

Handbook for organisers of SEALS annual meetings



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1 Background

This short handbook is intended as a guide for those planning to host a SEALS meeting, to provide some indication of the nature of the task and details involved, with the benefit of the experience of several individuals who have organised meetings over the decades the meeting has been running.

The annual SEALS conference, or *meeting* as it is known, is typically held over several days towards the end of May each year. The dates have varied historically between early May and early June, depending on local university calendar, though it has generally been a late May event.

SEALS began in 1991 as a meeting organised by Martha Ratliff and Eric Schiller at Wayne State University, Detroit. It was so popular that it became an annual meeting with proceedings published initially by Arizona State University. The ethos that emerged from those early meetings was of a very collegial informal society that runs on the goodwill and voluntary efforts of supporters/participants. There is no formal legal entity that takes responsibility for activities carried out in the name of SEALS, but there is an executive committee that ensures continuity and standards, and this executive is responsible for the annual business meeting held at the end of each meeting. From time to time, suggestions have been made that SEALS be formally incorporated, but these have not attracted sufficient concrete support, and so the present model continues. Consequently, when one takes on the responsibility to run a SEALS meeting, the local host institution/organisers will take responsibility for liabilities/risks that relate to the event. As an organiser, you will be supported in terms of advice and encouragement by members of the SEALS executive committee. They will already have encountered any and all problems you face, and their advice will ensure continuity of the solutions.

SEALS is a modest meeting by international standards, with historically 50 to 100 papers read over 2 or 3 days in 2 or 3 parallel sessions. Ideally, the location is in an Asian and then non-Asian country in alternating years, although in practice, it depends on the offers to host, and over time the meeting has tended to be held with more frequency in Asia. It is also common to organise workshops or seminars in conjunction with annual meetings in order to take advantage of the concentration of scholars and students occasioned by the meetings; these are typically organised independently by motivated convenors liaising with the local organising committee. Meetings are normally hosted by the local organisers' home institution/university, which provides meeting rooms and amenities, internet access, liability cover, and often accommodations. Meetings have also been run out of hotels with conference facilities, both independently and under university auspices.

1.1 Structure of SEALS

Executive Committee (EC)

The EC consists minimally of a President, Secretary, Publications Officer, plus other office bearers as may be appointed. The EC has no formal powers; it acts to provide continuity and corporate memory to the movement, on a foundation of goodwill. The EC is appointed by and reports to the annual Business Meeting (BM) of SEALS. Normal practice is that at the business meeting, the question of membership of the EC is thrown open for discussion and a consensus is sought. A member of the most recent local organising committee will be invited to join the EC, and members who have not been active for a significant time may be asked to step down.

Business Meeting (BM)

The BM is held annually, usually just before the close of the conference. It is attended by any and all participants who care to attend, no registration or participation role is kept. Minutes are taken by the Secretary and normal meeting procedures are followed (i.e. reports are made; motions are considered and voted upon, etc.). The BM decides matters such as who will host forthcoming meetings, who will serve on committees, and what may be done with any surplus funds.;

Local Organising Committee (LOC)

The LOC is a transient structure created for each year's meeting. It does all the local work in terms of organising the meeting venue, suggesting or organising accommodation, lunches and refreshments, the conference dinner, and keynote speaker invitations/arrangements. Typically, a local committee organises itself and approaches the Business Meeting with a detailed proposal to run an annual meeting.

Websites

jseals.org

sites.google.com/site/sealsjournal

The **jseals.org** website is a legacy sites hosted by CRCL Bangkok, and the webmaster is Doug Cooper. Since 2017 the active website is **sites.google.com/site/sealsjournal**, which is actively managed by the EC publications officer, and provides information about both SEALS meetings and the movement's journal, JSEALS. Content includes the following:

- Links to current, past, and future meeting websites;
- A main site for the society journal JSEALS, with information and downloads to current and past papers/publications;
- Archive of information and documentation in connection with past meetings;
- Committee membership data, meeting minutes and details, statements of policy, etc.

JSEALS

The *Journal of the Southeast Asian Linguistics Society* was inaugurated in 2008, replacing the previous conference proceedings volumes. Today, it is a peer reviewed open access journal, published by the University of Hawaii Press. Publication of conference papers is not automatic; participants are encouraged to submit their papers to JSEALS, which will then go through a normal editorial process. However, papers from any researchers/writers are

welcome to submit work that is in the scope of JSEALS publications, and as a result, many of the papers have not been presented at SEALS.

