

AGA  
Newsletter  
Editor  
Handbook

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## **Why A Newsletter?**

AGA's chapter newsletters are the main form of internal communications to members of each local group. When you consider that some members do not attend every chapter meeting, the chapter newsletter may be the only communication with these members over extended periods of time. Therefore, the newsletter editor is a key member of the chapter's public relations team. Remember, every organization needs to improve its internal communications. An accurate, clearly written, easy-to-read newsletter can go a long way toward achieving that goal.

## **Purpose of this Handbook**

This manual has three purposes. It is intended to help newly appointed newsletter editors in designing, preparing and issuing their first newsletters. Second, it is intended to serve as a guide to chapters that do not have a newsletter but wish to start one. Third, it offers suggestions and ideas for editors who wish to improve their newsletters.

## **Selecting An Editor**

Each chapter should appoint an editor. Some larger chapters may attempt to work through a committee, but try to appoint one person responsible for coordinating and preparing the newsletter. Smaller chapters may combine the duties of editor and chapter secretary or editor and public relations director. If combining the functions makes sense, make sure that one person can handle the workload.

In selecting your editor, look for someone who has basic writing and editing skills as well as a track record of meeting schedules and deadlines. Your editor should keep abreast of all chapter activities, perhaps by attending board and committee meetings or receiving copies of reports, minutes and important chapter correspondence.

Your editor may not have much newsletter experience when appointed, but producing the newsletter will get easier over time, with each issue improving upon the last. Therefore, at the discretion of the chapter president, it is suggested that editors serve two-year terms. Appointments should be made at least three months prior to the publication date of the first issue.

Arrange backup for your editor in case of illness or emergency. If you choose to appoint an assistant editor, you may consider staggered appointment terms, with the assistant editor moving up to become editor. This would provide desirable continuity to your newsletter.

# Getting Started

## Choosing a Format

Most likely, your first consideration will be the size of the chapter's newsletter budget. Time advantages, convenience and low cost have led nearly every AGA chapter to abandon printed newsletters for e-mail newsletters. Some use text-only e-mail messages; others e-mail Microsoft Word attachments; others send PDFs and/or post them on their websites.

Remember your readers—how would they prefer to read your newsletter? What are their online capabilities? If they have a hard time reading or downloading your newsletter, they'll lose patience quickly.

Here are some pros and cons to think about.

**Text-only e-mail**— These newsletters are the easiest to produce, it's as easy as writing an e-mail message. They don't involve any fancy formatting and are readable by everyone, no matter the e-mail system used. The downside is you are limited to one font style and size, so it can look somewhat dull.

**Word attachments**— These documents look more like an actual newsletter than an e-mail and can include color, logos and other basic formatting and layout options.

**PDF attachments**— They are easy to read if they're printed, but reading them online can be irritating because they are slow to load and clunky to scroll through. Many editors use Adobe to convert Word documents to PDFs. It can be downloaded for free at [www.adobe.com](http://www.adobe.com).

**Website Postings**— Many chapters send e-mail reminders that the newsletter is available on the site, often in PDF format, where readers can also link to archived issues.

**HTML Newsletters**— These are actually plain-text messages that are 'interpreted' by your e-mail client and can include photos, graphics and links. Easy to read and professional-looking, the AGA National Office has turned to HTML newsletters. To produce an HTML newsletter, you need significant support from your chapter webmaster and a robust website that can house multiple web pages and images. They take more time to produce than plain-text e-mails, and technical problems can arise depending on how different e-mail programs and spam filters deal with HTML. The newsletter may not look the same to everyone who receives it, and some may not be able to read it at all, so test it first on users of Outlook, Hotmail AOL, Yahoo Mail and Macintosh Mail. One 2003 survey by [nwltr.com](http://nwltr.com), a site that covers newsletters, found that while more than 90 percent of Internet users can actually read HTML e-mails, 45 percent of them still prefer to receive plain text.

Consider these options for HTML newsletters:

**Use your current e-mail client.** Send the message like you would any other e-mail, but be sure paste addresses into the BCC: field to protect everyone's privacy. If this option doesn't work, you can create a newsletter HTML file using Macromedia's Dreamweaver software. Another option is Microsoft FrontPage.

**Use a third-party bulk e-mail delivery service, specifically designed for HTML.** Bulk e-mail services can help design and distribute your newsletter. (AGA National uses Dreamweaver to produce its HTML newsletters and subscribes to a bulk e-mail service—Databack at [www.databack.com](http://www.databack.com)—for distribution.)

