AMERICAN
mensa
LTD.

SIG Handbook

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The High IQ Society

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Introduction to Special Interest Groups (SIGs)

So, you want to run a Special Interest Group. Congratulations! To many people, SIGs are the best part of Mensa. This handbook will help you run your SIG smoothly. This handbook is not intended to cover all contingencies — you are a certified genius, so Mensa doesn't expect you to need much handholding.

1.0 Mensa SIG Policies

The American Mensa Committee, official governing body of American Mensa, Ltd., has adopted (ASIE 84-48, Aug. 4, 1984; modified by ASIE 85-32, 6/23/85 and ASIE 90-31, 3/25/90) an official policy regarding Special Interest Groups. All SIG Coordinators should become familiar with the provisions of this policy.

1.1 AMC SIG Policy Text

"American Mensa, Ltd. (AML), as a national group of the international society known as Mensa, encourages members to join together in pursuit of special interests and, to this end, acts as the facilitator and clearing house for information on recognized Special Interest Groups (SIGs).

"Any AML member who has established or wishes to establish a SIG may apply to the SIGs Officer for recognition of that SIG. Recognition will be granted by the SIGs Officer to SIGs which are not identical in purpose to SIGs already recognized by AML, and which do not operate in conflict with the Constitution of Mensa, the Bylaws of AML or the laws of the United States and the various States thereof. To retain such recognition, a SIG may be required by the SIGs Officer to provide information on its membership and activities. Upon failure of a SIG to provide such information on request, or for other good and sufficient cause (i.e. the failure of the of the coordinator to remain a member in good standing of AML, for acts which are contrary to law or to the Constitution and/or Bylaws of Mensa, etc.). The SIGs Officer may withdraw recognition of that SIG.

"Any SIG publication which identifies the SIG as a special interest group of American Mensa must also include a statement to the effect that contents of the publication represent opinions of the writers, and not of Mensa, which has no opinions.

"A SIG may not be operated for a commercial purpose, and must be operated on a not-for-profit basis. No officer or member of a SIG may draw a salary or any other funds from the SIG except reimbursement for actual expenses necessary for SIG operations.

"A SIG may not affiliate with any non-Mensa organization without the express permission of AML. A SIG may not be used as a political pressure group either inside or outside Mensa. Members of a recognized SIG must be members in good standing of Mensa (any national group), but this requirement in no way limits the SIG from admitting as a nonvoting associate any person who is not a member of Mensa. A SIG or Service may encourage its members to investigate or participate in outside resources; however, you must include a disclaimer in your newsletter words to the effect: 'While SIG/Service encourages its members to investigate and/or participate in (name of outside resource). Neither the SIG/Service nor American Mensa are affiliated with any other group(s).

"Members of Mensa, and all other persons considering affiliation with a SIG recognized by AML, are advised that AML is unable to guarantee the information it receives concerning SIGs and that SIGs are voluntary associations which operate independently of AML. AML does not exercise control over the activities of SIGs, and no SIG, SIG member, or SIG coordinator is authorized to bind AML, express opinions on behalf of AML or act in any way on AML's behalf. For these reasons, AML is not responsible for actions taken by or on behalf of any SIG."

1.2 Mensa Name and Logo

SIGs may not use the Mensa name and logo in their SIG nor their newsletter titles without permission. Mensa gives that permission only in very special circumstances (i.e. AML Readers' Service [Bulletin for the Blind]). The SIGs Officer cannot grant a Coordinator permission to use the Mensa name and logo. That must come from the Name and Logo Committee of the AMC. The SO can furnish you the name and address of the Name and Logo Committee Chair. The Mensa name and logo are copyrighted, and Mensa licenses its name. If we do not exercise all due caution to prevent improper use, Mensa cannot prosecute those who knowingly and maliciously misuse it.

2.0 SIG Management

Of course, someone has to actually run a SIG. Traditionally, the person or persons who start the SIG will run it. Exactly what you do to make the SIG interesting and useful is up to you. But, you do need to follow some basic rules and practices.