2 Organising a SEALS meeting

2.1 Conference bid

The formal process for hosting a SEALS meeting begins with your bid. A written proposal should be prepared and emailed to the President of the EC before an approaching meeting so that it can be discussed at the business meeting. Your bid should contain enough information to assess the viability/desirability of your plans so that constructive recommendations can be made to the business meeting.

Ideally, a member of your team will be attending the BM and will make a personal presentation. This can include a slide show or multi-media presentation and a question and answer session. Your presentation can highlight the amenities of your location, opportunities for scholarly activities, and the approximate costs of participation.

Yours may not be the only bid, so you should have some flexibility in your plans in terms of intended year of hosting.

2.2 Finances

At the time of writing this handbook, SEALS is not an incorporated body. However, the EC may hold some funds in trust which were surplus to previous meetings. This may be a few thousand dollars only, and it can only be used to support SEALS meeting costs which are unexpectedly in deficit, or other SEALS related activities which are explicitly approved by motions of the BM.

In general, LOCs are expected to meet the costs of meetings by the following sources:

Registration fees

Registration fees are the main source of income. It is the natural instinct of first-time organisers to make registration prices as low as possible in the view that this will maximize attendance and appear generous. This is a naive view: there is no shortage of enthusiastic participants, and it is essential for the viability and practical requirements of meetings that more than enough funds are taken in to cover all contingencies. A combination of generously low registration fees and unanticipated no-shows have in the past resulted in serious financial shortfalls, and this is a serious problem to avoid. Do keep in mind that most participants are funded by institutions; it is much better to charge a higher registration and offer reductions for special cases than to leave your group with a deficit and effectively offer other institutions a discount.

Generally, a registration fee between 100 and 200 USD has been charged, with a student price at around half or two-thirds of the full price. Also, typically a 10% or so lower rate has been charged for early registrations, for instance, a month before the meeting. It is now the prevailing view that all participants should pay electronically in advance at least 2 months before meetings; this has been shown to greatly reduce no-shows. Cash payments on arrival by presenting participants should only be permitted by special advance request (for non-presenting participants, it is not an issue). The advance payment should be regarded as the regular price, and payment on arrival should attract a higher fee to discourage late payment.

Host institution contributions

Host organisations usually provide resources, such as use of lecture halls, internet access, and other conference necessities. Also, universities (variously at departmental, faculty or college level) often have conference funding schemes that will contribute a few thousand dollars (this is particularly useful for covering the costs of invited speakers and/or social functions). However, note that early applications, perhaps even a year in advance, may be required for such schemes. It is wise to allocate such funding to items such as covering costs of invited speakers, and rely upon registrations to cover unavoidable costs such as catering.

External sponsor contributions

Meetings have received cash contributions from institutions or individuals. Some institutions have discretionary funds that can be used to support international meetings. It may be possible to persuade international organisations and NGOs to fund the attendance of scholars/students from countries with poorly funded academic sectors. More often, sponsorship is manifest in terms of modest tangible contributions such as publisher branded tote bags and stationary. Obtaining sponsorship may require considerable initiative on behalf of local organisers.

Budgeting

Budget planning is crucial. A good principle is to strike a registration fee early that should be more than sufficient to cover the necessary budget items, and rely upon other income to cover optional expenses such as invited speakers or paying for some administrative assistance. Assuming free use of host facilities, and volunteer administrative assistance, registration income should minimally cover:

- lunches
- tea/coffee breaks
- welcome packs (tote bag with ID badge, program booklet, stationary, souvenir, tourist information)
- unexpected expenses (these always arise, and cannot be predicted)¹

Usually, separate charges are levied for the conference dinner and a social outing, such as a tourist day trip after the meeting.

It is customary to invite 1 or more keynote speakers and to cover their registration and local accommodation expense. However, it is more common to invite a prominent local to give a keynote talk, plus a prominent international speaker who is usually successful enough and shares enough goodwill to fund their own airfare without burdening the meeting budget. A good choice of keynote speakers can help to attract more attendees to the meeting.