**Use an application service provider (ASP).** An ASP can track how many people read the newsletter, how many people clicked links, and allow recipients to add or remove themselves from your e-mail list. These newsletters are more often marked as spam, however.

## Frequency

Your newsletter is the best way to publicize your next meeting, so make sure you distribute it at least two weeks before the meeting date. If your chapter holds monthly meetings, the desirable newsletter frequency will also be monthly. Issue the newsletter on the same day each month, the second Tuesday for example, and keep your e-mail subject line consistent. Include your chapter's city name in your subject line for National Office staff and others outside your local area who receive your newsletter.

## News Gathering/Content

Remember, the newsletter should be geared to all your chapter members, not just the chapter leadership. What do your readers want? Are you providing news they can use? Remember the 'what's-in-it-for-me' principle. Make the newsletter indispensable.

You will learn that one of the major problems for editors is gathering the news. Rule No. 1: You must **insist upon deadlines** for submissions from your fellow chapter members. Don't wait, for example, for chapter committee volunteers to report on their activities; instead, let them know that you're reserving a spot in the next newsletter, give them a copy deadline and stick to it every month.

Other sources of news to consider:

- The National Office sends out communications to chapter presidents and newsletter editors that contain a wealth of information.
- Anything you find on the AGA website can be used at no charge.
- Anything in TOPICS can be used at no charge. If you use items from AGA Today, please be sure to cite the original source the way it is listed with the article.
- Click on the link button on the bottom of AGA's homepage to reach a variety of Internet resources. This section connects you to most of the accounting organizations, standards-setting bodies and federal agencies.

## **Develop a Checklist**

To achieve broad coverage in each issue and to make sure you're not overlooking anything, a checklist may aid in planning.

Note that AGA's Chapter Recognition Program calls for a minimum of a president's message, notice of upcoming meetings and events, and Chapter Executive Committee contact information. Many chapters also include a recap of past events, meeting minutes, National Office news of interest, and accountability and financial management articles. A "Technical Feature" allows members to share challenges they faced at their organization and how they overcame them, for example.

You may wish to develop regular departments for each issue such as: Committee Activities, Meet Our Officers, National Office Notes, AGA Calendar of Events, etc.

Suggested additional items:

- Member profiles
- Information on other professional activities and upcoming events in the local area.
- Chapter and National elections
- Committee appointments (names make news!)
- Organization changes
- New projects or programs
- Progress reports
- National meetings
- Increases in membership
- Conferences, seminars and workshops
- Awards, honors, retirements, promotions
- New members
- Community activities

# A Word About Writing

Remember your ABCs:

**Accuracy**— Errors make good content look bad. Spend extra time and energy to ensure your newsletter is edited, proofed and corrected. It will pay off in a big way. Nothing looks more unprofessional than a newsletter with spelling errors or improper use of grammar.

**Brevity**— Get to the point, and quickly. Your colleagues get an average of 75-100 e-mails every day, so make sure your newsletter is not deleted. Few people enjoy reading lengthy documents online, and a targeted, concise message shows your consideration for the reader's time. Also, shorter text means better reader retention and comprehension, according to various usability tests.

**Clarity**— Say it simply and clearly one time. Make the most of the subject line!

Other tips:

**Avoid clichés.** How many President's Messages start with some reference to the weather ("Ah, spring"), or the quick passage of time ("Boy does time fly. Can you believe it's Christmas already?") Resist these bland, overused phrases.

**Consider your tone** and keep it consistent. Keep it conversational, not too slangy or too academic. Readers should be able to hear the person behind the writing.

**Avoid using "click here" on links.** Instead, integrate your links into the text and tell readers precisely where the link leads. (To locate one of our employees, scan our directory.) So forget "Click here to subscribe to the newsletter." The link should be: "Subscribe to the newsletter."

**Keep it clean.** Off-color jokes that float around the Internet or are forwarded via e-mail may be funny to you, but you run the risk of offending your readers by including them in your newsletter.

**Keep it apolitical.** Everyone has different views on politics, religion and world events. Keep them out of your newsletters.

# Design

## A Masthead

The AGA Chapter Identity website has three options for newsletter templates, which you may download at no charge. Go to [www.agacgfm.org/membership/identity/newsletteroptions.aspx](http://www.agacgfm.org/membership/identity/newsletteroptions.aspx) to check out your options.

