants learn what they initially need to know about the **basic truths** of the subject. This is not the same as our common deepening, in that it is not intended for the participants to acquire an extended understanding of the subject under study. Each study contains a considerable amount of information, especially for new believers. Try to keep the participants focused on learning and understanding the **fundamental verities or basic truths** of the subject, and not diverted by the endless thoughts and questions that such a study might evoke.

Be confident that if the participants learn the basics truths taught in the study, you have done your job. Remind the students there is a lifetime of learning to experience and these studies are a foundation upon which everything else is developed. The point is for you to trust in the study process without feeling you have to know everything, or have or teach the participants everything about the subject to be a good facilitator.

It is important **not** to take time to look up and read additional quotations from the Bahá'í Writings during class time. If you cannot briefly answer a question raised by a participant, ask him or her to jot it down, and then after the session you can refer to additional sources. If the participants are persistently asking questions unrelated to the subject of the study, remind them they are studying specifically the fundamental verities of the Faith and unrelated questions should be pursued later.

To answer questions factually, you may want to review their questions with them after class and together explore the answers directly from the Bahá'í Writings. It is better **not** to answer a question than to answer it in a way that is inconsistent with the revealed Word. New believers are especially impressionable and conveying misinformation can cause unnecessary distress.

## PREPARING THE ENVIRONMENT

Take the time while organizing your study class to prepare an environment that will "create a spiritual atmosphere conducive to learning." First, give some attention to the location of the study class. It is preferable to choose a place centrally located, easy to find, with plenty of parking, warm or cool enough for the participants, and with comfortable arrangements. You do not want to lose participants for reasons that could be avoided.

Many people have allergies and cannot tolerate being in environments that house dogs, cats, or creatures other than humans. Furthermore, animals can be a significant distraction. Cleanliness of the air and the physical surroundings can also help create a more desirable learning environment.

Make an effort to minimize distractions as much as possible. It may be appropriate to turn off phones, televisions, radios or other electronic devices that could interfere with the experience. You may want to hold the class where visual distractions are minimal or where curtains on the windows can help avoid distractions. Another consideration is the human environment. The activity of children or other household members may be evaluated and modified accordingly.

Some facilitators like to "set the mood" by preparing adequate and soothing lighting, adding pleasant fragrances (some people have allergies so be sensitive), or even providing low background music before beginning the class. Be creative; be sensitive; be moderate. The International Teaching Center wrote: "They [facilitators] need to combine the qualities of love, humility and patience with the dedication, perseverance, and commitment required to create a spiritual atmosphere conducive to learning."[1]

If you facilitate these studies in someone's home, you won't have control over the environment. This could provide you with numerous opportunities to demonstrate Bahá'í spiritual qualities. Sometimes it takes great sacrifices to do the Bahá'í work. Remember the life of our Exemplar, `Abdu'l-Bahá, and be kind, loving, tolerant, happy, and persevere!

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[1] *Training Institutes and Systematic Growth*, February 2000

# GENERAL FACILITATING SKILLS

Facilitators have the primary role of **facilitating** learning by guiding participants through the study process. This can best be accomplished when you are sensitive to the dynamics of the participants.

Your task is not to disseminate information like a teacher. Rather, it is to guide and encourage the participants, and to ease their journey through the process of learning inherent in the study. Part of this is to help everyone feel comfortable in the learning environment. Participants learn best when appreciated, heard, acknowledged, validated and encouraged. Consider all their questions valid, all answers valuable, and all shared feelings genuine. Refrain from remarking on every comment or from correcting trivial statements that may not be absolutely true or accurate. When participants have questions you cannot answer, simply tell them it's a good question, but you just don't know the answer, or that you will look it up with them later. This helps validate their question, but does not make them feel as though they have asked something foolish.

Establishing and preserving unity in the group will be one of your principal functions. That is, strive to maintain a heartfelt condition of peace, love, and harmony among the participants, free of conflict, dissension, contention and strife. One way to help accomplish this is to ask the participants to be extremely kind to one another, and remind them of `Abdu'l-Bahá's directive: "Beware lest ye offend the feelings of anyone, or sadden the heart of any person, or move the tongue in reproach of and finding fault with anybody…"[1] And, if by chance one of the participants should have the occasion to feel offended by another, remind them of `Abdu'l-Bahá's gentle guidance: "Let not your heart be offended with anyone. If some one commits an error and wrong toward you, you must instantly forgive him."[2]

These studies are designed to create an optimal environment for learning. For this to occur, a great deal of trust must be established among the participants. This will also be your role. The Bahá'í principle of independent investigation of truth is operative here and you will want to establish a setting for its fullest expression. One way to accomplish this is by discouraging these four vices: analyzing, generalizing, advising and sermonizing to one another. To prevent these "vices" from occurring you may want to request compliance with the following suggestions:

