



# Organising Events and Festivals for Literary Societies – a Quick Guide

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Your literary society has been running for some time and you want to start organising events – perhaps you're intending to use them to raise money or perhaps you want to stimulate the membership and celebrate your author/s. The first aspect to consider is why you want to hold an event at all. As anyone with any experience of event organisation will tell you, it only makes sense to do it when you have a clear purpose in mind. If you are thinking about holding an event because other people have been saying, 'We ought to have a conference/study day', that really shouldn't be an over-riding reason to do it.

Good reasons for holding events or festivals include: awareness-raising; recruitment of new members; fund-raising; marking an achievement by your society; celebrating an anniversary of your author; returning the hospitality of other organisations; using funds previously set aside for entertainment; publicising your publications; or as part of a general marketing initiative. We needn't explore the bad or unwise reasons for holding events here – they will become all too obvious if you are persuaded to organise an event which somebody else hi-jacks for their own benefit!

## **FORWARD PLANNING**

The length of time you will need to plan your event will partly depend on the length of the event itself and its complexity, as well as the popularity of the potential venue. However, it is usual to decide on your programme for the coming year and, if your event is going to be a major undertaking, you will need at least a year in advance to do the planning and to book venues and accommodation (if appropriate). It is possible to do something and make a success of it in a shorter timescale, but if you want to be able to attract important visitors or attendees from a wide area rather than just your local town or city you must give them plenty of notice. Of course, if you are basing your event on a celebration of some forthcoming anniversary, such as a centenary, or the anniversary of your society's founding, you will be able to predict the date well in advance.

The next thing you should do is decide what form the event will take. You might decide that the most important aspect of it is a celebratory meal; you may want to make your

centrepiece event a lecture by an eminent expert on your writer; or you may be keen to run a study weekend based around a popular local celebrity writer. Each of these elements can be combined to make a much longer event. However, you must bear in mind the following issues:

1. Unless your society is very wealthy, your event should be self-funding: that is, you should recoup from attendees the full cost of putting on the event.
2. Unless there is any reason to assume otherwise, your event should last no longer than a long weekend, say Friday morning to Sunday evening. A full-scale literary festival may last longer. Three-day conference-type events are most popular and easier to organise than longer conferences and are also less likely to lose you money, largely because hotels like to attract weekend visitors to balance the business clients they have during the week, and so set their rates cheaper from Friday to Sunday.
3. If you want to attract 'big names' such as celebrity authors or important academics, you MUST invite them early in the planning process as their diaries are likely to fill up more than a year in advance. Make sure you find out what, if anything, they will charge for their attendance or for speaking to your society: some of them are happy to give their services to their public but many are not, and you may be surprised to discover just what large fees they can command. They may also expect to claim travel/accommodation expenses.
4. You must choose the right venue for your event, and this may also involve you in considerable expense. Attractive and popular venues will be booked up well in advance, so do not fix your date until you have made absolutely sure you can have the accommodation you will need. Many venues will expect a substantial deposit before they will accept your booking, so don't forget to include this expense in your accounts and recoup it from the payments. Also, be sure to ask them about hidden charges (e.g. cancellation) and deadlines for confirmation of final numbers of attendees, etc.

If you are offered free accommodation on condition that your party takes advantage of the bar facilities – for instance, in a village hall or sports club – this is an excellent opportunity to transfer the cost of the event from your society to the event attendees.

## **A PLANNING CHECKLIST**

You can think of this as: Places, People, Performance, Participants and Paperwork.

## Places

You may need to book several 'places' for your event. If you are holding a banquet, you may need more than one room: you may need a reception room for drinks before you go through to the banqueting room and/or a lounge for coffee and drinks afterwards. Where will the speeches be given, at the tables in the banqueting room or elsewhere?

If you are holding a series of lectures, it may be necessary to plan the room layout as well as booking the lecture rooms. Don't assume that a university teaching room will be laid out as a lecture room; it may have chairs in groups and it may not have a lectern. Check what facilities your speaker/s want to use, including PowerPoint projection, microphone, laptop and so on. You may need to supply your own equipment, but do be careful – many venues seem to charge very high fees for renting their projectors and screens, but they may also supply a technician, whereas if you use your own equipment you need to have it insured and provide your own technical support! The venue also has to agree to your doing this. Think about public liability as well.

