

LEADERSHIP GUIDE FOR NEW CHAIRS OF LITA COMMITTEES AND INTEREST GROUPS

Prepared by Zachary Coble, Katlin Heidgerken-Greene, and Margaret
Heller

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Important qualities for Chairs

When we conducted our survey of LITA chairs and membership about what makes a good chair for a committee or interest group, there were three themes that jumped out: organization, preparation, and flexibility. Here's a summary of the most important things you need to be thinking about as a new chair—you'll see some of this information repeated later, but if you only remember part of what you read in this document, make it this part.

Get and Stay Organized

- Use time between conferences wisely in order to be productive and accomplish the committee's charge.
- Communicate regularly: Provide regular check-ins to update everyone on recent activity.
- If meetings are required, solicit agenda items from committee members, and reach a consensus on a date and time.
 - [Doodle](#) is great (and free) tool for scheduling meetings with multiple people across multiple timezones
 - Use technologies that are reliable and easily accessible for members, such as a conference calls, Skype, or Google Hangouts.
 - During the meeting, stick to the agenda but encourage participation and discussion, and know when to table an issue for future discussion.
- Delegate work to members. Remember, they have volunteered because they want to participate in the group's work.
- Give clear deadlines.

Prepare for becoming chair

- Ask yourself why you are seeking to chair. Make sure this is a committee or group that you are personally invested in and care about.
- Understand the expected time commitment, especially if you are starting a new position or other significant changes in your work or personal life. This will vary by committee, but assume that it will be significant.
- Contact the previous chair and ask for documents relating to procedures and the committee's work. Ask what worked and what didn't, and why.
- Read, or at least skim, the [Bylaws](#) and [Manual](#), especially the sections on committees and interest groups. Not everything in the Bylaws or Manual is correct or up to date, so make sure to double check normal practice with someone else.
- Talk to other committee and IG chairs during your term (Committee chairs have access to the Comchair listserv). These are your colleagues who are facing many of the same issues as you are. Attend the Committee and IG Joint Chairs Meeting at ALA Annual and Midwinter.
- Identify and introduce yourself to your Board liaison and Staff liaison.

Be flexible

- Utilize [lazy consensus](#): move forward even if you don't have 100% response
- Have a plan B for whatever the situation might be, and especially for meetings and projects.
- While it is important to set clear deadlines, understand when it is appropriate to give extensions. Remember, we are all volunteers and have day jobs and lives.
- Understand that technology fails. For example, if you're in the middle of a conference call and there are connectivity or other technical difficulties, try to solve them and stick to the agenda.
 - If necessary, try to reconnect with everyone using a different medium.
 - This requires knowing in advance your committee members phone numbers, Skype handles, Google handles, etc.
 - Acknowledge when it's hopeless and reschedule for a different time

Communication with your committee/Interest Group

Timeline

It is imperative to establish early, frequent, and consistent communication with your committee in order to complete the work required for your committee. There are some minimum requirements for communication, but you should reach shared expectations with your committee for what additional communication will help. You will be chair of the committee from 1-4 ALA years, which run from the end of the Annual Conference, with the Midwinter conference as a mid-point. If you don't start working with your committee until Midwinter, you've lost half an ALA year! So make sure you get started sooner.

Sample Timeline for an ALA Year:

July 1 (or whenever ALA ends): You are now officially chair of the committee. Be sure to introduce yourself to the members of the committee and get to know something about them. Find out what type of communication works best for them.

Weekly or monthly throughout the year (depending on committee): Send a message to your committee mailing list with project updates or discussions.

Between August-October: Have a conference call, Google Hangout, or some other type of group communication to make sure projects are on track for Midwinter.

January: Midwinter meeting.

Between March-May: Have a conference call, Google Hangout, or some other type of group communication to make sure projects are on track for Annual.

June: Annual meeting.

Methods

It's very important that you post all meeting minutes and other official documents to ALA Connect. Plan to use your committee mailing list for most committee work in between meetings. In addition to ALA Connect and the mailing list you have access to the LITA blog, LITA-L, LITA Facebook, Twitter, and Wiki sites/feeds, and the Litachair email list (which includes both committee and IG chairs). You should attend the Committee and IG Joint Chairs Meeting (always scheduled for Saturday from 8:00 to 10:00 at Midwinter Meetings and Annual Conferences). Links to these communication tools and

instructions for setting up your committee's email list can be found on the orientation tip sheet page. (<http://www.ala.org/lita/about/committees/tipsheet>)

That said, your committee members may have other ways they like to communicate. Do what works, but make sure that you document these discussions where others can access them in order to maintain openness and transparency in LITA and ALA.