1. When offering an opinion, speak about yourself only: your feelings, your thoughts, your opinions and goals. Avoid generalizations like: we feel, they think, those people always, or Bahá'ís believe.
2. Refrain from giving direct or indirect advice to others through imperatives like: you **ought to**, Bahá'ís **need to**, they **should**, we've **got to**, we **must**, you **better**, people **have to**, etc.
3. Avoid imposing statements like: I want you to, you won't, you have to, you can't, you're not, and you're going to.
4. Avoid all negative personal judgments about or towards others.
5. Keep all expressed attitudes, thoughts, feelings or goals confidential. What you hear stays here!
6. Consider all questions as valid, even if they are not necessarily relevant.
7. Consider all answers as having some value, even though they may not be correct.

Another role of the facilitator is to help create an emotionally safe environment by **equalizing** the distribution of power among the participants. You can best accomplish this by preventing controlling behaviors. It is normal in any group for controlling behaviors to surface, but especially undesirable in Bahá'í activities. These behaviors are demonstrated when individuals attempt to direct, guide, correct, advise, judge, reward or punish others. You can best prevent these behaviors by reminding the participants of the guidelines above and directing them to *return to the process* of the study. This will help create the emotional safety for you to gently encourage those who are hesitant to join in or say much, and if necessary, restrain those who speak excessively.

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[1] *TAB*, Vol. I, p. 45
[2] *PUP*, p. 453

## GETTING STARTED

It is a courtesy to the host and the participants to start on time. Once everyone is settled and ready to start, it is intuitive to begin with prayer. When outlining the conditions necessary for confirmations from the Holy Spirit upon the meeting of the Local Spiritual Assembly, `Abdu'l-Bahá wrote: "They must, when coming together, turn their faces to the Kingdom on high and ask aid from the Realm of Glory. … Should they endeavour to fulfil these conditions the Grace of the Holy Spirit shall be vouchsafed unto them…"[1] Even though this is not a Local Spiritual Assembly meeting, the conditions that attract divine assistance are principally the same. The Guardian reminded us: "…it is highly unlikely, nay impossible, for any enterprise to prosper and develop when deprived of divine bestowals and confirmation."[2]

### THE FOLLOWING GUIDELINES PARALLEL THE SECTIONS IN EACH STUDY!

## INTRODUCTION: *Approaching the threshold...*

Each study has a short introduction. The easiest way to introduce the study is for **the facilitator to read straight through the introduction** from beginning to end. Sometimes you may ask one of the participants to read the introduction. Keep in mind, however, that some people are hesitant to read out loud in public. You don't want to make anyone feel pressured or make anyone read through something that is so difficult it causes embarrassment. You will want to get to know the participants and then make wise choices as to whom you ask to read and when. The Bahá'í Writings contain words that for many are difficult to pronounce, and many will find themselves introduced for the first time to words and phrases they are unfamiliar with. So, proceed cautiously with the intent of making everyone feel comfortable enough in the learning environment to freely participate. Generally, what is written in the introduction will suffice and should take no longer than a couple of minutes to complete. Avoid giving a fireside or deepening at this point. The study material to follow will take care of the details related to the topic.

## OBJECTIVES: *A look to the horizon...*

Following the introduction you can merely state: "The facilitator's note say: 'Review the following objectives with the participants.'" Then, read whatever is listed as the objectives, which are also referred to as, "A look to the horizon". It will take less than a minute to read the objectives. Emphasize that this lesson will focus on these objectives only! That is, for example, if you are studying the lesson titled: "The importance of Prayer," the objective is, "to understand the fundamental verities or basic truths about the importance of prayer, specifically the daily obligatory prayers." It is important to understand that this objective comes directly from the Guardian or the Universal House of Justice. It does not say the believers need to understand all that pertains to the obligatory prayer, or the how and wherefore of prayer in general. Rather, the believer should be assisted to understand the **importance** of the obligatory prayer, thus the objective of the lesson. It would be natural and normal for you and the participants to have endless questions, comments, and stories about prayer through the course of the study. However, if everyone understands that the study is limited to a specific objective, it is easier to keep the experience on track and prevent it from becoming an extensive deepening. Furthermore, it will allow you to complete the study in a reasonable amount of time. So read through the objectives, check with the participants for clarity, and then move on to studying the quotations.

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[1] *SWAB*, p. 88
[2] *Living the Life*, pp. 1-2

## THE STUDY PROCESS: *Attaining the water of life...*

**Facilitator**

Review the following study process with the participants. Then study the numbered quotations on the following pages, one at a time as described below.