The question of providing accommodation is sometimes quite tricky. If you are using a university hall of residence, do read the small print. You may be required to fill a specific number of rooms and be charged a high cancellation fee if you don't get as many participants as you had expected. On the other hand, many chain hotels will give you a favourable room rate at weekends and even supply a room for your meetings at minimum cost because they know that they will make a profit on bar sales.

Of course, websites like [www.booking.com](http://www.booking.com) may have even better room rates. If you are not charging an all-inclusive fee (i.e. event and accommodation together), then it is much easier to let everyone arrange their own accommodation. You will have enough to deal with.

Most of your members or attendees will expect a reasonable level of comfort. This is particularly important if you have a high proportion of elderly members. If that is the case, then you will need to think about accessibility if there are likely to be people with mobility issues. Word-of-mouth is a good way to find suitable venues. Ask the ALS for advice and ask your members for recommendations of restaurants, hotels and attractions and you will be likely to have a good choice of places to start your research. You may find that it is a question of cost to the society and the size of your members' purses that determine your choice. Just because it is a very special event does not mean that everybody will be happy to stump up £100 for a dinner, or more than £400 for a weekend!

If you are using a local authority managed venue, and if you are a registered charity, you may be eligible for exemption from VAT on the booking fee – which would reduce your costs. If you are not a registered charity but are co-running the event with another organisation that is, see if they will place the booking and pay, in order to get the discount.

If you can hold the whole event (especially if it runs over several days) in the same venue or in places very close together (no more than five minutes' walk between them), this will make it more attractive. If part of the event, such as a visit to a specific building for a lecture or guided tour, has to involve a short journey, you may need to hire a minibus or coach; again, don't forget to factor this cost into the whole budget for the event. Your local newspaper, or a search on the internet, will give you the numbers of local coach firms to contact for estimates.

Festivals require a great deal more accommodation over a longer period; see our special Festivals section later in this guide.

## **People**

By this, we mean the people who will be leading your event – your committee, your guests and speakers. They are very important to the success of the occasion and you must ensure that they are fully briefed on those aspects of the planning process that apply to them. If you can create a team for the event, so that one person is responsible for the hospitality (accommodation, food and drink) and another for the speakers/guests and their needs, and another for the visits and lectures, this will help enormously. The organising team will be the hosts for the society's event and all of them can make a real contribution to its success. They can welcome everybody to the meetings together, or take it in turns to give a welcome speech, and can certainly be encouraged to give votes of thanks.

Even if you are holding a simple meal to celebrate some aspect of your society's activities, it is usual to have some speeches after the meal, including, if you are a single author or author-family society, a toast to 'the Immortal Memory'. This should be given by your guest of honour, and can last anything from 10 minutes to about half-an-hour. Don't forget to give your audience a 'comfort break' after the dessert or coffee and before the speeches start – you don't want them fidgeting or dashing out of the room, and your guests may also like a short break to gather their thoughts before speaking.

When you book a speaker, or ask one of your guests to speak, make it absolutely clear (in writing, if you can) how long you expect them to speak for. Any time over-run may add to the costs of your event, and your attendees will expect more than a couple of sentences

from a celebrity if they have paid a large fee – do encourage guests to circulate among the whole audience if at all possible, so that you don't get a privileged few hogging all the guests' attention. Everybody who has paid to attend would like a share of the limelight surrounding a celebrity guest and although they realise that the officers of the society or the organisers of the event will deserve special access, they will be more enthusiastic about paying to invite people in future if they have shaken the celebrity's hand or exchanged a few words with them.

