

Reading Group Organizers' Guide

Intro

This guide is specifically written for organizing the Alg-Econ reading group at CU Boulder, with the aim of helping student organizers understand what needs to happen and when, as well as providing some resources for choosing topics. Ideally this document will also be of use to anyone running a reading group at any institution, and is written more generally to help with that. Written in Spring '23 by Robin Bowers, with a fair amount of personal preference and style you're welcome to ignore.

If you more or less know what you're doing and just want a checklist of tasks to make sure you did everything you needed to, see the [Checklists section](#).

Reading Group Format

There are two main approaches to formatting a reading group, which have different benefits and drawbacks:

1. **Presentation-Based:** someone is assigned to prepare and present a topic to the group at each meeting.
2. **Discussion-Based:** each meeting has an assigned reading, which all participants read and come prepared to discuss.

You can do mixtures of these models, such as choosing one paper everyone reads with a designated discussion leader. I recommend not alternating models on a meeting-by-meeting basis, as the inconsistent expectations around meeting prep mean people will forget to do readings for discussion-based days.

The CU Alg Econ group uses the presentation-based model as of 2023, since the interests of involved students are quite broad and finding a single paper that everyone is motivated to dig into is difficult. A discussion-based model might make sense for a more focused group where everyone has very similar interests and learning goals.

The rest of this guide is written with the assumption of a presentation-based format.

Organizer Responsibilities

For alg econ, the organizer role generally lasts for ~1 year. Your job is not to prepare material, but to organize a space for other people to present material. Your specific tasks are to:

- Choose meeting times and [reserve spaces](#)

- Ensure a [topic has been selected](#) for each meeting
- Remind participants of times/locations/topics
- Send out any documentation after sessions (recordings, papers discussed, etc.)

Note that topic selection does NOT mean it's your job to present if someone has to cancel or you're otherwise unable to find a speaker. (See [Someone Has Canceled](#))

Organizer ToDo List

This section covers some helpful tools, and then walks through the tasks of getting a reading group going at its beginning/the start of a new semester and weekly tasks for an organizer. It assumes a new reading group with a for-dummies approach, you may already have a lot of this.

Tools

Email List

Make one/check you have access to one.

Schedule Document

It's very helpful to have [a scheduling document](#) which everyone has access to. I recommend having a Schedule portion which will have an entry for every meeting you expect to have, and a Proposals portion for people (you) to add topics that are not yet scheduled but have been proposed. If your group has been meeting for a while, divide it up by semester. For each, I'd recommend the following fields:

Schedule

- Location
- Date
- Who's presenting
- Title of presentation (can be approximate topic)
- Any links (most useful after a talk for presenters to link any papers they referenced)
- Recording (if applicable, add the link to a recording of the talk here)

Proposals

- Subject
- Who suggested (this helps to track potential presenters you can approach)
- Links (for specific papers that get proposed)
- Some way of marking off used topics

It can also be useful to keep a list of pre-recorded talks of interest, in case a presenter cancels. Also, other people can add talks to this list to make your life easier.

Group Drive

A group drive is helpful if your group tends to produce a lot of documents like slides or notes as opposed to linking existing papers, otherwise links can be stored in a scheduling document.

Zoom

If you're doing a hybrid meeting setup, create a recurring zoom. If you know some other people who are consistent attendees with their computers, you can add them as co-hosts through a zoom meeting's "advanced" options, which will let them admit people/record if you want to record your meetings.

Semester Setup

There's a setup phase at the beginning of every semester as participants' course schedules change and a new meeting time needs to be picked. A general outline of the steps that need to happen is, in order:

1. Solicit participant availability
2. Select a meeting time
3. Book a location
4. Have an introductory meeting

Availability

About 1 week before the start of the semester, send an email asking for participant availability. I use when2meet.com. If you don't know what frequency you want to meet with, this is the time to figure that out. A template email:

Subject: Alg-Econ Reading Group Scheduling

Hi Alg Econ'ers,

We're approaching a new semester, which means we'll be starting the reading group up again. We need to pick a new meeting time, please **fill out your availability for a normal week by [DATE ~3-5 DAYS AFTER EMAIL IS SENT]** in this when2meet: [SURVEY LINK].

If there's a topic you're especially interested in please add it to the scheduling document here: [SCHEDULING DOCUMENT LINK].

Looking forward to another semester of learning!

[YOUR NAME]

Setting a deadline is helpful because not everyone will respond on time, and at some point you need to move ahead with scheduling. A written deadline makes it clear when you'll pick times.

Meeting Time

Once your deadline to report availability has passed, you can pick a weekly meeting time. Ideally you'll pick a time that works for everyone's schedules, but a few other things to keep in mind:

- Are there faculty involved with the reading group? It's probably a good idea to prioritize scheduling around them and to run the final schedule by them.
- Department events: The CU CS department has a few regular events. It's nice to try to schedule around them to allow students the option to attend other important things.
 - CSGSA (CS Grad Students' Association) meetings
 - BAIC (Biweekly Antiracism and Inclusion) meetings
 - CS Grad Tea Time (go make friends!)

Booking a Location

Once you've picked a time, reserve a space. At CU, this can be done through the Events Management Service, ems.colorado.edu (venues you can book may depend on what department/program you're in). This webpage is very slow and requires you to be connected to campus internet or using the [campus VPN](#). You can book recurring meetings through this service, booking the whole semester at a time will make your life easier and means you're more likely to get a consistent room throughout the semester.

