



Forming a Literary Society – A Quick Guide

by Anita Fernandez-Young (2011); updated by Linda J. Curry (2018) (©Alliance of Literary Societies 2011)

Let's suppose you want to form a literary society – let's call it Litsoc.

What do you need to do? Where do you start?

Is Litsoc going to be a general literary society or will it be dedicated to one author or a specific group of authors? Are you setting it up to promote a literary site or association?

Examples of these types are:

- The Leamington Literary Society (general)
- The Dickens Fellowship (single author)
- Friends of the Dymock Poets (group)
- Nancy Blackett Trust (site/association)

All these types are able to join the Alliance of Literary Societies and take advantage of the experience and expertise of other member societies. Whichever type of society Litsoc is, it will need to do certain things in order to establish itself as a society.

FORMING A COMMITTEE

As long as there is more than one prospective member of Litsoc, there is the potential for a committee to run the society, organise its activities and recruit more members. This may be called the management or executive committee, and there are usually two types of committee members, the officers and the ordinary members.

Officers are the individuals with specific responsibilities and you will need to choose them early in the life of the society. If there are many people wanting to get involved in the running of Litsoc, you may need to hold elections for officers (see below for how to do this). Usually people are hesitant about putting themselves forward for office because they are not sure how much time and commitment is involved, so we will try to clarify this as we go along.

The **Chairman** controls the meeting, deciding who will speak and for how long, and is expected to be impartial and to help the meeting to arrive at decisions. The **Secretary**

usually takes the minutes of the meeting (that is, records roughly what was said and what decisions were taken) and is responsible for most of the administration of the society. The **Treasurer** takes care of any money that is involved in the running of Litsoc, such as subscriptions, expenses for visiting speakers, room hire and so on. If you are only a very small society you may be happy to combine the roles of the officers in whatever way seems practical – chairman and secretary, or secretary and treasurer for instance.

Ordinary members are an important part of any committee because they provide a range of different views and ideas and support the officers in running Litsoc. They can be asked to form sub-committees to consider specific issues and can stand in for the officers if any happen to be unable to get to a meeting. Becoming an ordinary member of a committee is a valuable experience and it is a good idea to try being an ordinary member before taking on one of the officer jobs. You will have chance to become familiar with meetings procedures and with the personalities you will have to deal with before you commit yourself to the work of an officer.

How much of my time will this take?

Most literary societies make do with two or three committee meetings a year which last no more than four hours each. If you are chairman, you will need to be familiar with the agenda before the meeting starts (and liaise with the secretary about the items to be included), will need to manage the meeting and carry out any actions decided on in the meeting, or make sure that the responsible person carries them out. This should not be a very big commitment, but it will depend on what activities Litsoc decides to carry out – see below.

If you are secretary of Litsoc, you will need to consider how much time you want to put in. You will need to produce an agenda for each meeting, take the minutes of the meeting, circulate the minutes before the next meeting and perhaps carry out some extra tasks decided on at the meeting itself. Some of these, such as designing a programme of activities, can be carried out with the help of other committee members, and you may also be able to recruit a minutes secretary so that you can participate fully in the meetings without the need to take minutes as well. Many societies today find it difficult to recruit a secretary, which is a great pity – the secretary can be as powerful as the chairman of a committee and can delegate much of the work to other members so that the load is spread.

The treasurer needs to be someone with some experience of handling money, if at all possible. This is a highly responsible job, but need not take up very much time if you get yourself organised. If there is very little money involved in the running of Litsoc you may be

tempted to do without a bank account, but it is much easier to keep control of the finances if you have one (see below for further information).

WHAT NEXT?

Once you have formed your committee, you will need to adopt a constitution. A sample constitution is shown below – Litsoc will vary this according to its own requirements. An example of a more complex constitution can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/how-to-write-your-charitys-governing-document>.

WHY DO WE NEED A CONSTITUTION?

A constitution is the legal document setting out the rules of the society, its aims and objectives. It is useful for many reasons, including setting up bank accounts, appointing officers and sorting out disagreements among the members. It shows that you are serious about what you are doing in forming a society. It can be changed according to the rules set up within it for making changes, so don't regard it as fixed forever: it is intended to help, not to hinder, the purposes of the society. If you want to join up with other societies, to raise funds of different kinds or do almost any of the things societies exist to do, a constitution will help you.