If you are hiring a room or using a hotel's facilities don't forget that there will be other people with whom you must negotiate, such as porters, doormen, receptionists, waiters and managers. If you are using a conference centre or university accommodation, you may be obliged to work with a 'dedicated organiser'. This does not mean that they will go to great lengths to get things right, just that they are the named person with whom you have to liaise. If you are trying to keep your costs down (and who isn't!) you may find that your organiser is being paid out of the overall fee and that this is therefore inflated to cover that cost. This is acceptable for commercial organisations, but for literary societies it probably means that you will be paying too much.

It is easier and more economical to negotiate every aspect of the event within the team you've set up, rather than leaving things to a 'professional organiser' who is answerable to the accommodation provider rather than to you. If you are happy to use someone like this, make sure that they know exactly what you want and that they provide it. If they are providing signage, for instance, check that it's in place before the event; if they have agreed to provide a lectern, make sure it isn't in the wrong place; if they have promised technical equipment make sure it's in working order. If there are any failures, you must claim a refund, naturally. (All these are problems from real-life events we have experienced, and happened despite having a 'dedicated organiser'.)

There must be a named person to whom everybody can refer during the planning process. Make sure this is somebody who can be trusted to act on information and who is totally committed to your society and its welfare. Organising events is hard work and anybody who takes it on is committing themselves to a period of constant anxiety, so be prepared to thank them very profusely at the end of the event. This is the main reason why we put so much emphasis on the reasons for holding an event – only the people with responsibility for organising it know how much work is involved.

## **Performance**

There are two main aspects to this: the first is the planning of activities for your event; and the second is the evaluation of the event as a whole, and we will leave that till last.

What sort of activities will be involved in your event? We have hinted already that these may include speeches of various kinds and lengths, and most readers will be familiar with the kind of thing we mean.

You may also be including (especially if your author is/was a dramatist) a performance of a play or readings from your author/s, and there may also be music you would like to include, either live or recorded. (Again, check out copyright/performance rights.) Visual elements to the event may include showing a DVD of a dramatisation of a novelist's work, an exhibition of relevant material such as manuscripts or memorabilia, photographs, maps and publications. All these types of activity will need spaces of different kinds and, therefore, appropriate planning.

It is worth thinking long and hard about how much variety you want to build in to your event. We have heard a conference attendee complaining that the programme was 'all walks and talks', although for literary societies these activities form the basis of most events (and the event she was referring to was, in fact, an extremely lively and enjoyable one, with walks to exhibitions and concerts!).

If the main element in your event is speaking, from one or more invited lecturers or celebrities, it is absolutely essential that you plan the timing very carefully.

Check with the kitchen if there is a meal involved – how long will it take to serve? How long will people take over the food and drink? When will the speaker stand up, how long will they speak for, and will there be a toast at the end – so will people need their glasses charging?

If your meal is an informal one, much of this can be left to the mood of the audience and speaker/s, but if it is a proper formal banquet it is appropriate to make your preparations precise and thorough. We have found that it is essential to indicate in advance how long each speech should take. There are speakers who resist being limited to 20 minutes, or 45 minutes, or whatever you have decided is the appropriate length of time, but if you have a number of speakers and a limited time (you may be being charged for the room booking, and incur a penalty if you run over) then you can use this to encourage your speaker/s to stick to their time limit. Most professional speakers will be grateful for having a specified time to work to.

Similarly, if you are engaging musicians or performers of any kind, make sure you have agreed in advance exactly how long the performance will last, and that there is a fixed start

and finish time. You may have to become very strong and authoritative, especially if there is a co-ordinated element (such as a walking tour arriving in time for an open-air performance, or a costumed interpreter welcoming a group to a pre-booked meal) which needs to be time-controlled. If the performance is over before the walking group arrives, or the costumed interpreter delays the meal service, you have disappointment and complaints to deal with. These issues are particularly important when you are planning a full-scale literary festival, so work on your programme very thoroughly before you consider it complete.

The technical problems of performances are many and various. If you are putting on any kind of event in the open air, remember that voices may not carry over the sound of traffic, planes and trains, so you may need microphones. Open air theatre is delightful when the weather is good but the British weather is unpredictable.

