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Especially for SJGs

Even though this handbook as a whole is intended as an aid for all Mensa editors, most of the specifics pertain more to local groups than to SIGs. There is a good reason for this: SIGs are bound by very few of the constraints that affect local groups. As long as SIGs operate within the absolute limitations listed in Chapter 1, they can pretty much make their own rules.

The SIG handbook, *Special Interest Groups Guidelines*,* covers the subject of SIG operation as a whole but does not give detailed attention to the subject of SIG newsletters. The techniques of paste-up and the principles of good editing are the same regardless of the category of publication. What is at issue in this chapter is the concerns of SIG editors as they happen to differ from those of other Mensa editors. To touch on them, we'll make a brief chapter-by-chapter review of the material covered elsewhere in this book, noting its application to SIGs and emphasizing points of major deviation from the local-group orientation. Then we'll round up some comments from SIG editors themselves.

Editor's Handbook

1. What You Absolutely Need to Know

Except for the part about publishing a calendar of events and qualifying for local-group funding, all of Chapter 1 applies to SIGs as well as to local groups.

* Check with the national office for currently available support materials and information.

2. Getting Started

Beth Sample's "A Letter to a New Editor" contains useful information and advice for the SIG editor, even though it is addressed to a local group editor.

SIG newsletter functions seldom include "official" functions other than those that are official to the SIG itself.

While timely publication of a calendar of events is not a matter of SIG concern, the scheduling of steps in the production of the newsletter is relevant.

The identified "basic elements" of a publication are just as basic to a SIG newsletter as to any other. It is particularly important, since a SIG is not restricted by the "no opinion" stance of Mensa itself, to make sure that you include a disclaimer dissociating the SIG's opinions and causes from Mensa as a whole.

The AMC officer charged with responsibility to the SIGs is the Groups Officer.* You may, however, freely call upon any AMC officer, appointee, or consultant for aid whenever you feel the need.

3. Content

Virtually all SIG newsletter content is optional, in the sense that SIG newsletters are unlikely to be asked to carry messages from AMC, have little or no official business to transact, and have, in general, no bylaws-mandated requirements to meet. On the other hand, SIG editors have a more particular relationship to their readers than have local group editors. The nature of the SIG publication is defined by the special interest around which the SIG is organized. Unless the SIG has a literary orientation, a high order of literary/journalistic style rightly occupies a lower priority than it does for local group editors. Content itself—what is said, not how it is said—is usually the chief concern. The editor should still be selective, but there is more reason for trying to include something from every contributor, if at all possible, than there is with a newsletter that serves a heterogeneous readership.

The suggestions for cultivating contributors apply to SIGs, as do the cautions about scolding the membership. SIG membership is voluntary; local group membership is automatic with membership in the national organization. Therefore SIG editors have to work a good deal harder than local group editors at delivering what their readers want. Their advantage, however, is guaranteed audience interest—a certainty the local editor will never have—and a predefined focus that can serve as a yardstick for all published material.

SIG editors enjoy an enviable freedom from political concerns and often from excessive preoccupation with the technical aspects of newsletter publication as well.

SIG editors must be every bit as careful as other editors—perhaps even more so, since the temptations may seem greater and the risks more slight—about infringing upon copyrights. No book or magazine outside Mensa has ever been published, we daresay, that exempted Mensa SIGs from respecting their copyrighted status.

4. Production

The chapter on production is as pertinent to SIG publications as it is to any others.

* Now the SIGs Officer.

5. Distribution

The steps in getting the newsletter out are not specific to local groups, but the assumptions underlying that chapter are. You will be on your own for address labels and will have to work out a method for keeping track of subscription expirations and renewals, address changes, and sample copies. You might be lucky and find a computer hobbyist in your local group who is dying to think up new things to try with his toy and will maintain your mailing list for the price of the labels; it's worth asking around.

Few SIGs approach the medium-size local groups in number of members, but a single-handed mailing can be tedious all the same. You can't really expect your local group's members to pitch in, but if you happen to have an obliging member of your SIG living nearby you may find a helper.

If you can meet the minimum mailing quantity and can maintain a regular publication schedule, you can qualify for second class mail. Note that there is a risk involved: if you lose the permit, you forfeit the fee as well. Since SIGs can set their subscription prices according to their expenses, you may not find any advantage in going to second class mail.

6. Finances

Unless the coordinator plans to underwrite SIG expenses himself or has a generous benefactor, SIGs have to be self-supporting. There is no backup system comparable to the local group treasury, the subsidy from National, or the RVC's discretionary funds. The amount of SIG dues charged and the size of the publications budget are inseparable and should be projected in advance, as the SIG handbook recommends.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with trying to raise funds by carrying paid advertising, SIG publications are likely to have little to offer an advertiser and may well encounter considerable resistance to the idea on the part of SIG members. In general, SIGs will have to be creative about fund-raising if it becomes necessary. One SIG has done very nicely by offering issue sponsorships to members: for a fixed amount, rounded up to the next dollar from actual cost, members may subsidize a four-page increment to the newsletter's usual eight and receive prominent credit in "their" issues.

7. Record-Keeping and Reporting

SIGs are required to make a brief semiannual accounting to the Groups Officer in order to be listed in the *Bulletin's* Directory. It is important for SIG editors (who are, for the most part, also the coordinators, treasurers, and all other functionaries combined) to keep a careful record of income and expenses since they are directly accountable to their paying members and also should not have to put their personal checkbooks on the line in order to maintain SIG solvency. The postal forms are necessary for second and third class mailing. None of the other forms and reports covered in Chapter 7 has any bearing on SIG publications.

9. Your Editorial Role

The sections on philosophy, policy, and style are pertinent to SIGs, as are the "Ten Commandments" and the portion headed "When You Retire." The balance of the chapter is applicable primarily to local group publications.