2.1 Planning a New SIG

Determine the purpose of the SIG — the more specific, the better. Next, determine what will be the benefits to the members, and what their obligations will be. Keep in mind that most people join SIGs to receive, not to give. If your SIG is going to be information-intensive, you — rather than the members — will most likely provide the information.

2.2 Starting a SIG

To start a SIG, contact the SIGs Officer per the address (preferably, the e-mail address) given in the *Mensa Bulletin*. Provide information similar to that for SIGs already listed — since these are approved SIGs, they are examples of what needs to be in a listing. The SIGs Officer will reply to you with approval, denial or suggestions. Once you have approval, the SIGs Officer will include your SIG in the next SIGs listing.

2.3 Membership and Exclusions

You can set requirements for membership and you can set exclusion criteria. However, those requirements and criteria cannot be arbitrary. Common sense applies. For example, if you have an Irish-Americans SIG, you could limit membership to Mensans of Irish decent only. But, you can't do that with a golfing SIG — the ethnicity of the members has nothing to do with the purpose of the SIG. A skinny-dipping SIG can limit membership to only those over 18 years of age, but such a restriction may be discriminatory under other circumstances. It is generally best to make membership as non-exclusive as possible. Doing so results in larger memberships and reduces the likelihood of conflicts or misunderstandings.

2.4 Running Your SIG

Your Mensa membership means you are a certified genius. Thus, Mensa isn't going to tell you how to run your SIG, except as provided in this handbook.

You are in charge of your SIG. You make the rules, you enforce the rules, and you settle disputes. With all of this authority, however, comes the responsibility to live up to what you promise your members and to do so as fairly as possible.

2.5 Handling SIG Overload

If the SIG gets to be too much for you, you can:

- Notify the members you are scaling it back (This may require some refunding of dues.)
- Find an assistant or a replacement
- End the SIG (with sufficient notice)

2.6 SIG Publication(s)

SIGs are not required to have publications per se, but the SIG publication is normally the main tool for communicating with the members. Will your SIG use a Web site, e-mail forum/Web forum, paper newsletter, or some other form of communication? Some pointers:

- Web site: Determine where the contributions will come from, and how often they will be made. A Web site requires frequent refreshing to be effective.
- Forum or discussion group: You must set up rules of conduct for that group and then enforce them fairly. In most discussion groups, two or three voices tend to dominate — to keep the group interesting to other participants, you will need to politely intervene at times.
- Paper Newsletter. It's helpful to keep member information in mail merge files and then print envelopes when it's time to mail the newsletter. This way, you don't have to store paper. You will need to collect dues for postage and publication expenses, unless you want to pay for those yourself.

All SIG publications must carry a disclaimer to the effect of, "This SIG is a part of Mensa, which has no opinions."
In all of your publications, remember to obey intellectual property laws. Mensans, of all people, should respect such laws. Essentially, don't publish the work of another person without permission. You should research the current "Fair Use" laws before quoting material from other sources — your local library has all the information you need on this.

2.7 Obligations and "Paperwork"

You must mail one copy of each issue to the National Office. If you have an electronic copy of your paper newsletter, you may elect to email each issue to the National Office (MembershipDirector@AmericanMensa.org). If you select the email option for your newsletter, please include the SIGs Officer (SIGsOfficer@us.mensa.org), and the Communications Officer (CommunicationsOfficer@us.mensa.org) in your distribution.

If you have an electronic newsletter you must email each issue to the SIGs Officer (SIGsOfficer@us.mensa.org), the Communications Officer (CommunicationsOfficer@us.mensa.org) and the National Office (MembershipDirector@AmericanMensa.org). Alternatively, you may provide links to your electronic newsletters for each issue.

The Mensa Bulletin publishes a SIGs directory on a regular basis. To keep it current, the SIGs Officer collects a SIG profile from each SIG coordinator. When you get a request to update your profile, please do so promptly. It's easy to comply, if you simply fill out the form once electronically and keep the file for the next round — making sure to update the information as needed.