Special Considerations for Interest Groups

Interest groups are much less formal than committees. Anyone who wants to can participate, and interest groups can accomplish a great deal if properly managed. Interest groups are a great way to work with people outside of LITA or with people who want to get involved with a group but don't have the interest or ability to serve on a committee.

- Make sure that the members of your interest group feel like members by communicating with them regularly.
 - Document your available channels of communication (ALA Connect, mailing list, social media, etc.), and determine a reasonable timeline for updating those channels (weekly, monthly, etc.). Make sure it's easy to find current information about projects, discussions, or programs. You may want to communicate more heavily closer to conferences, but make sure that there is fresh content throughout the year.
- Encourage open feedback and reach decisions by consensus where possible.
- Encourage members to "scratch their own itch" and provide them the resources to be successful in creating a program or service of value to LITA and/or the library profession.

Communication with LITA staff and leadership

As chair of a committee or interest group, you have a responsibility to work with LITA staff and leadership. This includes being proactive about asking for help.

Understanding LITA and its governance

LITA is unlike other ALA divisions in that it has a fairly flat hierarchy. You can ask questions of any officer on the board, including the president, and feel free to show up to any meetings unless they are explicitly closed.

The board structure and duties are here:

<http://www.ala.org/lita/about/manual/litamanualsection2>. The board consists of

- President
- Vice-President/President-Elect
- Executive Director
- Immediate Past-President
- ALA councilor
- Seven directors
- Parliamentarian

To keep up to date on what the LITA board is doing, keep an eye on this page: <http://www.ala.org/lita/about/board>.

Another handy and not well enough known page to read over is the LITA History: <http://www.ala.org/lita/about/history>. This will explain why things have evolved the way they have, and help newer members to know what more long term members have done in the past.

LITA staff

The LITA staff are professional association staff who work out of the ALA office in Chicago. Just as librarians are professionals with training specific to libraries, association professionals have training specific to managing and promoting the work of the association. LITA has three staff members. Their names and contact information are available here: <http://www.ala.org/lita/about/contact>.

Each committee has one or more staff liaisons who will help you with the practical matters associated with getting your committee's work done. Make sure to note who your staff liaison is and communicate with them early and often. Because LITA only has three staff members, they rely on you, the member leaders, to get work done and be proactive.

Working with other LITA Committees

Your committee (or interest group) may have ideas for programs or services that it could offer. In many cases, you will need to work with another committee to ensure your idea can be accomplished in an efficient manner. If you aren't sure, ask your board liaison if your idea should be handed off to another committee for approval or completion. All committee chairs are automatically members of the Committee Chairs Committee, and this is another resource for finding out how you can work with other committees.

Examples:

- Surveys of LITA members need to be approved by the Assessment and Research Committee.
- Changes to your committee's charge or your interest group must be approved by the Bylaws and Organization Committee. Ideas for new official relationships should also go through this committee.
- Ideas for educational programs should go to the Education committee. Your committee or interest group is free to develop the content in consultation with this committee, who will help with scheduling, marketing, and logistics.
- Programs related to the annual conference should go through the Program Planning committee in their regular call for programming, the timing of which is [listed in the LITA Manual](#) and will be widely publicized.
- Ideas for new content for the LITA website and online communications should go to the Web Coordinating Committee.

Planning the work for your committee

Now you've learned some basics about communication and collaboration with the rest of LITA, it's time to get into the real reason that you are a committee chair—to do work for LITA and the library profession. This requires understanding what your committee does, managing projects, and planning meetings. The next three sections address these topics in detail.

Understand the official charge and the “real” story

Each committee has an official charge, which you can find at <http://www.ala.org/lita/about/committees>. Make sure that you read this and understand what it means. Charges are not always clear to the uninitiated. Ask for clarification from your LITA board liaison and former chairs if necessary. Be able to explain it in plain English to your committee members and other LITA or ALA members. Starting with clarity about what you need to accomplish will aid you in planning your committee's work.