Most speakers who use PowerPoint are used to loading their material onto laptops from memory sticks but it is always good to have someone technically competent on hand to sort out problems like microphone feedback or incompatible software. Run through your whole event in your mind a month before it takes place and check that you have a plan for every eventuality – you may still have a problem, but you will have some idea how to solve it!

The final element in your performance planning is the evaluation you **MUST** carry out after the event has taken place. Using feedback forms to get responses from the attendees is a good idea – they needn't be very long or exhaustive, but it is a pity not to get some kind of response from your 'customers' when you can. If you'd rather not use forms, do phone or email a few people after the event and try to get honest answers to a few basic questions such as 'Did you enjoy it?' 'What was your favourite part of the event?' 'What could have gone better from your point of view?' If you get all positive responses and no negatives you will be able to pat yourselves on the back and say your event was an unqualified success. If you get a few little niggles (the food was overcooked; Mr X went on too long; the toilets were difficult to find and there was a queue) then you will be able to make sure that next time (if there is a next time!) these issues will be addressed if possible.

## **Participants**

How many people do you want to come to the event? How much will it cost them to attend? This is not merely a matter of the ticket price, of course. You may be expecting attendance to be drawn from a fairly small radius, especially if your society has a geographical aspect and local interest only, but there may be people who would like to attend but come from further afield and who will need accommodation and travel costs to be taken into account when considering your event.

There is a tendency among older members of literary societies to ignore rising costs and expect to get the same benefits and entertainment for what they have paid in the past – we have all had this experience in the last few years. You MUST NOT be intimidated by this into reducing your prices below what will cover your costs. Compare what you are charging for an evening's entertainment with what you would have to pay for a cinema or theatre ticket; your celebration dinner is unlikely to cost less than the price of a three-course meal at a good restaurant, even if you are holding it in a social club or a school.

If you are expecting attendees from across the country or even from abroad, you should try to ensure that your timing will allow them to arrive in time for the main events and leave so that they can catch their planes/trains/coaches back. If you anticipate any difficulties of this sort, getting your planning started early will help you to resolve them in good time.

Most towns and cities provide an accommodation guide in print or on the internet so that if the hotel you have chosen doesn't suit your delegates they can find some other hotel or guest house. Some delegates may prefer an alcohol-free or meat-free environment, or may prefer to avoid a busy conference hotel. It is also important to be aware of the possibility of disabled delegates wishing to attend. Although you may want to hold your event in a historic building, you may find that it does not have acceptable disabled access. In this situation, you will have to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of using a non-disabled-friendly venue. If you do go ahead with the booking, you need to state quite explicitly on your publicity materials that there are accessibility issues, and what they are.

You will base all your costings on a likely attendance number. Be prepared for this to be either an over- or under-estimate. If you have underestimated the popularity of your event, you may need to find larger rooms – or simply announce that tickets are 'first come, first served' and that there will be a cut-off for numbers. If you have overestimated, you may need to cut your costs somewhere, and do make sure that you are not going to be hit by cancellation fees. The more events your society holds the easier it will be to estimate your numbers, but it is very difficult to work round events such as the Cup Final or a Royal Wedding or the Boat Race. Trying to guess what will also be scheduled for the weekend you've chosen is a nightmare, as any bride will tell you. We have organised a weekend conference at a venue which later agreed to host a marathon run on the second day, thus making access to the grounds almost impossible for delegates! And our 'dedicated organiser' failed to warn us! Don't forget that you may need some insurance – third party or cancellation. Check if public liability is covered by the venue. If it isn't, you should get some quotes.

Publicity for your event is essential. Make sure you have informed the ALS so that it can appear in our newsletter and on the website, and put it on your own website if you have one. Use Facebook and Twitter if you can to let as many people as possible know about it – assuming that it is open to outsiders and not just members of your own society. Of course, if you are holding it in order to recruit new members you will want to make it as widely known as you can. Your local newspaper may be happy to put a short column in, and you will also have your own publications to put the word around. Some local newspapers are really keen to celebrate local activities and may send a photographer and journalist to your event as well as putting in a notice beforehand, particularly if you have any ‘celebrities’ attending. Give them plenty of notice and keep checking that they have the date and time right. Local radio may also be interested, especially if you are prepared to go and be interviewed about the event, but you may need to create a ‘story’ for them, with some sort of controversy to tickle their interest. Something along the lines of ‘Local people never really liked Author X because he was considered too avant-garde’ or ‘Local people remember X’s mother buying knickers on tick’ (both those have been used!).

