

Guidelines for seminar organizers

([Hannah Rowland](#) & [Dieter Lukas](#), March 2017)

We put this advice together based on our experience running various seminar series in the Department of Zoology at the University of Cambridge.

The role of the seminar organizers is to (i) set up the logistics, (ii) solicit suggestions from the members of the department/institutions, (iii) keep track of suggestions, (iv) officially invite speakers, (v) manage the listings, (vi) remind organizers about announcements etc., (vii) getting people to meet the speaker, and (viii) handle finances.

i) Set up logistics

In most instances, seminar series have an established slot and running order. Still, it might be worth considering the setup depending on preferences in your department: one option could be to have the seminars at an early start time (starting between 10am-2pm) to have it during times when everyone is likely to be in the department (people can make the school run, etc). Earlier times might also make it easier to meet the speaker as people might be more likely have questions after hearing the presentation. Alternatively, seminar series could be at a late afternoon time and more informal, such that children can be brought along and seminars don't take up work time. Later times might also make it easier for people from off-site to come and for undergraduates to join if there is a busy lecture schedule (though you might find an empty earlier slot).

Seminars usually last for one hour, with speakers asked to present material for 40-45 minutes, followed by questions. You might want to have a moderator for the question session in case you want to balance who asks questions.

You might want to organize opportunities for further open discussions after the seminar where anyone is welcome to join the speaker: for example a pizza lunch for students or a visit to the pub with first-drinks paid.

ii) Solicit suggestions

About four months before the start of the series, we sent around an email to all members of the department asking anyone to suggest names. Since speakers should be hosted by the research group who proposed them, you also need to make sure when hosts are available. Responses vary, and you might have to write to group leaders specifically if there appears to be an imbalance in terms of the topics covered. We usually had around two internal speakers, generally postdocs or fellows who had joined the department during the last twelve months: you might know about them, or ask group leaders whether they can recommend anyone. These internal speakers are usually accommodating in filling any remaining slots.

Template email:

Dear Members of the Department, XXX and I are organizing the talks for our regular seminar series during the coming terms. We are asking for suggestions from you and your group for potential speakers from research institutes in the UK and other parts of Europe.

We are hoping to have a wide range of topics represented, and accordingly welcome any names of speakers you know who would be exciting for a wide audience. In addition, as part of ongoing efforts to increase the value of their visit, we would like to ask that speakers will be hosted by the proposing research group during their day in the department. XXX and I will send out the invites, arrange the talks during the series, and deal with logistics regarding travel and accommodation, with you arranging your visitor's schedule on their day in the department and hosting them during the open drinks and for dinner. Accordingly, could you in addition to the names of one or two speakers also include your preferred dates? The seminar series will continue to be on Tuesdays at 4pm, from October CC until December DD, and again January EE until March FF.

Many thanks,

iii) Keeping track of invites and making sure to get a good balance

Do not be surprised when all of the suggestions are for senior male speakers! You might have to email people and make them aware that they are not

suggesting women and other underrepresented groups. We kept track of who was invited, and by who, in a google doc. That way we could then meet and discuss who we would invite, so as to ensure a good spread of topics, gender, and age/origin of speakers. You can also check whether the department will be advertising positions in the near future: you could invite people that are suited for the position (without telling them or others). This can provide an opportunity for them and the department to informally get to know each other, which has potential benefits. Members of the department can get to know presenters without risking unconscious biases that might occur during official hiring processes. Inviting speakers from underrepresented groups can create new norms for the department. Candidates can see how they fit into the department.

iv) Officially invite speakers

Anyone recommending speakers to you might already contact potential candidates as they might know them well: they can see about general availability. However, the official invite should come from you, for the following main reasons: first, you want to avoid date clashes. This means that you often have to invite speakers sequentially. Second, you might want to make sure to have a balanced line-up (in terms of gender, career status, topics, etc.). For example, we always invited women first until we had about half of the slots filled, before inviting men. Third, you can inform speakers of all the logistics. Fourth, your official invite will clarify what the department can cover in terms of expenses.

Template email:

Dear Dr, My name is XXX, I am a Research Associate/Fellow/YYY in the Department of Zoology at the University of Cambridge. I am writing to you because together with AAA I organise the Behaviour, Ecology and Evolution seminar series in Zoology. BBB suggested you as a potential speaker, and we are all very interested in your research and would like to invite you to come and speak about your work. Our seminars are on Tuesday afternoons, and we have a few free dates this coming term: [list dates which are free and during which hosts are available]. The talks start at 4pm, and we ask that these talks be aimed to a non-specialist zoology

audience and to last for 40-45 min with subsequent time for questions. This format is designed to encourage a more discursive and inclusive question session in our department. We would cover your accommodation and travel expenses (within Europe), and also take you for dinner in the evening after the seminar.

Please let me know if you would be available and interested?

I very much hope you can come, and look forward to hearing back from you.

Best wishes,

v) Manage the listings

Seminar series should have an online listing. We tend to include talks as soon as a speaker has confirmed, using their general research interest as talk title and a link to their website in the abstract. You might also want to list the name of the host in the abstract so people know how to contact if they want to arrange a meeting with the speaker.

vi) Remind hosts

We have switched to a system where speakers are hosted by the group who suggested them (that might include you if you picked a speaker yourself). This means that host groups should be in charge of helping with travel arrangement (almost all speakers organize their own travel and get reimbursed), arranging accommodation if needed, arranging meetings between the speaker and department members, sending out the announcement for the talk, introducing the seminar, and hosting informal sessions. Often though we provided assistance, for example in when and how to announce the seminars. In addition, hosts might need support in organizing accommodation if there is an official departmental arrangement.

vii) Getting people to meet the speaker

This is by far the most challenging task! We have switched from having people tell us if and when they are free, to using a google sign up sheet that is accessible to all including the speaker. We have found that emails to all do not elicit a good

response though the invitation to meet with the speaker should always be expanded to everyone. It is a good idea to ask the speaker who they would like to meet, and hosts should know on which doors to knock to individually ask people about meeting the speaker. We had considered setting up a lunch for graduate students with the speaker, where they get pizza delivered, and all grad students have to do it as part of their training.

viii) Handle finances

You should see what expenses are claimable: usually these include travel and accommodation. In terms of travel, this should be by public transport and only within Europe, though car hire can occasionally be the best option; it should be cheapest option; we have paid travel expenses even when return flight is not immediately after the seminar especially if this is a cheaper option (but not for additional accommodation); and arrival and departure destination can occasionally be different. In terms of accommodation, we tend to restrict it to a maximum of two nights but occasionally might extend this, and we have been paying for family rooms if speakers have young children and bring them and their partner along (though we have not paid travel expenses for anyone but the speaker).