Facilitating these studies is quite easy. All you have to do is follow the instructions given in the facilitator's notes provided with every exercise and in each study. Many Bahá'ís are accustomed to studying by reading through a quotation and then discussing its meaning. Often, only a few in the group will offer **opinions** while the rest take on the role of listening. This results in the majority learning what a few others **think** the Word of God means. This study process is different. Participants will read the quotations and **mine gems of truth** from the quotation by finding numerous answers to a specific question provided in the study material. This "mining of the gems of truth" helps the participant learn the obvious truths without undue interpretation. Furthermore, the participants may use the provided replacement phrases, synonyms or definitions to better understand the true meaning of words used in the quotations. This way, there is less misinterpretation of words, less learning of meaning according to another's definition or understanding, and less misinformation from using alternative dictionary definitions or synonyms that can confuse the true intent. This process helps to ensure that the participants learn the intended meaning of the sacred Verses.

If you are facilitating a study with some veteran believers you may find they have a tendency to talk about each quotation and the various meanings and possible applications of wisdom it contains. If this happens excessively, encourage the participant to stay on track and follow the instructions as they are. Getting caught up in time-consuming analysis of the verses can distract from the intent of the study and can cause more confusion than it does clarity.

Study of the quotations begins by simply following the instructions provided for the facilitator in each study. Those instructions are also listed below, *with additional comments noted in italics.*

**Facilitator**

Review the following study process with the participants. Then study the numbered quotations on the following pages, **one at a time** as described below.

*Read through the following four-step study process together, and then proceed with the study of the first numbered quotation. You may need to do this only if this is the first time the participants have studied a lesson from **Bahá'í Essentials**, or there are new participants at the session, or you feel a need for review.*

1. **READING:** *A drink from the cup of guidance...*
   Have two participants take turns reading the quotation out loud so that it is read twice.

   *Encourage all the participants to take part when it's their turn to read a quotation out loud. Ask the group for feedback and they will tell you what they need.*

2. **CONFIRMING MEANING:** *A spray from the fountain of light...*
   A. If anyone would like to have better understanding of a word used in the quotation, now is the time to refer to its substitute phrase, definition or synonym, which can be found in the boxes below each quotation. Read the substitute phrase, definition or synonym out loud so everyone can hear.
   B. Read the sentence again that contains the word you selected, while **substituting for that word,** its given phrase, definition or synonym from the box below the quotation.

*Since part A and B are new procedures for most people, they may appear a little awkward at first. The first time you may need to demonstrate for the participants by choosing a word yourself, reading out loud its substitution phrase, definition or synonym, and then reading it again into the sentence.*

C. If anyone would like a better understanding of another word, repeat the process above until everyone is satisfied with their understanding of the words in the quotation.

*You may want to ask others to choose just any word to help them become familiar with this process. Participants have fun with this once they realize that choosing a word and reading its substitution into the sentence is not an admission of one's ignorance, but is a proactive effort to better understand the Divine Revelation.*

*As an alternative, you may choose to read the entire quotation while inserting* ***all*** *the replacement phrases.*

III. **FINDING VALUE:** *Mining the gems of truth...*

Take turns stating each basic fact or truth you can find in the quotation about… *(the topic of the lesson is inserted here).*

*You simply read the statement provided, repeatedly if necessary, until the participants have exhausted the possibilities. Many are familiar with the Ruhi process in which the participants were asked to respond with their answers word for word from the quotation. It isn't necessary in this process as some may discover implied truths or even some truths that don't seem relevant at all. It doesn't matter. All discovered gems of truth are legitimate and should be validated by the facilitator, unless of course, the perceived truth is completely at variance with Bahá'í Teachings. The following guidance from the Notes of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas gives some general principles that can be helpful in facilitating this exercise.*

*"The interpretations of `Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi are considered divinely guided and are binding on the Bahá'ís. The existence of authoritative interpretations does not preclude the individual from engaging in the study of the Teachings and thereby arriving at a personal interpretation or understanding. A clear distinction is, however, drawn in the Bahá'í Writings between authoritative interpretation and the understanding that each individual arrives at from a study of its Teachings. Individual interpretations based on a person's understanding of the Teachings constitute the fruit of man's rational power and may well contribute to a greater comprehension of the Faith. Such views, nevertheless, lack authority. In presenting their personal ideas, individuals are cautioned not to discard the authority of the revealed words, not to deny or contend with the authoritative interpretation, and not to engage in controversy; rather they should offer their thoughts as a contribution to knowledge, making it clear that their views are merely their own."*[1]

Proceed with this same process through all the numbered quotations.