If you feel your committee's charge does not accurately reflect your committee's work, you can work to update the charge. Committee charges are reviewed periodically by the Bylaws & Organization committee, and a committee can suggest a change in their charge to the Bylaws & Organization committee at any point.

That said, the "official" charge may not tell the whole story. There may be some unwritten traditions and rules in your committee that may or may not be worth preserving. You can usually find this out from former chairs, members, and LITA staff. Just because something has always been done a certain way is no reason to continue, but if something works, it may be worth it to continue. Make sure that you document "unofficial" procedures for the future. Your committee's ALA Connect page might be a good place to do this.

Make sure that you understand the history of your committee. Read old meeting minutes on the LITA website and/or ALA Connect. Set a time to meet the former committee chair at an ALA conference or have a phone conversation. As above, this will help you define the charge for your committee, but it will also help you avoid making mistakes. If the former chair is not available, you should plan to have such a conversation with your board and staff liaisons.

Understand the concrete outcomes of the committee's work

During the time you are chair of your committee you will be expected to achieve certain outcomes. To that end, you should expect to spend some time setting goals for your committee and planning its work in consultation with your committee members. Understand the concrete deliverables for your committee. These may vary in complexity, and you should work backward from those deliverables in understanding what is realistic.

For instance, if your deliverables are finite, such as a certain number of programs, a conference, or a scholarship recipient, you will want to manage your time to make sure that you meet the very real deadlines that exist inherently in these. If you fail to deliver the programs, conference, or scholarship recipient it will be very clear.

Not all committees have such concrete deliverables. Your committee may need to handle work as it comes up, without specific items to accomplish. In this case, you may want to establish a baseline of what has been accomplished in prior years and aim to meet that your first year, exceed it your second year, or whatever works best for you.

In either case, planning the work ahead of time in consultation with the members of your committee and with clearly communicated deliverables and timeline will keep everyone on track. Set specific goals, outcomes related to those goals, and delegate committee members to specifically “own” deliverables.

Example concrete deliverable planning:

Program #A

Committee Members in Charge: John, Mary

Deadline: January 30, 2015

- *Task 1 (due January 15, 2015)*
- *Task 2 (due December 15, 2014)*
- *Task 3 (due October 1, 2014)*

Example non-concrete deliverable planning:

Last year: 3 conference calls, 2 in person meetings. Accomplished X, Y, Z.

Goal for this year: 4 conference calls, 1 in person meeting. Expect to accomplish W, X, Y, Z.

Owners for W and Y: Susan, Jane

Owners for X and Z: Mary, Tom, Sam

Project management skills

We can take a lot of the skills we use in our daily work to facilitate the work of a committee and/or interest group. Some methods used in software development, such as waterfall and Agile, work very well in managing committee projects. There is a lot more to project management than we can cover here, so make sure to read up beyond these basics if you aren't familiar with this topic.

Set goals and objectives

When working on a project, it is important to be organized.

- Set goals, objectives, and action items for the project.
- Communicate regularly to keep everyone up to date and on focus.
- Encourage virtual participation. This is helpful for those who are unable to attend conferences. Offer online meetings and collaboration in mediums that are easily accessible to all members (Google Docs and Hangout, Skype, etc). Make sure to document your virtual work on ALA Connect.

- Beware of [mission creep](#): “uncontrolled changes or continuous growth in a project's scope. This phenomenon can occur when the scope of a project is not properly defined, documented, or controlled. It is generally considered a negative occurrence, to be avoided.”

Work on a timeline

- Have clear deadlines for each task.
- Delegate tasks evenly among group members.
- Encourage continuing the conversation and completing work between conferences.
- During meetings or discussion, know when to table an issue.
- Be prepared for technical difficulties.
- Utilize [lazy consensus](#): move forward even if you don't have 100% response.

Delegate tasks

- Delegate work to members. Remember, they have volunteered because they want to participate in the group's work.
 - Also understand that it's sometimes necessary to extend deadlines or redistribute the workload.
 - Regular communication will help you spot potential issues in advance and advert crises.
- Trust your members. Expect great work from them and invite it.