Sample Constitution

LITSOC CONSTITUTION (adopted 20th October 2010)

NAME

The name of the society is The Literary Society ('Litsoc')

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

1. To bring together lovers of literature, literary works and sites and artefacts associated with them.
2. To issue publications about literature.
3. To hold meetings at which literary works will be studied and discussed.

FUNDS

1. The funds of Litsoc will be applied solely to the aims and objectives as shown above, after allowing for reasonable management expenses.
2. Should Litsoc cease to exist, any funds or assets remaining will be applied to such objectives as shown above.

MEMBERSHIP

1. Litsoc will be open to anyone, regardless of race, age, religion, gender or sexual orientation.
2. The annual subscription will be decided at the Annual General Meeting and will be due at the first meeting of the year.
3. Every member shall have one vote at the AGM.
4. Honorary Life Members may be appointed by the AGM and have full membership rights.

MEETINGS

1. Regular meetings of Litsoc will take place once a month from September to June, dates, times, locations and activities to be decided by the committee. Additional meetings may be held at the discretion of the committee.
2. Committee meetings will be called at the discretion of the chairman or at the request of any member of the committee. Three members of the committee will make a quorum. The committee may appoint sub-committees from its members, accountable to the full committee, to discuss specific issues.
3. The Annual General Meeting of Litsoc will be held in May. Reports and audited accounts will **be** submitted and all officers and committee members will be elected or re-elected for the next year. All members of Litsoc will be entitled to vote at the AGM. At least 14 days' notice will be given to members. One third of the membership will make a quorum.
4. An Extraordinary General Meeting may be called at the request of the chairman or of five other members. At least 14 days notice will be given to members. One third of the membership will make a quorum.

OFFICERS AND EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

1. At the AGM, members of Litsoc will elect a chairman, a secretary and a treasurer, who will hold post for one year and be eligible for re-election at the next AGM.
2. Five ordinary committee members will be elected at the AGM. The committee will have the power to co-opt replacement members if a vacancy occurs between elections.
3. An auditor or independent examiner will be proposed by the committee and approved by the AGM.
4. On the recommendation of the committee, a president and vice-president or vice-presidents shall be appointed for a normal term of three years but the terms may be extended at the wishes of the AGM.

Elections

All paid-up members will be entitled to nominate, second or vote for officers and committee members at the AGM and to vote on any resolutions proposed at AGM. Resolutions will be put to the AGM by members of the committee, proposals to be received by the secretary in writing at least seven days before the AGM.

Alterations to the Constitution

The constitution will be reviewed every three years. Any alterations must be approved by the membership at an AGM or EGM. Proposals for changes must be received by the secretary at least seven days before the meeting.

Notes on the Constitution

This is a sample constitution and will not be appropriate to every literary society. It has been written in simple language and kept brief so that individual societies can vary it as they wish. The idea of a 'quorum' is that if it is difficult to get a full committee together there must be a minimum of members before any decisions will be binding on the committee as a whole; it is not a good idea to have a very small core of the members making decisions about spending the society's money, for example. It is not necessary to have the accounts audited externally (unless the society becomes incorporated), but you should have your accounts independently examined – by someone with financial experience, and not a member of the committee. Elections can be held by a show of hands if you have 'real' meetings, but if you

are going to be a 'virtual' society (one which meets rarely and conducts much of its business by mail or email) you may need to produce election documents such as manifestos and voting papers.

CHARITABLE STATUS

There is no need for Litsoc to be registered as a charity, and if many of its activities are not exclusively charitable this might not be appropriate. If it has been set up to raise money for the preservation of a literary site or assets, the situation may be different – some literary societies are registered but many are not and it will be a decision for the Litsoc committee to make once it has been established for a while and it is seen how it will develop. Having registered charity status does mean that you can claim gift aid on subscriptions/donations, and might make you eligible for VAT exemption when booking venues in public venues. However, Litsoc must have a minimum income in order to apply. Check the Charity Commission website for detail; there is also more information in 'Finance and Accounting for Literary Societies – A Quick Guide' on the ALS website [Resources Page](#).

