

HOW TO START AND RUN A SHERLOCKIAN GROUP

By Judith Freeman

This project started when I asked two young Sherlockians (Matt Laffey and Nick Martorelli) to help me resurrect The Priory Scholars of New York City. This scion was founded in 1954 by the legendary Chris Steinbrunner. Over the decades it had gone through a number of transformations and I was reluctant to see it disappear. Anxious to give my two young colleagues every possible resource I began to jot down some notes. It didn't take long for those notes to evolve into the following document.

Along the way I realized that there were things, essential things, I might have overlooked, so I reached out to other veteran Sherlockians asking them to advise me about any significant points I might have missed. I'd like to thank the following people (in alphabetical order) for their generous assistance - John Baesch, Peter Blau, Evelyn Herzog, Robert Katz, Francine Kitts, Susan Rice, Randall Stock and Sue Vizoskie.

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A MANUAL FOR HOW TO START AND RUN A SHERLOCKIAN GROUP

What is a Sherlockian group, society or scion?

A Sherlockian group, society or scion is an organization whose membership consists of people who consider themselves Sherlockians.

Before starting a group of your own, you might want to see if there are any other groups in your area. An excellent place to look for the names and locations of other groups is the Active Geographical List of Sherlockian Societies at <http://www.sherlocktron.com/>.

This web site might also give you some ideas about what to name your group if you haven't already chosen one.

Who is a Sherlockian?

A Sherlockian is a person who is an admirer of Sherlock Holmes and who enjoys sharing that interest with other like-minded people. There are no restrictions as to who qualifies as a Sherlockian. Your path to Sherlock Holmes could have been a book, a movie or a TV show. A person can have read the Canon for decades or have just read their first adventure last week; if they consider themselves a Sherlockian they are.

What is the Canon?

The Canon (aka Sacred Writings) is how Sherlockians refer to the sixty published adventures of Sherlock Holmes written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

How to become a scion

The word scion is often defined as "a young shoot or twig of a plant; a descendant of a notable family."

Many Sherlockian groups are scions of the Baker Street Irregulars. A Sherlockian group can ask to become a BSI scion by applying to The Baker Street Irregulars at the Baker Street Journal website: <http://www.bakerstreetjournal.com/> via the Contact Us tab.

Why have meetings?

The answer is simple - it is infinitely more fun to share the Sherlockian experience and make friends with other Sherlockians in person than it is to just chat online. In a group, people find their own enjoyment increased, learn about new topics to take an interest in, and gradually become part of a web of kindred spirits that covers the world.

How often should you meet?

A group should meet as often as it wants to. Some groups meet only once a year; some meet every month; most meet between two and four times a year.

If you are just starting you will want to see how frequently your members want to get together. It is often better to schedule fewer meetings while you're getting started. You will also need to consider how much time you and other organizers can devote to planning and arranging for meetings. You can always revise your meeting schedule with experience.

When should you meet?

As most people work and/or attend school during the week the best times to meet are week day evenings or weekends. You should avoid holiday weekends as most people spend these dates with their families.

If there are other groups in your area, you will want to avoid scheduling a meeting on the same date. Checking the Sherlockian Calendar <http://www.sherlockiancalendar.com/> may help to avoid such conflicts.

Where should you meet?

Some groups meet in public places (e.g. a library), some meet in people's homes and many groups meet in restaurants. Your choice, in part, depends on what is available in your area. There are several things to consider in choosing a meeting place.

One important consideration should be finding a meeting space that has a room that is separate from the rest of the establishment. This prevents any noise that your group might make from disturbing others. It also limits the noise of others from interrupting your meeting.

When choosing a location you should pick a place that is located in an area which is relatively easy to get to, close to whatever public transportation is available and/or has parking nearby.

When negotiating with a library, restaurant, etc be sure to ask how many hours the space is available; this will help determine the length of your meeting.

If you are going to meet in a restaurant, you should visit it before you schedule a meeting there and check out the following:

1. How good is the food? Pub grub is best, not everyone likes ethnic cuisines. If a couple of people check out a place together you can sample more items. The basic burger has to be worth eating.
2. Size: How many people can they accommodate comfortably? How private is the private room?

3. Price: Can they offer a *prix fixe* menu including tax and tip that the membership can afford? What would the menu include - drinks, coffee, dessert, etc? Would you have to place orders in advance? Do you have to guarantee a minimum number of attendees?

You might want to look for restaurants that include moderately priced items on their menus for those of your members with limited budgets. Another alternative is to ask if diners can order from the menu and pay separate checks.

4. Ambiance: Is the place clean, comfortable? How is the service?

Once you've decided to include a meal as part of your meeting you'll want to take the following into consideration:

1. If at all possible try to arrange for a *prix fixe* menu offering between 3 to 6 entrée options, one of which should be vegetarian. Most restaurants are glad to do this as it makes it easier for them to plan for your event.

The best times to contact a restaurant owner and/or manager are about 10 AM (before they get busy for lunch) or about 3 PM (between lunch and dinner).

Mailing or emailing a copy of the menu to the membership in advance helps (hopefully) to reduce the amount of time spent placing orders.