2.8 Resolving Problems

Disputes come in many shapes and sizes. Most small disputes can be handled by the SIG coordinator, and if needed the SIGS Officer or the Assistant SIGs Officer is always available to assist.

As the SIGs listing has grown over the years, so has the job of the SIGs Officer. With this revision of the SIGs handbook comes a new policy on problem resolution. Essentially, SIGs are meant to be fun. Yet, disputes arise. Financially, SIGs members have little at risk — a few dollars at most. Emotional investment in the SIG, however, can result in high levels of perceived injury. It is not the job of the SIGs Officer to referee petty disputes. Petty disputes brought to the SIGs Officer will be remanded to the respective coordinator. Bright minds should be able to come up with equitable solutions.

If a SIG member makes a seemingly unreasonable request, remind the member you are a volunteer and the SIG is meant to be fun. Ask for a suggestion on a win-win that doesn't strain you as a volunteer or make the SIG no longer fun. Be open-minded and flexible, but don't feel obligated to change the scope or intent of the SIG to make someone else happy. That person is also free to start another SIG. For example, suppose you were running the skiing SIG and another person objected that you weren't covering cross-country skiing. You could create two SIGs — one for downhill skiing and one for cross-country. There might be a third for water skiing.

If a problem escalates or has the potential of escalating, the SIGs office should be notified as soon as possible. Depending on the dispute, other AMC officers should also be notified as well. For instance the Communications Officer if it involves a newsletter or web site concerns, the membership officer if it involves a problem with individuals. It may also be appropriate to involve the AMC chair or National Ombudsman. If in doubt contact the national office and they may advise you who should be involved. It is much better to at least give someone else notice that there is a potential problem rather than to have them blind-sided by the issue. Also as these people are all volunteers it is important that you involve more than one individual since sometimes they are away from email and may not be able to respond immediately.

Problems that involve illegal activities are out of Mensa's jurisdiction and should be turned over to the proper authorities. However if you are aware of such a situation, the SIGs officer should be notified as soon as possible.

2.9 Membership Confidentiality

You must obtain expressed permission from your SIG members before sharing their names and/or contact information with anyone else — including others in the group.

2.10 Fairness and Ethics

Make these two concepts your bywords as you run your SIG, and you shouldn't have any problems.

2.11 Conclusion

The SIG Coordinator experience can be very rewarding. Just keep a few simple rules in mind, and your SIG will be enjoyable to others, as well. And remember, it's meant to be fun. Keep the SIG in perspective, and you'll have the energy to keep it going for a very long time.

3.0 General Information

3.1 List of acronyms, etc.

AG: Annual Gathering. Mensa's annual convention and business meeting.
AMC: American Mensa Committee.
AML: American Mensa, Ltd.
LSASE: Large Self-Addressed, Stamped Envelope.
RG: Regional Gathering. Smaller gatherings hosted by local groups.
SASE: Self-Addressed, Stamped Envelope.
SIG: Special Interest Group
SO: SIGs Officer.

3.2 Other Resources

You can find SIG history and other information at us.mensa.org. You are also free to contact other SIG coordinators for advice on running your SIG.

SIG Coordinators e-mail chat list

If you would like to communicate with your fellow SIG Coordinators, we have an e-mail chat list. The list address is SIGCoord-talk@lists.us.mensa.org. To subscribe, go to http://lists.us.mensa.org/mailman/listinfo/sigcoord-talk. Provide your e-mail address and name and click Subscribe. As it is a closed list, membership is pending verification of your membership and office. This will be handled promptly so that you can start enjoying the exchange of experiences and ideas with your fellow Coordinators.

SIG Coordinators e-mail announce list

There is also an announce only e-list (SIGCoord-ANNOUNCE@lists.us.mensa.org) which all SIG Coordinators are subscribed to upon notification of appointment. This list is primarily for announcements from the SIGs Officer, Assistant SIGs Officer or National Office.