MANAGING THE MONEY

As you will have gathered, the finances of a literary society are very important to it; if it is unable to raise a little money it will be difficult to do many of the things the committee and members want to do. The simplest way to raise a starting-up fund is to charge a subscription for membership. It is usual to make this an annual subscription and to set a date on which the society's year begins. This would normally be the beginning of the first month after the closure of your accounts for the year.

Opening a bank account for the society is very simple; some banks specialise in providing banking for local clubs and societies, but they may ask for two signatories rather than just one (the treasurer and secretary, treasurer and chairman, for instance) for security. It is usually a good idea to have three signatories registered in case one of the two signatories is away for a long period. The Litsoc account ought to be at a bank different from the treasurer's personal bank, even if this is not very convenient, so that there can be no confusion about which account is which.

Subscriptions will need to be large enough to pay for room hire as well as for other purposes, so think carefully about what you think potential members can afford. You may need to think about affiliation to a larger organisation, such as the ALS, or if you are a new branch of an existing society, which may cost money too. Then there are the activities (see below) which

may raise money or spend it – and which you may want to charge for separately from the subscription.

ACTIVITIES

In the sample constitution above it is assumed that there will be monthly meetings of Litsoc. However, many literary societies have fewer meetings than that, while some have more. Setting regular dates for meetings is a good idea so that your members will get used to setting aside time – the first Saturday in every month, for instance. Making sure that everybody knows when and where the meetings will be is essential. You may want to meet for discussions, readings, talks from members and other speakers, for social events such as dinners, lunches, coffee mornings or outings. You may hold fund-raising events such as bring-and-buy sales, book and DVD sales, raffles or guest appearances by celebrities.

Speakers

There are plenty of academics out there who speak on literary subjects on a daily basis, and you can find out from your local university (or University of the Third Age) who is an expert on your chosen author or on creative writing or literary topics in general and might be able to come and talk to your society. Make sure you understand on what financial basis the talk is to be given. People in the public eye, who appear on television and in the newspapers, often charge very large fees for speaking, sometimes because it is their livelihood, so don't expect people to come and speak at no cost. There are plenty of enthusiasts available who will speak on an expenses-only basis or charge a fee which will be paid to charity or accept a bottle of wine, so do be careful to spell out what you can afford to pay well in advance. You can use good speakers as fund-raisers – ask your members to invite their friends and charge a small entrance fee.

Meeting Places

If you hold your meetings in a central location, for members who are scattered around the country, you may find it difficult to hire rooms. London is expensive, so you may prefer to choose a location related to your author (many regional writers' societies meet only in their home region) or hold your meetings in different places to attract different audiences.

Finding a regular venue for your meetings is difficult, but getting it right can be a huge boost for your society. Some suggestions:

- Try libraries – many local libraries have meeting rooms to rent at low cost.

- Look out for schools or colleges with meeting spaces available to clubs and societies; small rooms cost less to rent than large spaces.
- Arts organisations, Mechanics' Institutes, church halls, parish rooms, village halls, 'little theatres' and art-house cinemas may all have rooms to let, and if you can negotiate on the basis that you are a not-for-profit group that is trying to get started you may find they are sympathetic. If some of your members are already members of the hosting organisation you may be lucky enough to get a discount on room hire – do ask your members to make enquiries of places they already know.
- If it suits your style of meeting, you may be able to find a hotel or restaurant with a private bar which it will provide free as long as you spend freely in the bar. Don't be afraid to ask!
- In the early days, while you are still small, and if you are in a city with large stores such as John Lewis, you may find that they have a community hub which they let out free of charge to charity groups.
- If all else fails, you may need to meet in someone's house. This is how many societies get started but it depends on the goodwill of the host. Think about how you can circulate meetings from member to member, and start holding meetings at formal venues as soon as you can raise the money: it is much more professional and will give your society a better identity as you increase your numbers.

Choosing a Time

There are societies which meet only at weekends, or in the evening, or in the afternoon – for whole days, for an hour – in fact, the range of possibilities is huge. You will need to take account of the type of members you have or expect to have. If your members are quite elderly you may find they don't like being out at night, especially in the winter. If your author is popular with young people you will have to find a time when they are not committed to something else, such as sports. Trying out a few different times or conducting a survey of your members should help you to hit on the best arrangement: a yearly 'study day' meeting is popular with some societies whose members can't do regular evenings; Saturday afternoons (but not every week) suit a wide range of people; if your members work they won't be able to make weekday afternoons but might enjoy a midweek evening meeting. Collaborating with your venue (see above) to find a good time is highly recommended.