Be very reluctant to offer free registrations to anyone, as everyone who attends will eat the food, take the souvenirs, among other costs the conference must cover. If you offer free registration to student helpers, carefully limit the number of these. Do not fall into the situation in which large groups of locals freely take up seats and help themselves to the buffet. If you have a lot of helpers, it is better to hold them back from the lunch table until the paying participants have helped themselves.

¹ Be prepared to manage risk: a participant might get lost, injured, or robbed; the caterer may go bankrupt and lose your deposit, the university mini-bus might break down and taxis are hired – everything you can imagine, and some things you can't, have already happened. Be prepared for incidents with a buffer fund and everyone will be happy with you for being able to help out in the event of a misfortune. If 2 days of meeting pass without incident, consider using some buffer funds to make offer attendees a treat at the end of the meeting or providing additional alcoholic beverages at the banquet.

Talk to your university finance people early on about how to receive, receipt, and make payments, and be aware that local sales taxes or national VAT may be applicable. These days, receiving registrations by credit card and PayPal is very easy, especially if you are handling the payments directly. Alternately, the EC is willing to handle the taking of registration payments by PayPal and reimburse the LOC later. In an ideal situation, there will be a modest surplus of registration payments over actual costs, and this can be split between the local host and the EC. These arrangements should be discussed well in advance.

2.3 Communications

Timely and ready communication between organisers and participants is key to a successful meeting.

Website

Local organisers will establish a conference website well in advance of the meeting date, ideally at least 9 months out. The site can be hosted at the discretion of the local organisers, and there should be a prominent link to it from the JSEALS site; alternately, the meeting site can be hosted through the JSEALS site at the discretion of the webmaster.

The meeting website will be the principal method of communication and promotion. All necessary information will be uploaded to the page as it becomes available (e.g. program, registration, travel advice, accommodation options, etc.), in addition to other means such as email mail-outs. The site will subsequently be saved so that it can be archived and accessed through the JSEALS site.

Circulars

Circulars are regular or occasional notices that update participants on the status of preparations and necessary actions. Typically, circulars take the form of 1- or 2-page PDF documents. They are posted on the website, and either emailed out to participants or a notice of the download URL is emailed.

Conventionally, the first circular posted is the “Call for Papers”. This announces the forthcoming meeting and minimally includes details of dates, location and guide to submission of abstracts.

Mailing list

Organisers will benefit by beginning with a list of email addresses of participants for previous meetings, as these are the most likely to attend subsequent meetings. Despite efforts from time to time establish a register of addresses, the informal nature of SEALS has contributed to chaotic and irregular efforts in this regard. The effective practice is for organisers to directly approach the individuals concerned with the most recent previous meetings and obtain their participant listings.

2.4 Abstracts: evaluation and acceptance

The initial announcement of an upcoming meeting should specify a date range for acceptance of abstracts, which is typically 4 or 5 months out from the meeting, and decisions on acceptances should take no longer than about a month. For example, for a meeting at the end of May, it is reasonable to call for abstracts through January and to confirm acceptances by the end of February. Participants typically require a formal letter of acceptance, which can be a PDF attached to an email.

It is convenient to use one of the free online systems for managing abstracts (easychair, linguistlist, etc.) to ensure anonymous handling, although individuals may experience difficulties using these systems and consequently direct submission may have to be accepted in that circumstance.

It is very important to be strict on the length and content of abstracts; you should specify no more than a single page of 12-point type, including any references or examples (many conferences insist on no more than 150 words). This reduces the burden on reviewers, makes production of the abstract book easy, and puts everyone on a fair and level footing. Experience tells us that some students/scholars will try to put much of the content of their presentation into their abstract, not understanding that it should only be a general statement of what the presentation is about, its significance, and claims/conclusions.

In accordance with decisions of the BM, abstracts must be independently reviewed and rated in a process supervised by the EC. This is to ensure that academic merit is primary in the organisation of the program. In practice, it is expected that between a third and a half of abstracts submitted will be rejected; the real consequence of this is that abstract submissions have improved in quality and number, as have offers to host meetings.

Historically, meeting participants have appreciated being issued with a book of the accepted abstracts. The usual layout is to have one abstract per page, ordered by family name of the author. It is useful to include front pages with a timetable and useful conference information (e.g. venue map, transport guide, etc. as appropriate). A PDF version should be posted on line about a week before the meeting date.