The masthead features a consistent design element that includes the name of your publication. Your masthead may be completely in type, or may incorporate artwork. Many chapters include their personalized copy of the AGA logo somewhere in the masthead. The AGA logo for each chapter and AGA's CGFM logo can be downloaded at <http://www.agacgfm.org/membership/communicators/editortoolkit.aspx>.

## Layout/Readability

Use a **font** that is best for on-screen readability: Palatino, Verdana, Arial or Georgia are good choices. Most fonts are readable between 9 and 12 points, when used as body copy. Pick one size and font and stick with it. For your heading type choose either a highly contrasting or a complementary type to your body type. Use a larger size and try to stick with it throughout as well. The easiest way to make a publication look cluttered and hard to read is to use too many fonts and sizes. Try to use no more than three fonts throughout your newsletter. The best rule of thumb is to choose a “san serif” font such as Arial, Helvetica or Universe for your headlines and a “serif” font such as Palatino or Times New Roman for your text.

It's a good idea to use a professionally designed **template** to give your newsletter a consistent, easily recognizable look. Consider placing major recurring items—your meeting notice, President's Message, etc.—in the same spot each issue. That way, your readers will know where to look for items of special interest.

Web readers rely on **headings** to find the paragraphs they want to read. Use active verbs in your headlines for more impact. If your story is lengthy, break it up every four to five paragraphs with **subheads**. Readers are put off by big blocks of text, so make sure you have a lot of white space in text e-mails. That means you'll need adequate margins on all sides and space between articles. The white space that is created is much more appealing to the reader's eye than a crowded page. Poor formatting can take away from even the best content.

Capture some of your chapter activities in **photographs**. Consider these tips:

- Tell your photographer what you want—don't let him/her just flounder around.
- Don't try to crowd half of your chapter into a photo—three or four people is optimum.
- At the time you shoot the picture, jot down the names of your subjects to ensure future identification.
- Avoid the “firing squad” pose—have your subjects *doing* something if possible.
- You don't have to use the whole print. Crop out the superfluous parts as necessary.

## **Resources**

### **Chapter Communicators' List Serve**

Receive regular updates throughout the year and exchange ideas with your fellow chapter communicators. The list serve is purged every July. New program year communicators and/or chapter presidents should register at <https://www.agacgfm.org/membership/communicators/register.aspx> any time after July 1. If you are continuing for another year, you must re-register.

### **Chapter Communicators' Resource Center**

This site gives you access to the most important Association news and events so that you can pass it on to your chapter members. It contains the Chapter Communicators' Toolkit ([www.agacgfm.org/membership/communicators/editortoolkit.aspx](http://www.agacgfm.org/membership/communicators/editortoolkit.aspx)), which contains everything you need to produce a sharp, professional-looking newsletter or website. Find the official AGA corporate logo, personalized for your chapter, the CGFM logo, and photos and bios of AGA leaders as well as Executive Director Relmond VanDaniker, DBA, CPA. Also find access to past issues of TOPICS, membership applications and more.

### **Chapter Websites**

Learn from other chapters. See what works and what doesn't, and save yourself time and money. Most chapters post their newsletters on their sites and list an archive of past issues. Go to [www.agacgfm.org/membership/localchapters/chapterlist.aspx](http://www.agacgfm.org/membership/localchapters/chapterlist.aspx) to see the list of AGA chapter websites.

### **Chapter Identity Site**

Here you can find AGA's chapter identity guidelines, templates for letterhead, business cards, envelopes, mailing labels, name badges, event brochures, signs and more. Go to [www.agacgfm.org/membership/identity/](http://www.agacgfm.org/membership/identity/)

### **CPE Opportunities Listing**

Your chapter can list events online for free using our easy events form found at [www.agacgfm.org/events/EventForm.aspx](http://www.agacgfm.org/events/EventForm.aspx)

### **Chapter Newsletter Editor and Website Contests**

The contests, held every spring, are designed to bring recognition to chapters producing top-quality newsletters and websites in each chapter group. Awards are presented at the PDC each year. Criteria used to judge the newsletters and websites can be found in the toolkit at [www.agacgfm.org/membership/communicators/editortoolkit.aspx](http://www.agacgfm.org/membership/communicators/editortoolkit.aspx). Please explore the chapter communicators' site, and feel free to give us feedback on how to improve it. Your involvement is the key to making this site successful.

# Contact Us

This short how-to manual was designed to bring a few helpful tips to AGA's newsletter editors. The Communications Department welcomes your comments and suggestions for improvements to future editions of this handbook. For questions or other assistance, contact us at 800.AGA.7211.

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