10. Mensa and You

Apart from the AMC actions cited, this chapter's briefing on the national organization should be useful to SIG editors.

11. The Voice of Experience

While some of the comments allude to local group matters, the principles and generalities expressed here can apply to SIG newsletters.

12. The Reference Shelf

Any editor may find valuable aids in the works cited.

SIG-cerely Speaking

by Vicky Edwards Gehrt

Six Ignoble Gaffes: What NOT to Do as a SIG Editor

1. Do not be a martyr. You will ask for SASEs and not get them. You will request that checks be made out in your name and get them in the name of the SIG. You will set deadlines that will be ignored. You may be annoyed, but don't let your readers know. Making your members feel inferior won't get you anywhere.
2. Do not procrastinate. Get your newsletter out on time; members like knowing when to expect it. Promptness counts with correspondence, too. Try to answer questions and sample requests within a week.
3. Do not badger your membership. One of the worst things you can print is a threat. Never claim you will fail to respond to a request not submitted in the proper manner.
4. Do not change quotes. There is a vast difference between editing excess wordiness (or trimming for space reasons) and changing the actual wording of the writer.
5. Do not add an editor's note disagreeing with an article written by a member. As Meredy Amyx has said, "Editorial last-word-ism is a dirty trick and guaranteed to drive off contributors." Because we're usually opinionated about the subject of our SIGs, it's a very easy mistake to make, but it's a deadly one.
6. Do not misspell names. Since my first name has a variety of spellings and my last name is impossible, it happens to me all the time. But I draw a distinction between those who care enough to check my signature and those who don't. Be an editor who does.

Six Illustrious Gestures: Some DOs of SIG Editorship

1. Be personal. When someone sends you an article, or showers you with lavish praise, acknowledge it with a personal note.
2. Use a questionnaire. I send a one-page survey of members' interests, special problems, recommended books, and favorite quotes on our topic when I send out a sample or get a new subscription. Most people fill

them out, giving me a lot of material to work from and a basis for introducing new members.

3. Neatness counts. People are fussy and don't usually care to spend a great deal of time deciphering pages that are illegible or that have been chewed up by your dog.
4. Be grateful. Give full thanks, in print, to those who send extra money or stamps and those who give your SIG free publicity in other Mensa publications.
5. Give a grace period for renewals. The stereotype of the absent-minded genius may have a basis in fact; I sent an extra issue and a reminder to those failing to renew, and got almost 20 checks in return. That far offset the cost of sending them to the few who did not renew.
6. Use at least part of every article or SIG-related letter you receive from a member. A person whose contribution is ignored is a person who will not contribute again.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This article is reprinted from InterLoc #137, July/August 1981. The author is coordinator of Parents SIG and editor of its newsletter, ParenThesis.*

Shop Talk

While it may not truly be a problem to SIGs, it is a fact that SIGs are generally invisible to the rest of Mensa—and even to each other. Some SIGs may work out exchange-newsletter arrangements with other SIGs, but there is nothing corresponding to the subsidized exchanges among local editors. This is okay—after all, everybody belongs automatically to a local group, which is officially part of the national structure and shares in members' dues, while SIG membership is optional. But SIGs would benefit from more publicity than the Groups Officer is able to give in the limited space of a *Bulletin* column or than the semiannual Directory permits.

I have heard local group editors at the Editors' Workshop ask, "Why can't we get copy about the SIGs? We all need fillers from time to time, and we'd rather use the space for something members may be interested in than fill it with clip art from Dover books." Having been a local group editor myself, I know that this is true. Efforts to consolidate promotional blurbs for SIGs and make sheets of them available to local editors have not been terribly successful. Once more, we are on our own.

In trying to spread the word about my SIG for art lovers, I have had very good luck with this method: for the first two years, I made three or four extra copies of every issue and sent them to local editors, using the list in the *Bulletin's* Directory. I inserted brief notes in them, saying something about the SIG (worded a little differently for each one—editors love exclusives, however minor, and hate mass mailings) and including my name and address. Some editors have simply pasted up my note as was, and some have gone to the trouble to read the entire sample copy, describe it and extract quotes, and include it under the logo clipped from my cover. This coverage has brought me many inquiries and reinforces my conviction that Mensa editors are, in general, a wonderfully supportive and accommodating bunch.

From time to time I've also addressed copies to members of AMC just to let them know what we were up to. Except for the Groups Officer, members of AMC have very little chance to observe this special aspect of Mensa. A few copies per month have not strained our conservative little budget, and I think they've done us good.

—Meredy Amyx
Arthur SIG

Biggest problem is financing out-of-pocket expenditures. M should support all newsletters at least to half of printing and mailing cost.

Second biggest: how to build interest and contributions and at same time require money and effort of newsletter receivers.

Most successful idea: invite guest editors to publish an issue. Encourage assistant editorships for parts of the subjects. Invite correspondence and feedback in each issue.

—Glen Lambert
Truth SIG, Lucid SIG

With SIGs even more than with local newsletters, the biggest problem is getting members to contribute.

—Cynthia Fisher
Oriental Cooking SIG

I used to be the editor of the Palm Beach County chapter *Palm-Mensa* for some years and now have this Degree-Free SIG newsletter job. To state the differences briefly, I guess it boils down to the fact of having a hundred amateur editors looking at your work with the hope of finding a typo or something “to tell you for your own good”—and having a hundred happy readers who enjoy what you are sending them and don’t criticize it. I don’t have to waste one minute in worrying about what another local officer wants or doesn’t like—can please only myself, which makes the job thrilling and very challenging, as I use my best judgment to figure out what the members enjoy.

—Joy McLeieer
Degree-Free SIG