2.5 Accommodation

If you are holding your meeting at a hotel, that hotel will usually provide a discounted meeting room rate, and the bulk of international participants will stay there. This is the administratively easiest way to proceed, although you may incur the cost of the meeting room rental, which will need to be recovered via registration fees. This is less of an issue if you are running a larger meeting since the hotel may give bigger discounts or even offer free room use.

If you are running your meeting on campus, you may be able to provide cheap accommodations on campus via student dorms or similar, especially during semester break times. International visitors will generally expect something better than dormitory accommodations, and the best way to cater for them is to negotiate discounted rooms with a couple of local hotels, with an eye to having moderate and high-quality options. It is especially appreciated if you can arrange a daily shuttle pick-up and drop-off from the recommended hotels especially if they are beyond the reasonable walking distance of an aging academic.

Warning: You will receive requests by participants to make accommodation bookings for them, and your naturally generous inclination is to offer to do this. This is always a frustrating and administratively burdensome option, and you are strongly advised to simply inform participants of their options and allow them to make accommodation arrangements directly, especially payment for accommodation. Also, experience teaches us that (for cultural reasons, or simple confusion) there are always some individuals who assume that having arrangements made for them means that payment is also made for them, and it is not unusual that a participant tries to check into their booked hotel or dormitory without funds to cover it. Do not put yourself in the position of raising such expectations.

Finally, advise people as early as possible of their accommodation options, as this issue can be a source of great anxiety.

2.6 Travel

Much like accommodations, advise participants as early as possible of the location and date details so they can make their own travel arrangements.

It is much appreciated if you chose to host your meeting in convenient proximity to an international airport. Many participants will be coming to your country for the first time and also may be older and/or have special needs, so any planning that simplifies travel arrangements will be welcome and will generally make life easier for everyone.

As early as possible, advise participants of any special visa requirements or other paperwork they might need to facilitate travel. This may include providing letters of invitation on institutional letterhead or certificates of participation. Provide links on your website to appropriate government departments, airports, and transport providers as appropriate.

2.7 Security

Security is very important and too often neglected. Typically, meetings conducted on a university campus are in an open venue such that anyone can wander in and out. This creates vulnerabilities to opportunistic thefts, especially theft of unattended bags. It is recommended that you:

- Liaise with campus security to make sure that they are aware of your event and follow all advice they provide,
- Make arrangements for supervised baggage storage,
- Make sure that a nominated person supervises all cash collections and banking and attends tables at which cash is taken,
- Ensure good signage to make locations of conference rooms clear and provide all participants with printed maps of the campus, including details of transportation and security,
- As far as possible, hold sessions in adjacent rooms so that participants are not widely dispersed and do not have to walk far between sessions or to use amenities.

The best security is usually achieved by holding your meeting at an international hotel; the hotel event management normally has things well contained, and strangers do not so easily wander in and out of the venue.

2.8 Catering

Daily catering

Typically, participants expect a buffet lunch and tea/coffee breaks each day within the conference venue. If you do this, a number of points are worth noting:

- Provide drinking water all day. Consider buying bulk cheap bottled water and leave caches of bottles around the venue and in the seminar rooms;²

² Cultural practices vary considerably regionally; it is quite western to have water on hand all the time and expect to be able to drink water any time, including while eating or snacking, or while talking (formally or informally) to people, and local organisers may not anticipate this. Meetings have been held at which no provisions have been made for drinking water, and there have been meetings at which the only drinks

- Consider having an all-day tea/coffee station rather than just putting out refreshments at scheduled times, and include some sweet and savoury snacks – participants come from different time zones and do spend all their time in panel sessions;
- A few participants will arrive late in the morning, often without taking breakfast, and they greatly appreciate some snacks/refreshments on arrival;
- Carefully estimate catering based on registration numbers plus an estimate for freeloaders/helpers/spoilage.

Note: Nothing will alienate paying participants more than missing lunch because they were a little late (perhaps caught up in discussions after a presentation) only to find that students and other locals are now queuing for the food. In any case, carefully control access to the lunch and break rooms.

