



# How to Run a Successful Less Wrong Meetup Group

Tips and tricks for starting, running, and growing a successful Less Wrong meetup group

by Kaj Sotala and Luke Muehlhauser



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## How to Use This Document

This document is written for anyone who wants to organize a Less Wrong meetup. We have written most sections so that they can help you whether you want to start a new group or improve an existing group.

Do you have additional suggestions? Are you encountering problems not solved by the advice in this document? Please contact [kaj.sotala@singinst.org](mailto:kaj.sotala@singinst.org) — we will incorporate your feedback and try to solve your problems with the next version of this document.

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# Why Organize a Meetup?

"We are a group of friends [who] try miracle fruit, dance ecstatically until sunrise, actively embarrass ourselves at karaoke, get lost in the woods, and jump off waterfalls. Poker, paintball, parties, go-karts, concerts, camping... I have a community where I can live in truth and be accepted as I am, where I can give and receive feedback and get help becoming stronger. I am immensely grateful to have all of these people in my life, and I look forward to every moment I spend with them. To love and be loved is an unparalleled experience in this world, once you actually try it."

- Will Ryan, Less Wrong NYC: Case Study of a Successful Rationalist Chapter

Humans are social animals, and even introverts want to enjoy the company of others. Human relationships are one of the few factors that have a lasting impact on our happiness. A pleasant social environment and close friends make us consistently happier.



Almost everyone can benefit from being in a community, but not every community can benefit everyone. It's easiest to feel comfortable with people who share your values and interests. People who might be interested in attending Less Wrong meetups tend to have strong interests in judgment and decision-making, philosophy, and self-improvement. Great things can happen when people with strong common goals come together and learn from each other.

## Getting help

You can ask Less Wrong for help with any questions that you might have. Don't hesitate to create a new topic in the Discussion section of the website and explain the issue you're facing. Additionally, there is a Google Group for meetup organizers, found at groups.google.com. To have your membership approved, Just state that you're a meetup organizer.

# Announcing and Organize Your Meetups

## Choosing avenue

There are basically two kinds of meetup sites: public (e.g. a café) and private (e.g. someone's home). There are also semi-public locations, such as university classrooms (when not being used by anyone else).

New people may feel uncomfortable meeting new people in a private location. At the same time, people who do know each other usually feel more comfortable at a private location. An ideal balance might be

to have regular meetups at a public location to attract newcomers, and also meet often at someone's home. For example, you may want to hold weekly meetups at someone's home and meet in public once a month.

The participants of at least one meetup found their agreed-upon location to be unbearably full, and decided to start the meetup by scouting for a better venue. Since there was the possibility that some people would arrive late, the meetup split into two groups, with the first one heading out to the new site and the second staying behind for a while to inform any latecomers of the new location. You'll want to avoid this.

A public meetup location should be quiet, open, have enough room for everyone, and (ideally) offer food. Restaurants, large coffee shops and diners are good for this, particularly if they are mostly empty during the meetup. Such places do expect most people to order something, however, so the site shouldn't be overly expensive. In general, coffee shops are better than restaurants, as new people may feel intimidated sitting alone at a restaurant while waiting for others. At a coffee shop, people can sit down and read a book or use their computer while waiting for others. It's also easier to spot a meetup while walking through a coffee shop. You'll want to avoid showing up and finding your location already full. If the meetup is going to be at a 5 PM on a Monday, have someone briefly scout out the meetup site a week or two in advance to see whether Monday early evenings are crowded or not.

Students may be capable of reserving university classrooms for their own use, for free. This can be a good option if it's available. If none of the meetup organizers are students, you can try to find campus groups such as "skeptic" or "atheist" organizations who are willing to co-host an event. As an added bonus, they can advertise the meetup to their own members.

Public libraries may also have rooms that are available for a meetup. Outdoor locations such as parks are good for more physical activities, from playing frisbee to jogging to fencing, but they require a backup plan in case the weather is unfavorable.

Of course, the backup plan may be as simple as "if it rains, we'll try again next week."