2. Let your members know the cost of the meal including tax and tip. Also request that your members either pay in advance or pay at the door. This will save time when you have to settle the bill with the restaurant.

Some restaurants require the number of attendees up front and will expect a payment for a certain percentage of the reservation number. If this is the kind of restaurant you use, those who wish to attend must prepay by check in advance, with the understanding that refunds can only be guaranteed up to the date that the organizers have to give a number to the restaurant

3. Make sure to allow enough time when planning your program for the ordering, serving and clearing away of food; approximately 1 to 1 1/2 hours depending the number of courses being served.

4. Take into consideration that including a meal as part of the meeting reduces the time available for the rest of your program.

5. A least a week before your meeting make sure to reconfirm your reservation with the restaurant.

Important note: If the space in the restaurant is limited, make sure that you let people know in advance the maximum number of reservations that you can accept. Tell people that they need to RSVP to assure that a place has been reserved for them. Advise them that if they show up without a reservation they might not be able to attend. Hopefully this will avoid awkward situations.

What kind of program should you have?

There are several formats to choose from. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Presentation of papers – Some Sherlockians like to write papers on various topics related to the Canon. You can ask individual members in advance of your meeting if they would like to present a paper on a specific story or a specific subject, e.g. dogs in the Canon or was Holmes a feminist. Papers about Victorian events or everyday Victorian life can also be of interest. As we get farther away from that era, explanations help our understanding of the world Sherlock Holmes lived in.

If your format is the presentation of papers, make it clear to your members that they have to contact you in advance of the meeting so you can schedule them accordingly. You should ask them the topic/title of their paper.

Important note: You may want to consider setting a time limit; no paper to be longer than 10 or 12 minutes in length. Papers that are longer can be presented in two or more installments at sequential meetings. Without limits there are those that will use up all the available time, which is unfair to the rest of the group.

2. Games – there are some groups where the major event of the meeting is a game with a Sherlockian theme, e.g. Trivial Pursuit. You can also invent your own games.

3. Discussions – this is a popular meeting event; providing that one or more of the leaders are good at moderating. A moderator is necessary in case you have to encourage members to participate or, more likely, prevent everyone from speaking at once.

You can discuss one story in depth, e.g. delving into one particular character. You can compare two or more of the tales that have something in common. You can discuss a particular aspect of how Holmes investigates his cases. The possibilities are endless.

Make sure that the title of the story and/or subject to be discussed is announced in advance of the meeting so people can be prepared.

4. Guest speaker(s) – There are times when an author who has written a book on Holmes or a related Sherlockian subject is visiting your locale on a book tour; you might want to invite them to speak at your meeting. Checking with local bookstores can help you with getting advance notice.

Other people you might invite to speak at a meeting could be professors of criminology from your local college or your local medical examiner. Some of your members may also have something of interest to share with your group; e.g. a collection of items related to Sherlockiana.

Important note: when scheduling a speaker, make sure you get a firm commitment well in advance. Also, it never hurts to have a back-up plan.

5. Special events – some groups also have an annual event such as a special dinner or an award luncheon. You can also have a movie and/or video program depending on the resources of where you meet (libraries would likely have the equipment). Skits are also fun.

6. Toasts - In addition to other events at their meetings, many groups include one or more toasts in their program.

1. Toasts can be traditional, the same for every meeting, e.g. a toast to Holmes and Watson.
2. Toasts can be specific to the story and/or topic to be discussed.

You can ask people if they would like to give a toast as they RSVP for the meeting. This is a good way to get members more involved in the group. If you have several toasts it's a good idea to divide them between the veteran Sherlockians and newbies.

You may want to consider setting a time limit (2 minutes or less) for each toast. Some Sherlockians can turn a toast into a paper if you don't set a time limit.

7. Quizzes - Another activity that groups frequently include in their program is a quiz. Often groups have a quizmaster/mistress; a person who presents the quiz at each meeting. Other groups have the person who wins the quiz at one meeting make up the quiz for the next. Another option is to rotate the role of quizmaster/mistress among the membership so that everyone gets a chance.

A quiz should be between 10 and 15 questions long. You can either hand out copies of the quiz and let people fill the answers on the same paper (which will save much time) or you can have the person giving the quiz read out the questions.

After a reasonable amount of time the quiz master/mistress reads out the correct answers; members correct their own papers on the honor system. Prizes can be awarded if available.

You can also divide the group into two or more teams and have them compete in getting the most correct answers to the quiz.

Prizes can be anything from books, journals or commemorative pins and badges. Sherlockians tend to be collectors and some often have duplicate items that they are willing to donate as prizes.

As with toasts and papers you might want to consider a time limit for your quizzes so that you have time for more than one activity.

Some groups have been known to include an essay question; they hand out a paper at the start of the meeting with a question (often silly) related to the story under discussion. Members are asked to write an answer no longer than one paragraph. A small committee can be asked to review the entries and select the best three.

8. Songs - There are some groups that include songs in their programs. They generally end their meetings with a song or songs that are specific to their group.