Other catering models have been used. For example, some meetings have been held on a campus during teaching term so that regular student union/commissary facilities can be used, and participants directed there to purchase their own meals/refreshments (either with their own money or with coupons issued by the organisers out of registrations). This is a potentially easy option for organisers but can leave a very negative impression for participants, since they expect to feel like guests rather than customers.

Conference dinner

The conference dinner is a social highlight of the meeting; it is not just a meal but the an opportunity for academic networking and bonding/deal making that people will see as worth travelling internationally for, so think about this carefully and make the most of this opportunity. Many people will recall the dinner as the defining event of the meeting long after they have forgotten many of the papers.

The dinner should be on the second last evening of the meeting, not the last evening since many people will actually depart on the afternoon of the last day.

Two basic models have been followed:

- A buffet dinner at the conference venue (on campus or at hotel);
- Dinner at a restaurant or similar catering venue off campus.

Either of these can work well. The best dinners are not rushed, are held in large venues, are close to the meeting venue and accommodation, and plenty of alcohol is available for those who enjoy it. While only a minority of participants will expect alcohol, a “dry” dinner can leave a very negative impression. It is suggested that both beer and wine be readily available, and participants should be able to purchase additional drinks if they desire and ideally can easily walk back to their accommodations.

Sometimes, a local cultural performance is included in the dinner for entertainment. These can be very enjoyable but should not go on too long or otherwise dominate the program and distract from the networking/conversation. Similarly, it is good to have music but no so loud that people cannot easily talk to each other.

The dinner should have an MC who will make announcements and otherwise acts as a point of information/contact through the evening.

provided at breaks were syrupy compote or strong sweetened tea (mercifully offered in tiny cups). A meeting was once held during Ramadan without advising non-Muslim participants and the consequences were an abject lesson in the failure of cross-cultural communication. SEALS is an international meeting and it is important to offer basic international-level amenities.

Frequently, the conference dinner fee is charged separately from the registration, especially if it is held at a private restaurant, and because some participants elect not to attend the dinner. However, while this is fine, it is our experience that it is much better received if the conference dinner cost can be subsumed within the budget (either covered by registrations or sponsorship) and offered as “free” or “included” for all registrants. Note that in such cases, drinkers will happily pay for their own alcohol on the night.

Memorably bad conference dinners have had features such as the following:

- Participants bussed to and from a restaurant well across town, such that they could not easily leave early, and complicated plans for after dinner activities;
- The dinner was served in small rooms with insufficient space for seating, and participants could not easily move around and/or had to wait to be served in shifts;
- Events were held in halal venues or in districts with alcohol restrictions and no provision made for drinkers;
- Dinners have been scheduled such that some participants were left standing about idly for a long time after the last talks as they could not easily go back to their accommodations to freshen up and regroup or travel independently to the dinner venue.

So please think carefully about the banquet preparations and don't hesitate to discuss plans with experienced participants or committee members.

2.9 Programme

The program has the following features:

Speaker panels

Speakers are conventionally given 30-minute slots: 20 minutes to talk and 10 minutes for discussion. 3 talks are grouped into 1½ hour panels. If possible, consider allowing 5 minutes of additional time between talks for changeovers. Panels are thematically grouped and sequenced; for instance, if you have 9 phonology papers, organise them into 3 sequential panels on the same day in the same room. Also, do not run cognate panels in parallel, but in sequence. Grouping panels thematically may seem obvious, but it cannot be emphasised enough. It has happened that organisers have not appreciated this, and have scheduled talks on other bases (alphabetically, randomly, etc.) leaving participants to change rooms every 30 minutes, sewing great confusion and losing valuable time.

Panel chairs

Each panel requires a chair who announces speakers, keeps time, controls questions and discussion, ensures that speakers are ready, and liaises with local facilities and tech support as required. Chairs are recruited from experienced conference goers and should be sought early on. Good panel chairs are valuable since effective time-keeping ensures fairness to everyone and effective scheduling, so recruit some good chairs and put them in charge of multiple panels. This will give the meeting a discipline that will make everything else easier. This works even better if panel chairs get special high visibility ID badges and an announcement is made at the beginning of the meeting that participants are to follow the instructions of panel chairs faithfully. When rules are made clear, conference participants will generally gladly follow them, no matter how arbitrary they are in reality.

