



National Federation of Atheist,
Humanist and Secular Student
Societies

How to Write a Constitution

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Introduction

The following guidelines are based on the UK Charity Commission's advice on writing a constitution. Your institution or Students' Union may have a pro forma constitution, in which case you'll need to use that, and you can stop reading... now.

Alternatively, they may have minimum requirements for society constitutions, so make sure you include these items too.

There are lots of examples of constitutions available through the AHS if you need some inspiration.

Why Write a Constitution?

A constitution is a set of written rules governing the aims of your organisation, how it will be run and how the members will work together. It will lay the foundations for the structure of your group, allowing it to develop within a concrete framework, and ensuring that it stays on track and continues to successfully achieve its aims.

A constitution is important because:

- without a written understanding, people may become confused and things may not get done;
- it will act as a point of reference and help resolve any problems or controversy arising;
- it reassures the public and funding bodies that your group is properly run and that money is effectively managed;
- it illustrates that your group is democratic and accountable, with clear decision-making methods.

Components of the Constitution

- Name*
- Aims (also known as objects)*
- Powers*
- Membership*
- Management Committee*
- Officers*
- Meetings*
- Finance*
- Dissolution*
- Amendments*

Writing the Constitution: Section by Section

1) NAME OF THE GROUP

The name of your society should reflect what your group is all about. Every member of your society should identify with the name of your group. Do you want the subject or main interest of your group to come first, or the area in which you are based? How might the name appear on any literature?

2) AIMS OR OBJECTIVES OF THE GROUP

Why has your group come together and what is it hoping to achieve? Your objectives should cover what you aim to achieve at this point in time, and also what you may wish to do in the future. Don't simply list various activities, but keep your aims as wide as possible to enable you to change your activity without amending your constitution, giving you flexibility as you develop.

3) POWERS

This section should discuss what the group is allowed to do to carry out its activities and meet its objectives. Remember that your group may expand in the future or change as it develops, so keep your powers broad.

This section may include details on the powers to:

- raise money;
- employ paid staff or recruit volunteers;
- buy or rent premises/equipment;
- conduct research;
- receive contributions through a membership fee;
- work in partnership with different organisations.

4) MEMBERSHIP

Groups are made up of members who want to work in association to achieve the stated aims. Members essentially own and control the group, but who are you going to invite as members? Will it be limited to students at your institution? Students within a certain radius of your institution not necessarily belonging to your institution? Will you set an age limit? Allow anyone with a defined worldview or epistemology? You must also decide if you are going to charge people to be a member and if so, who is going to fix the price.

Address how you are going to appoint new members and how long membership will last (usually for an academic year). It may be that your existing members appoint new members by a majority decision. Furthermore, what does having a membership entitle them to do? How will you remove people from your group if you need to? This may be necessary if an individual's behaviour is detrimental to the aims of your group, and you may need to call a meeting to resolve the matter.

5) MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

A management committee is essential to manage your group's work, but to make decisions and direct policy making. Management committees should include honorary officers, and may also involve others who have been nominated or elected. There are three types of committee member:

- nominated by and from the membership;
- nominated by a different group;
- co-opted by the committee due to their knowledge, skills or experience.

As well as deciding who will be on your management committee, it is important to consider the following questions:

- When will you elect your management committee?

- How long will they be on the committee before a re-election is needed?
- What procedures will you have in place if a member leaves?
- How will you remove a committee member and for what reasons?

6) OFFICERS

It is common for committees to have named individuals known as officers, to carry out various tasks on behalf of your group. These may include a President, Chairperson, Secretary or Treasurer. You also need to come to an agreement on how officers will be chosen, whether they will be elected at your AGM or appointed by your committee, and how long they will be in place. How will the officers be removed where this is required? How will their vacancies be filled? What will their powers and responsibilities be?

7) MEETINGS

State where and how often you will meet to discuss the work of your group and make any decision surrounding it. Small groups may find it more appropriate for decisions to be made by all members together, whereas larger organisations may find it better to elect a committee to make any decisions on behalf of members.

Ensure that you make provisions for both general and committee meetings. General meetings are open to all members within your organisation and at least one should take place per year (usually known as the Annual General Meeting (AGM)). Your group may also wish to hold a minimum number of additional meetings.

Include the following details:

- The minimum number of meetings you will hold and how often you will have them
- How much notice you will give to inform your members when a meeting will be held

- The number of members that need to be present to allow a meeting to commence (this is known as the quorum)
- Who is able to vote and how voting will occur (such as a show of hands)
- The process by which your members will be allowed to call a meeting as opposed to your committee, covering the minimum number of people required in order to request such a meeting.

As well as meeting to deliberate the day-to-day activities of your group, you should always consider the method by which you will meet to discuss the more formal aspects of your group such as your finances, issues concerning the election of committee members, and evaluating and reviewing the work and objectives of your group. This is generally carried out at your AGM.

If you wish to make a major change to your constitution you will need to call a special general meeting. This procedure must include details of who can call a meeting (the committee or a particular number of members), and how much notice you will give.

8) FINANCE

You should consider where you will keep the group's money. Is your money held with the Student Union and or do you need to open a bank account in the name of your society? You should also keep a record of all income and expenditure. You must list any members authorised to sign cheques on behalf of the group, including the number of signatories needed. Cheques require a minimum of two signatories, but it is best practice to identify three or four members who are authorised (generally the Chairperson, Treasurer, Secretary and another committee member).

9) AMENDMENTS TO THE CONSTITUTION

Acknowledge from the beginning that your group may change as it grows, and you may find that you need to make amendments to your constitution.

Your constitution represents why people joined your group in the first place, so you should make sure that it cannot easily be changed.

In general, changes to a constitution are deliberated at a general meeting consisting of all your group's members, and a majority vote in favour of any amendments needs to be reached. Sometimes it may be that you decide you need a particular number of members to be present at a general meeting and in agreement before you allow any changes to be made, such as a two-third vote.

10) DISSOLUTION

If for any reason you need to wind up your group, you must adopt rules similar to those you have put in place to make changes to your constitution. This may occur if your group is simply lacking in support or resources, or if your activities have been transferred to another organisation.

Include details on how you will call a special meeting and how many members should be present before you can dissolve your organisation. Usually when a group ceases to exist, debts are repaid and the surplus assets or finances are then distributed or donated to similar groups or local charities. This is to reassure the public and any funding bodies that the money is being utilised properly and not just being split between members.

How to get Started

Get together with the rest of your group to draw up your constitution and make sure everyone has a say in deciding the objectives of your organisation and how it is going to be run. Begin with a clear, simple draft that will allow you to elaborate and expand as you go along and keep in mind that the language you use doesn't have to be complex. It should be written in a way so that everyone can understand the manner in which your group is run and what you are aiming to achieve.

When writing your constitution, as well as considering the day-to-day running of your group, try to plan for unexpected events or circumstances such as resignations, disagreements between members, or even the winding up of your group.

To formally adopt your constitution you must call a special public meeting to finalise the rules and obtain the agreement of the members. As your constitution is the governing document for your group, you need to ask all the committee members to sign and date the constitution (including the location where the agreement was reached) and ensure that the decision is recorded by the Secretary in the minutes of the meeting. All committee members should be given a copy of your constitution when they join to ensure they fully understand the rules of your group.

Don't forget that once you have written your constitution you must abide by it, so don't be afraid to keep writing draft versions until all your members are totally happy with it.

Good luck and have fun!

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