You may feel that it’s worth paying for an advertisement if your event is really important, but check the rates carefully before investing in paid advertising – word of mouth and free editorial can cost less and be just as effective. Bear in mind that the more you are investing in your event, especially if it is a full-blown festival, the more it is important to market it thoroughly. However, a major festival may well involve you with partners who will help with this. For further ideas on advertising and marketing your event, please see the *Quick Guide to Marketing Your Literary Society*.

## **Paperwork**

Of course, you will try to do as much planning and booking by using the internet as you possibly can, but you will need to write some letters – not all your invitees and participants will be on email – and you will need to prepare several other items of paperwork in advance. If you have been hiring rooms and booking speakers, you will have had to deal with the paperwork other people have created, so now you must think about creating your own for your participants. This is not difficult but you will have to take it seriously as a task and get it tested before you use it – there are a few pitfalls to be avoided.

### ***Booking Forms***

It is a good idea to have a booking form for your event unless it is simply a small and local affair. This should list the times and places of each part of the event, any costs associated with specific parts of the event (such as coach fares or entrance fees) and include tick-boxes

for participants to indicate which parts of the event they want to attend and how much they will be paying. Do try to keep it simple! If you can also give an overall price with a small discount for those who book for everything at once and in advance ('early bird'), so much the better!

You will need to decide whether you want full advance payment or just a deposit, and whether you will be able to take electronic payments or only cheques. If you can offer people the chance to pay with their credit cards they are very likely to do so and do it sooner rather than later, which will be a great help to you (but only if you already have that facility). If you have a Paypal account, you can accept online payments via that, but do remember to factor in the 3% or so that Paypal will charge you for the privilege.

Make it absolutely clear what they are paying for – if they think they have paid for a meal but don't get one, you will be in trouble! Put all returned booking forms together – if they are returned electronically they will go into the same folder. Then you will be able to count up who has paid for what and will easily be able to tell whether or not you will meet your financial targets. Keeping a spreadsheet of the bookings does make life easier, and is 'good practice'.

One thing to note, if your event includes an AGM, this part of the event **MUST** be free to members; people who have paid their subscription to belong will not be charged a fee for attending their own AGM. You can ask them to pay for their tea or coffee, of course.

### ***Programme***

The other essential is to have a programme for the event. The information on your booking form may well be the same as your programme – they will certainly need to agree about the times and places for your event, but there may be less detail on the booking form (for instance, you may not need to list the speakers who will be appearing in a specific session, or giving details of the entertainment which will follow the dinner). If there are likely to be accessibility issues with the venue (or coaches), then you need to make that clear on the programme. If there are any walks taking place, you might need to give detail of terrain and distance.

You will give the programme to all the attendees as they arrive at the event, along with any other ancillary information. If your event is a one-day conference followed by a dinner, there may be enough material to be handed out (including summaries of the talks and promotional leaflets for books written by the speakers, perhaps) to justify preparing a conference folder.

Some events may warrant including a notepad and pen (using your logo, perhaps) and you could think about including a sheet of information about your author/s, advertisements for other events or publications, promotional material for your society and perhaps a commemorative item such as a bookmark. (You can download a template for creating bookmarks.) Maps of your venue and local attractions can be obtained from your local tourist information office too.

You can see that this 'goody bag' can sometimes cost quite a lot of time and money to prepare, but it can be a great promotion for your society and its activities. See the *Quick Guide to Publishing for Literary Societies* for further advice. And don't forget to create name badges for your delegates.

To get your folders filled, make a social occasion out of it – invite some helpers and promise them 'tea and cakes' or some suitable benefit, and they will enjoy what is a very mundane but essential task.