Note: In some countries/cultures (including some western countries), there are strong biases against rigid time keeping and/or a reluctance to follow directions from individuals who are

perceived to have lower social status. Consequently, on some occasions, there has been a breakdown of meeting discipline and schedules have collapsed, to the detriment of participants. This is best prevented in the first place by seeking the most senior people to act as chairs; it is not good enough to call for volunteers at the last moment or to let panels sort themselves out on the day (which has happened). A good chair can control a series of panels or a whole day, bringing consistent expectations to a session.

Sessions

A day of panels is a session, and there will typically be 2 or 3 parallel sessions. One or more days will start with a unified session for a plenary speaker. Thus, a typical day will consist of a unified session before morning break, followed by 2 or 3 parallel sessions of 3 panels. Such a plan provides for 18 or 27 talks plus the unified session each day. A hypothetical maximal 3-day meeting might have 2 plenary sessions, plus a unified session on day 3 for the business meeting. This permits at least 57 talks in a 2 session format or 81 talks in a 3 session format.

While one can vary this format, it is recommended that there be a maximum of 3 parallel sessions at one time. That is already a heavy schedule, and exceeding this number severely reduces the chances for individual participants to attend all the talks of their choice.

Keynote talks

A conventional feature of any international conference is the plenary or keynote talk. A typical format at SEALS meetings is to provide a 1-hour slot, usually before morning break, allowing 45 minutes for speaking and 15 minutes for discussion. You may schedule a keynote talk each day, not more than one in a day.

Another approach has been to use such a unified session for a keynote panel, during which senior figures address a common theme of topical or regional significance and take discussion.

In any case, the important function of these sessions is to bring people together to address important programmatic or theoretical developments, showcasing leadership in the field and stimulating discussion, and thus, consideration should be given to the identities invited to give plenaries beyond straightforward seniority or perceived status. Please keep in mind that keynotes are not about celebrity; they should be about leadership and program.

Breaks

Be generous allocating time for breaks. Allow at least 30 minutes for morning and afternoon breaks and a full hour for lunch. Many participants have come a long way and may have to return home quickly. They are tired and do not need to be rushed.

Business meeting

The business meeting is an important part of any SEALS conference. It should be scheduled towards the end of the meeting, and at least 1 hour allowed for it, part of which may be the closing ceremony. It has happened in the past that local organisers have not scheduled a business meeting, and this causes great inconvenience. It can be expected that a few participants will leave on the afternoon of the last day, as they have to get back home/work the next day, and some people do not care to worry about the government of SEALS, so the business meeting may not need a huge theatre, but allow for at least 50 people, and provide a desk/podium for the EC members.

Opening/closing ceremonies

Allow for approximately 20 minutes at the beginning of the meeting for opening remarks. Typically, the opening session leads directly into the first plenary talk. Also note that the formal closing is usually part of the BM.

3 Miscellaneous policies/practices

Language

SEALS is an open and inclusive international movement. Meetings are expected to be conducted in English, although this is a matter of discussion from time to time, and occasionally sessions are conducted/papers read in other languages. The general experience of international conferences is that mixed-language conferences don't work well for attracting international participants (even with live translation), while use of local languages in presentations has the effect of minimising their impact, disadvantaging local scholars who otherwise have barriers to international exposure. It is also the real experience of SEALS (and other international meetings) that having sessions in different languages leads to social divisions, with the conference effectively breaking down into multiple parallel meetings with little overlap.

There is a vocal minority view that an Asia focussed meeting should empower Asian languages and speakers by permitting or encouraging multiple languages. Also, there arises the situation from time to time that the meeting is held in a host country where English is not well known, and such meetings may have majority local attendees. Notwithstanding these pressures, the current dominant view is that the benefits of the English-only language policy outweigh the down sides.

Logo

A SEALS logo was designed in 2009 by Đinh Lư Giang for the meeting he ran in Ho Chi Minh City that year. The logo appears on the the SEALS/JSEALS website and the journal and should appear on all correspondence and notices concerning SEALS meetings.



The logo can be modified for specific meetings, such as for use on announcements, tote-bags, souvenirs, banners, etc. For example, the colours can be altered, dates and host information added, as long as the proportions and arrangement of elements is not affected.