RECRUITING MEMBERS

You will only attract new members if they know you are there! See 'Marketing Your Literary Society – A Quick Guide' on the website [Resources page](#) for advice on how to do this most effectively. Make sure you get as much publicity as possible, but be clear about what you are doing and why, so that prospective members know what they are joining, what it will cost them, and what to expect from membership. Check on Facebook to see if there are any groups which celebrate your particular author/s. Some of them might be interested in becoming members. You can also 'tweet' your presence. Using social media for publicity might help you to attract a wider age-range to your group. Don't expect every new member to be as enthusiastic as you are, but make them feel welcome and make sure they feel they are getting something out of that membership – a 'welcome pack' is cheap and easy to make up (a plastic wallet, a programme of activities, a newsletter, a copy of the constitution, a badge, a bookmark, leaflets, reading lists – use your imagination!).

DATA PROTECTION

In May 2018, the data protection laws are due to change, mainly on the issue of 'consent'. When you start to recruit members, you will be storing some of their details (name, e- and postal addresses, etc.).

Assuming you have created a membership form, you need to add a sentence to the bottom of the form stating where the information will be stored and what it will be used for. Then, provide a tick box for them to opt-in to allow you to keep this information. These forms should then be kept in case of query later. Detailed information on all this is available at <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/charity/>

PUBLICATIONS

Many literary societies produce their own publications. It is usual to produce a newsletter of some sort, to keep members informed about the programme of activities and let them know what is going on, what has been done in the meetings and what is proposed. If you can take photographs at meetings to illustrate the newsletter this helps to make it lively and personal. Get your officers to put reports in it, use quotations from your author if you are a single author society, and encourage members to see it as a forum for their contributions. You may need to find a society member to nominate as 'editor' who has a computer and printer,

and ideally a photocopier as well, but your local library may help you with cheap photocopying.

If your author is the subject of an academic journal you can encourage members to subscribe to it, but founding a new academic journal is a huge undertaking and not something to embark on lightly or early in the life of your society. Building a good relationship with the editor/s of such a journal is a good idea and may bring you additional members.

A leaflet which gives details of your society, meeting times and places, contact phone numbers and so on, can be a very useful means of publicity. See 'Marketing Your Literary Society – A Quick Guide' for more advice and information at the [Resources page](#) on the website.

Most literary societies support their own websites, and this has been an important method of making contact with potential new members. Nowadays, it is vital to have a presence on the internet.

CONFERENCES/FESTIVALS

An annual conference or festival can be the highlight of a society's year, but it will come at the cost of a great deal of work on the part of the committee. See the leaflet 'Organising Events and Festivals for Literary Societies – A Quick Guide' at the [Resources page](#) on the website for help with this. There is no need for these events to be exclusively 'academic' – many literary societies hold conferences or festivals which have a good balance between talks and entertainment with time for the AGM as well. Combining activities in this way is a proven way to attract interest, publicity and new members, and give members a real sense of belonging to a group of friends with similar interests. Do consider it even quite early in your society's existence because it establishes the identity of the group and asserts its confidence. It need not be held in an exotic place to be a success!

Entertainment at conferences usually includes literary walks, talks, performances, film showings and exhibitions. Your own members should help with the organisation – but make sure you find out who has a talent for entertaining and get them involved. If possible, setting up a small, local sub-committee, with a co-ordinator, can ease the pressure on the main committee.

An important feature of conferences is the dinner, which for many society members is a highlight of their year, with speeches appropriate to the occasion and good food and drink.

A conference is an expensive feature of a literary society, so consider collaborating with another society in the same region or with similar interests, in order to spread the costs of organising and to increase the attendance.

Festivals are a little different and do not necessarily include a dinner. Talks, walks, entertainment, and booksellers are the main backbone of this type of event.

THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECT OF LITERARY SOCIETIES IS ENJOYMENT!

Good luck with your venture!