## **PRICES**

As indicated above, you do need to try to ensure that your event will not cost more to put on than you will be able to raise from tickets, unless you are holding it to repay your members for their loyalty and support, in which case you may subsidise it from your society's funds. This type of event is likely to be a small one and quite exceptional!

It is a good idea to try to include a very small percentage on top of the cost per person to allow for contingencies. If you know, for example, that the weekend will cost £342 per person, round it up to £350. Then you will have a small sum to cover any unexpected expenses. If the dinner costs £25 per person, think about adding £1 per person to cover the cost of your invited guests – and don't forget to factor in tips for the waiters. If you explain this to your members they will generally be happy with it – unless you have a lot of money in reserve, in which case they may feel that you should use it.

## **SPONSORSHIP**

Please see the *Quick Guide to Finance and Accounting for Literary Societies* for advice on obtaining sponsorship for your event.

A good sponsor can make your event an even greater success by helping to subsidise some aspect of it for your delegates, in return for advertising. Sponsorship can be developed into partnership for planning purposes: if the sponsor is keen to invite particular celebrities or to use a specific venue then they will help you with the booking as well as paying towards the

costs, but do beware of being committed to something you can't afford. Your sponsorship must be a matter of a clear-cut contract which lays down the limits of what is being paid and for what. Try to get at least an email which states this clearly, although word of mouth is sufficient to form a contract. UNLESS THE SPONSOR IS PAYING FOR IT, the sponsor can't insist on your organising something specific ('Wouldn't it be lovely if....' does not mean 'We'll pay for X to attend'). Most commercial sponsors are quite clear about their commitments and will be generous, but there can be inexperienced sponsors as well as inexperienced event organisers!

## **FESTIVALS**

Sponsorship becomes much more significant when you are engaged in organising a major event such as a literary festival, and festivals would never happen without the substantial involvement of commercial sponsors.

If you are thinking about such an event, take the trouble to attend a few in your region, note who the sponsors are and what sort of help they are providing. Then you will have a good idea of how you will approach them or similar organisations for your own purposes. Bear in mind that sponsors often have a budget to spend which has been pre-determined and they really want to spend it. Don't hesitate to ask them for help. A refusal does not mean that your request was a foolish one and that you can't try again next time.

Think about who might be relevant to what you're doing: local second-hand or antiquarian booksellers or even a bookselling chain might wish to pay to have a stand at your event. Publishers of your author/s may be interested, as may the local historic houses with literary connections, or local museums or galleries. If you are inviting speakers, don't forget to advertise the fact locally, as you may get members of the public ready to pay to attend, even if most or all of the rest of the event is free.

## **GETTING HELP WITH ORGANISING**

There is help out there. There are university and college programmes in event organisation or events management (or similar titles), and there may be one in a town near you. If you are looking for help, contact the course organiser and ask if they have students looking for hands-on experience or a placement or internship. If you are very lucky, you will be offered either a single student or a group, depending on the time of year and the type of event you are considering. They may be happy to do some of the running around for you, or they may have good IT skills and the ability to put together leaflets and posters or create your booking

form. They can be used 'on the day' as marshals or stewards, and if you're lucky you can recruit them to your society as well!

Feel free to discuss your plans with other members of the ALS, especially the committee who have experience of organising conferences and meetings. It is essential that you understand the amount of work and worry you are letting yourselves in for when you decide to organise an event, but it is also important to realise that you will be giving pleasure to others and will derive enormous satisfaction from looking back on a successful event and saying 'We did that!'

Many literary societies might benefit from more opportunities to meet with their members and those of other societies, and we look forward to welcoming you all to our AGM each year. We don't 'poach' members from one another, but often all it needs is awareness-raising to add a few new members; some people belong to several societies at once. Whatever your plans, don't be daunted! Think of the pleasure you will be giving by organising an event – to all the delegates but also yourself!

If you are a small society and feel daunted by the prospect of holding an event, consider whether there is another literary society you could team up with, especially if there are points of connection between your authors.

**The benefit of an umbrella organisation like the ALS is the expertise of its members. If you have corrections to this Quick Guide, or additional information which you feel should be included, please contact us via the website.**