[1] *KA*, Notes, pp. 221-22

## SHARING: *A breath from the spirit of inspiration...*

**Facilitator**

Ask the participants to complete the statements below. When everyone has finished, have each person share, in a round, the one thing that was most outstanding or inspiring and how it made him or her feel. Please remind everyone not to remark on the comments of others.

*Please follow the instructions for this exercise very closely. The participants should read the statements and write down their comments. You may then choose someone who normally offers their opinion eagerly to be the first to share his or her most outstanding or inspiring verse. After a person speaks, you may need to remind them: "How does that make you feel? Please explain." Participants readily reveal their most inspiring verse, but frequently forget to tell how it made them feel and why. Sharing feelings this way makes the experience personal and helps the participant speak from the heart. Heartfelt sharing in an emotionally safe environment evokes empathy in others and strengthens bonds of love in the community.*

*You may feel it necessary to assure the participants that no one is* ***required*** *to share. However, it is especially important that they do so if possible. The design of this exercise has a bonding effect on the group that would be significantly reduced if anyone were to refrain from sharing. Of course, if an individual insists, it would be more* ***appropriate*** *to let that person pass and move on to the next person.*

*Remind the participants not to comment on the answers of others but to share only what they have identified as personally inspiring.*

*It is usually good to take a short break after this exercise. This is often an emotional experience and people need time to process. Having a break where they can talk or freely move about is helpful.*

## SOME QUESTIONS: *A gentle breeze from the testing winds...*

**Facilitator**

Ask the participants to answer the following questions. They can usually find answers in the quotations just studied or in the introduction. When everyone has finished, review the questions, then share and discuss the answers.

*To facilitate the writing exercise, simply follow the facilitator's notes provided. The questions are usually simple and generally intended to self-check the accuracy of one's understanding of the fundamental verities. Just so you know, sometimes a question may present new information not provided in the introduction or the quotations. This is intentional, and there to add pertinent information to the learning of the fundamental verities. Sometimes, if time is running short, you may just read the questions one at a time, and openly ask the participants for the correct answers.* ***Answers to the questions are located at the end of each study****.*

## APPLICATION: *Showing forth divine light...*

**Facilitator**

Read through the following paragraph together and proceed as stated. Then take time for the participants to write out their individual plans for action. When everyone has finished, move on to the closing reading.

**Bahá'u'lláh wrote:** *"It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action...."* Imagine how the Bahá'í Teachings in this study class could be translated into reality and action. Take turns sharing the possibilities. Begin your statements with: *"**One could**...."*

*At this point in the study the participants engage their creative nature by exploring the endless possibilities for applying the gems of truth mined from the Sacred Writings. Again, you simply read through the first paragraph and encourage the participants to engage. They are asked to begin their answers with: "One could," because this keeps them in the creative mode and out of an advisory mode, sometimes stated as: you should, Bahá'ís must, we had better, we've got to, etc. This is a brainstorming exercise, in that, no one is allowed to criticize or judge any idea or suggestion that is offered—no matter how foolish, impractical, or useless it may seem. This method provides an opportunity for the participants to creatively explore possibilities of application, and then follow with an immediate commitment to action.*

From your experience in this study class on…, describe what ***you*** are inspired to put into reality and action. ***I will*** *make conscious efforts to...* _____

*Proceed with the application exercise by following the facilitator's notes provided. Give the participants enough time to write out their plans for action. Sometimes people are getting fidgety at this point so you may have to ask them to remain quiet so everyone can concentrate enough to finish. It there is limited time, have them simply make a mental note of their intentions. There are no application exercises in the first three lessons.*

## CLOSING READ

*It is recommended that either you read the story, talk, or letter found at the end of each lesson, or choose someone who is familiar with Persian, Arabic, or Bahá'í words and phrases. Reading Bahá'í material can be intimidating for a new believer, and could prove embarrassing. It may even be wise if you read through it privately before the session to become familiar with the words and content.*

*Try to read straight through the reading without spending much time in discussion or explanation. Some participants may ask questions for clarity, but try not to get drawn into a detailed explanation of everything in the reading. The reading is just for closure and reinforcement of the verities under study.*

*Check with the participants before closing the study to see that their hearts are left assured and comforted with these new teachings. You may ask: "What hope do you find in fully adopting these teachings?" Try to assure the new believer that in making efforts to conform to Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings, his or her spiritual hopes can be realized through God's great mercy, grace and bounty. Moreover, you may ask: "Is there anything you fear losing by fully adopting these teachings in your life?" If there are any concerns, it will again be your role to reassure any soul that what he or she perceives as being given up or lost will be fully compensated for, in light of their true purpose, by the spiritual blessings, favors, grace and mercy of God.*