Most CU meeting rooms require card swipe access, and are tied to a specific card. You can register up to 3 cards with a reservation: the reserver's and two alternatives. If you know people who tend to be in-person regulars, ask them for their BuffCard numbers before going to book the rooms so you aren't the only person who can access the room.

Introductory Meeting

Once you've picked a time and booked a location, email your reading group to set up the first meeting. I schedule the first meeting for the second or maybe first week of the semester to give people time to return to campus after a break. You can make this meeting shorter than usual and use it to a) introduce everyone and b) plan out the semester.

A basic agenda for an introductory meeting is:

- Introduce yourselves
 - name/pronouns
 - year/program
 - One thing you're interested in covering in the reading group (write these down!)
 - Icebreaker question

- Reading Group Plan
 - Set expectations: if people should be doing prep for the reading group, decide/state that now
 - What topics do you want to cover?
 - Get volunteers to present in the next few meetings

A template first meeting email:

Subject: Alg-Econ Reading Group First Meeting on [DATE] + Schedule

Hi all,

Thanks to everyone who filled out the when2meet, it looks like our meetings this semester will be on [DAYS] at [TIMES] in [LOCATION] and on zoom here: [ZOOM LINK].

Our first meeting will be next week on [DATE] at [TIME] in [LOCATION], where we'll do some introductions and talk about what we want to cover this semester.

If there's a topic you're especially interested in please add it to the scheduling document here: [SCHEDULING DOCUMENT LINK].

See you soon!

[YOUR NAME]

I bold dates/times and locations, especially if there's a one-off location change, because people are bad at reading emails and it makes the important bits stand out on a skim.

Weekly

Meetings

Each meeting has a few tasks tied to it:

1. **Remind your speaker:** check in with your next speaker 1-2 weeks before their presentation to make sure they haven't forgotten to prepare. Ask them to provide a short summary of their topic, so you can tell people roughly what the talk will cover.
2. **Check you have a space:** if you haven't made a recurring reservation, make sure you've booked a room for this week.
3. **Reminder for participants:** the day before/morning of your meeting, send an email reminder ("scheduled send" emails are great for this) to all participants that includes:
 - a. Location/zoom link
 - b. Time
 - c. Presenter + title/topic (link to any relevant papers)

- d. Brief teaser of the topic (~1 sentence)
4. **After-meeting debrief + links:** after the meeting/the next day, send an email to everyone including:
- a. Thanks to speaker
 - b. Links to any materials the speaker shared/recording
 - c. Reminder of next meeting's time/location and presenter/topic

Presenter Scheduling

It's your job to make sure there's a speaker lined up for the next meeting. I suggest a) doing this several weeks ahead of time and b) in batches. Most people can't happily prepare a presentation in a week, so booking speakers a few weeks out means they're less likely to cancel and it'll probably be a better presentation.

I try to schedule 2-4 weeks' worth of presentations all at once: it's easier to reach out to a lot of people and have them pick the most convenient week out of a few than to ask people to present on a specific week. This also means you only have to deal with finding speakers every 2-4 weeks, instead of having a weekly task of finding your next speaker.

To find speakers, you have a few resources:

1. **Proposed section of your Schedule Document.** If you keep a list of topics and proposers, you can solicit specific people with a topic you know they're interested in.
2. **During Meetings.** A nice model is to take 10-15 minutes at the end of a meeting when there are still 2+ weeks already booked out to get an idea of who would be interested in presenting in the month after that, and follow up after the meeting. Prompt people by asking if there are any relevant papers they need to read for research or classes.
3. **Professors.** Ask involved professors to ask students. In the Alg Econ group, there's a loose expectation that each student will present each semester, either on their research or another topic. If someone hasn't presented, professors can prompt them but this isn't your job.

Someone Has Canceled

This is inevitable, and it is not your job to present or lead a discussion in their place. Instead, you have a few options based on when they canceled:

1. **1-2+ weeks before:** you may be able to find a replacement speaker without it being too short-notice. Ask around as soon as you can, or see if another presenter would be willing to switch places.
2. **<1-2 weeks before:** this is a little short-notice to prepare a talk. Look for a recorded talk that's $\sim\frac{1}{2}-\frac{1}{3}$ the length of a usual meeting, and watch the recording with pauses to discuss. You don't have to be an expert on the subject of the talk (or have watched the whole thing), just pause periodically for questions. For Alg Econ, some good places to look for recorded talks are:

- a. [EC Archives](#)
 - b. [Simons Institute](#) (find a relevant playlist)
 - c. [TCS+](#)
 - d. [COMSOC](#)
 - e. Ask professors: they like talks too.
3. **Whenever:** just cancel for the week. It's not a big deal.

Checklists

If you just want to make sure you've done everything without all the extra text...

Semesterly

- Decide a time
- Book a room (preferably recurring)

Weekly/Per-Meeting

Pre-meeting

- Remind your speaker
- Confirm your location + time
- Send email with:
 - Speaker's name
 - Topic/description (+ resource links)
 - Time + location/zoom link

Post-meeting

- Make sure you know who's speaking at the next session
- Send email with:
 - Thanks to speaker
 - Links to resources/recording
 - Time + location for next week
 - Name of next speaker
 - Periodically include a link to your scheduling document