9. Show and Tell – You might want to consider having an occasional meeting when members can bring a Sherlockian related item to the meeting to share with the group. For example, such items could include a classic or recently published book, an article, a DVD/CD of a Sherlock Holmes story (TV or film), a poster, photograph, or an audio recording. The bringing of artifacts related to the story chosen for discussion can stimulate a deeper understanding of the history, culture, and society of this era.

10. Announcements – You might want to schedule a few minutes of your meeting to let people know about future events, members' birthdays, etc.

Remember these are only some possibilities. Feel free to get creative and invent formats of your own.

If you want further inspiration, you can check out the Beacon Society's web site <http://www.beaconsociety.com/>, and explore.

Preparing for your meeting

Now that you have decided what kind of program you want, you've picked a date, you've booked a venue, and you've booked a speaker (if you're having one); you need to do the following:

1. Send out an announcement giving a brief description of your program. This may sound obvious but make sure to include the date and the time of the meeting; the name of the location and its address. Also include a reply-by date when members have to RSVP; this is especially important if you are meeting in a restaurant. You should give the restaurant a final head count before the meeting.

Most groups contact their members via email, a few still use snail-mail. Whatever method of contact you use, if you are meeting in a restaurant, remember to attach the menu.

Important note: send your announcement at least a month before the meeting date, allowing your members ample time to plan accordingly.

2. Track the replies by keeping a list of names of those who confirm. You can print out the list and use it to check people into the meeting. If your members are slow to respond you might want to send a reminder. Again, if seating is limited, make sure that members know that they have to RSVP.

3. Make yourself a checklist of things you may want to take to the meeting; this could include name tags, a list of who is giving what toast, the quiz, prizes for the quiz, extra pencils, paper, etc.

Meeting strategy

You should plan ahead of time the order of events at your meeting. Consider what part of your program you want to start with, what comes next and how you want to end the meeting. Allow

enough time for people to socialize before starting the meeting. Sherlockians like to socialize; “milling and thronging” is one of the attractions of any group meeting.

If a meal is part of your meeting you might want to allow people to first place their orders and then call on members to give their toasts until the meal is served. After the meal you will want to call for a break. Make sure you clearly announce a time limit for the break; sometimes getting Sherlockians back into their seats is a little like herding cats. You might want to plot out a time budget before the meeting. Things inevitably take longer than you think and the larger the group the longer things will take.

Structure of the group, society or scion

There are some groups where one person has full responsibility and does all the chores. Other groups divide the work between two or more people. Some groups divide responsibilities into committees. Some groups have officers; those that do often give them titles taken from the Canon – e.g. Gasogene.

While there are some group leaders that are willing to do all the work, it is generally better to share the chores. That way if one person is unable to participate for whatever reason there are others that can pitch in and carry on.

Having several people involved in running the group also helps with succession. Inevitably there are changes in peoples’ lives; they change jobs, go back to school and/or move to another location. Bringing in new members who are willing to participate in running the group ensures the group’s future. Some groups elect a new leader every year; this also helps to keep the group viable.

How to find members

At a recent gathering of Sherlockians I talked with a number of people who have been active members of the Sherlockian community well before the advent of social media sites on the internet. I also spoke with a number of twenty-something attendees. I asked how they found their way to the Sherlockian community. Here are the results of my informal survey: the most common response was that they found the Sherlockian community through a personal contact. A teacher, a classmate, a co-worker, a neighbor, and/or a friend mentioned that they were a member of a group or planning to attend a meeting. Some were introduced into the Sherlockian community by their significant other.

Some people learned of their local group, society or scion through a meeting notice posted in a bookstore they frequented. This is still an option if your local bookstore has a notice board and is willing to post your meeting announcements.

Another avenue was the media. More than one person said that they saw a review of the Sherlock Holmes Birthday Weekend events in a newspaper; which mentioned the Baker Street Irregulars. Inevitably the response they got to their letters requesting to join the B.S.I. gave them information on how to contact their local group, society or scion.

Surprisingly I learned that personal contact is still the most common method of finding one's way to the Sherlockian community. One would think that most of younger generation would have just googled Sherlock Holmes to discover a group of like minded people. No doubt some did, but more often than not it was a friend that introduced them to the wonderful world of Sherlockiana.

What can your group do to get the word out that your group is looking to welcome new members?

1. In addition to your local libraries and bookstore(s), you might want to post meeting notices at your local college bookstores and, if they still have them, bulletin boards.
2. Place an ad in your local newspaper or invite them to cover your meeting.
3. Make use of the internet; create a Facebook page and/or a web-site. You might want to make one of your members the group's web-master/mistress, responsible for updating reports on the group's activities complete with pictures of recent events.
4. If you are a member of one of the Sherlockian on-line discussion groups (e.g. Hounds of The Internet or WelcomeHolmes) post a notice there.

Keep in mind that movies and TV shows about Sherlock Holmes come and go; they bring in new admirers. For some of them the Sherlockian community is only a passing fancy. Others will want to stay and "play the game" for years to come. Make sure your group is inclusive and welcoming.