Planning Meetings

There are a few types of meetings you will preside over as chair. The major meetings are at the Midwinter and Annual conferences, and those should be a high priority for you. But most of the work that you do will take place in between those meetings, and you should plan to have a few additional meeting times throughout the year via conference call or some other method. No matter what type of meeting, remember that ALA has an [Open Meetings Policy](#), which states that meetings (virtual and in-person) are open to all ALA members and members of the press, unless the meeting will be discussing private information about specific individuals or institutions. There are specific rules surrounding closed meetings, which you should make sure to follow if you are chairing a committee which might be affected by this.

Meeting Logistics

Meetings, programs, or managed discussions planned for ALA Midwinter or Annual Conferences should be scheduled according to the timeline and guidelines set forth in the [LITA Manual](#). [Section 5](#) of the LITA Manual provides a suggested timetable for important planning benchmarks and should be used as a guide to steps in planning for programs and/or meetings at Midwinter and at Annual. Generally you will need to put in room requests for Midwinter by October, and for Annual by February.

If you plan to hold programs or managed discussions, be aware that there are specific deadlines and criteria you must meet. Work with the LITA Program Planning Committee as soon as possible after the Annual conference to ensure you meet these. Detailed

information on proposal submission and specific deadlines will be provided to Committee and Interest Groups Chairs each year via the [Chairs' Community in ALA Connect](#) and at Joint Chairs Meetings at ALA Midwinter and Annual (which are always scheduled for Saturday from 8:00 to 10:00 AM). It is also important for chairs of committees and interest groups to watch for emails coming from LITA staff, which will contain additional information about deadlines for program proposals, meeting room reservations, as well as links to ALA meeting planning documents for the current conference. Proposals for Annual Conference and Midwinter Institutes plans are both due as early as July for the upcoming year, so advance planning is critical from the start of each Chair's term.

Other things to keep in mind:

- Notify committee members of the date, time, place, and agenda of meeting, and goals to be achieved. Post this on the committee mailing list and Connect page.
- If funding is needed, prepare and submit budget requests to the LITA Board of Directors
- Send a message to the LITA-L listserv stating the time and place of the meeting and mention that participation is welcome. Determine in advance of the meeting what virtual participation will be possible and publicize this as well.

Setting agendas

Where possible, committee work should be structured and delegated so that it can be done in advance of regular committee meetings. To whatever extent possible, meetings at the ALA Annual Conferences and Midwinter Meetings should be used to examine progress in planning committee activities, outline future activities and assignments, and evaluate past activities, *not to actually do work that can be done in advance of the meeting.*

It is crucial to prepare, distribute in advance, and, where possible, stick to the meeting agenda, including staying on time and keeping the meeting moving forward as scheduled. All documents that will be useful should be made available before each committee meeting by the chair, but make sure to bring copies to the meeting as well. As chair, you will preside over the meeting. Use your own style if you prefer, and remember that ALA uses [The Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure](#) (aka Sturgis) rules of order if you need a fallback. A brief reference sheet for using these rules is available at http://cseweb.ucsd.edu/~ddahlstr/misc/roberts/parlia_sturgis.pdf. Stick to the agenda but encourage participation and discussion. Don't be afraid to table an issue for future discussion if it's getting out of hand or off-topic. You only have a very short time to work with your committee in person and need to make the most of it.

Working with different participation styles

Committee members are responsible for attendance at all committee meetings (whether in person or virtually if that works for your committee), and for notifying the committee chair in advance if attendance at a meeting is not possible. The [LITA manual states](#) that failure to attend two consecutive meetings without an explanation acceptable to the chair may result in replacement of a committee member. While it is up to each

committee member to contribute to meetings in a meaningful way, committee chairs can facilitate discussion and move discussions forward by soliciting opinions of committee members that may hesitate to speak up and providing opportunities for all members to be heard and acknowledged. Committee members have a responsibility as well as an interest in contributing; allow and support their contributions to the meeting to make it more productive and engaging for all.

After the Meeting

The [official instructions in the LITA Manual](#) are out of date. In general, all records should be posted on the committee's ALA Connect page. Post the meeting minutes as soon as possible after the meeting. Make sure that you have identified in advance who is keeping minutes for the meeting! Notify your committee members via the mailing list when you have posted items. If there are particular members of LITA staff or the board who need to be consulted, it would be a good idea to send the information to them as well.

What to do when things aren't going well

We all know that no project or relationship is perfect. A mark of leadership is your ability to foresee potential problems and react to them, as well as to take responsibility when things aren't going well.

Some normal problems you can expect are as follows:

Lack of time

You may have agreed to chair a committee without understanding the time involved. Or, maybe something changed at your job. Maybe you had a family emergency. For whatever reason, you are falling behind.

As you probably know, "I'm busy" is not an excuse. When you say this to other people, they hear "I didn't care enough about this to manage my time effectively." That may not seem fair, but you agreed to be chair. There are probably other people in LITA who would welcome the leadership opportunity and are less "busy." Make sure that you don't wait until it's too late to complete something. Be honest as soon as you start to feel swamped. Set up a discussion with your members to delegate work. More often than not, members feel that their skills and talents are not being used to their full potential. You as the chair should manage the work, *not* do it all yourself. Divide up work into very small chunks. Rather than trying to complete everything in one three hour call, could you have one hour calls once a week?

If you have a genuine emergency (family member in hospital, library building flooded, etc.) make sure to let your committee, the LITA staff and board know as soon as possible, particularly if there are deadlines to be met. You will probably want to hand over your responsibilities to someone else.

Confusing priorities

As above, the charge for your committee may be unclear to you. You may discover that your committee members, past committee chair, or the LITA board have a very different

set of priorities in mind than you do. Changes within ALA or the library world at large may change your vision while you are in the middle of working on it. Change is a reality of life, and keeps things interesting. Strong leaders welcome change and are able to be flexible to change courses in the middle. But this is sometimes easier said than done. Periodically review your plans for your committee. What no longer rings true? Discuss potential problems with your committee and with LITA leadership sooner rather than later. Drop things that are no longer working, and try something new in their place.

Committee members not participating

People join ALA committees for all sorts of reasons, some more noble than others. Some may truly believe in the charge of your committee and want to effect change in ALA and the library world as a whole. Some may be looking for a line on their CV for the promotion and tenure committee. Most people are probably somewhere in the middle. From time to time, you may feel that your committee is not helping you accomplish anything, either by apathy or by not staying focused on the business at hand. Consider first if you have provided a good framework for your committee members to participate. Do you have a schedule for regular check-ins on ALA connect or your committee mailing list? Do you have clear guidelines and plans about what work is to be done by whom? As chair, it is **your responsibility to set the agenda and start the conversation**.

If certain committee members never speak up in meetings, add their thoughts to a mailing list thread, or volunteer to do something, get in touch with them personally. Is there something you could do to make them more comfortable? Are they confused about what to do? Is there something you could do better? As professionals, LITA committee chairs and members should be able to give and take constructive criticism, and it is important to not let someone's talents go to waste because of a misunderstanding.

If someone is genuinely not participating in the work of a committee and none of the above works, make sure that you communicate this to the appropriate people. If a member misses two meetings without explanation, they should be removed from the committee (see here for procedures:

<http://www.ala.org/lita/about/manual/litamanualsection4#removal>). If someone is consistently apathetic or disruptive, make sure you have discussed this with the LITA vice-president.

When you are no longer chair

Schedule a handoff meeting or phone call

A great way to help orient a new chair and preserve continuity of leadership for your committee is to reach out as soon as possible to the incoming chair with an offer to meet or exchange messages and answer any immediate questions the new chair has regarding their first steps as your successor. Be ready to pass on the documentation from your time as chair to the new person at this first meeting or exchange, and provide your contact information so that you can be a resource to the new chair. This handoff

meeting both preserves the legacy of your leadership and allows the incoming chair to keep the group moving forward in the transition period.

The items you should handoff to the new chair include:

- All files and documents (make sure to organize them)
- A short summary of the activities of the past 1-4 years of the committee.
- A neatly organized and complete ALA Connect space for the committee.

Be a resource

The former chair is expected to be available to the incoming chair as an important resource for procedural and historical committee information. While you are not expected to do any of the work of the committee, it is a great gesture to reach out periodically to the new chair for the first several months to make sure things are going well. Schedule a phone call or coffee date (if geographically feasible) to talk over the work of the committee.