## Making the announcement

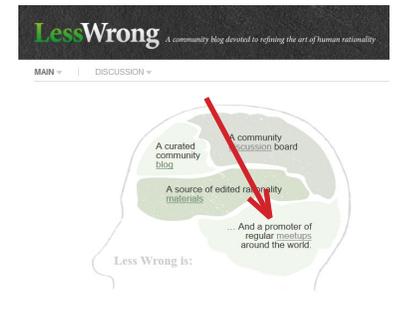
The most obvious way to announce a meetup is at Less Wrong: that's what the "Add new meetup" button is

for. When organizing a meetup for the first time, it helps if you already know local Less Wrong users who may be interested in attending. Contact them to see if you can find a time that's suitable for

everyone, then create the announcement and ask those users to post a comment saying that they'll attend. Additional people are more likely to show up if they can see that there will be other people present. Don't get stuck trying to negotiate an ideal time, however. Use a scheduling service such as [doodle.com](http://doodle.com) for people to post their preferences, then decide on the time. If you don't know of any other locals, just go ahead and post the notice.

Wherever it is that you are meeting, you'll want to bring a sign so that people can recognize your group. Mention the fact that you'll have a sign in the meetup notice, or offer some other easy visual cue for recognizing the group. This way, people don't need to be nervous about whether they'll find you. This is especially recommended if you're meeting at a large location.

Even regular users of the site may miss an announcement that is only posted at Less Wrong, so it's good to establish an alternative communication route as early as possible. [Meetup.com](http://Meetup.com) offers an easy way to organize and announce meetups, and provides visibility for the group, but hosting a group there costs a nominal fee. You can also use services such as the 'group' feature on [Facebook](http://Facebook), but there are people who don't use social networking sites, so you shouldn't rely on them exclusively. Getting everyone to sign up to an e-mail list is probably your best bet. Such a list can be created using a site such as [Google Groups](http://Google Groups) and is an easy, basic alternative. Don't just use it for announcing meetups, but initiate active discussions about topics that people find interesting.



“While scheduling meetups is an obvious function of a group mailing list, it can be used for all manner of discussions and coordination between group members. Given our significant overlapping interests, one function of the list is for people to invite others to join them on their adventures, be that going to conferences, parties, sous-vide steak dinners, rock climbing, or whatever else people feel like doing. Another very important use is to ask the group for advice on a particular subject, like [optimizing OKCupid profiles](#), learning programming languages, alleviating bad moods, and more! Last but not least, mailing lists make large group discussions on serious questions feasible.”

- Will Ryan, [Less Wrong NYC: Case Study of a Successful Rationalist Chapter](#)

Once you have a core group together, you may want to expand beyond existing Less Wrong users. Get people to bring their friends, and organize events that will be interesting to nonmembers as well. Then advertise the events, e.g. via fliers placed on suitable university notice boards.

## The first meetup

Once you’ve chosen a venue and announced the meetup, you’ve already beaten some of the hardest challenges. Be there at least ten minutes in advance, and don’t forget to bring some sort of a “Less Wrong meetup here” sign. When people arrive, just start talking with them and ask everyone introduce themselves. People may not know what to expect from a Less Wrong meetup, so you’ll probably need to lead the discussion in the beginning. Some questions which might be suitable for discussion at the first meetup:

- How did you become interested in Less Wrong?
- Which particular Less Wrong topics are you most interested in?
- How does being a Less Wrong reader have an impact on your everyday life?

You may wish to pick some fun activity or two to engage in once everyone has had a chance to talk for a while (see the Activities & Games section below). Persuade people to sign up for the e-mail list or whatever form of communication you’re using, and agree to have another meetup soon. Don’t forget to relax and have fun.

It’s possible that people will spend the first meetup only discussing what they want to do in future meetups. This is fine if everyone is excited about it. Ideally, however, you want people to leave with the memory of having had a good time at the meetup, rather than the feeling of having spent a couple of hours doing nothing but dull planning and speculating. Have some fun activities planned that you can do in addition to just planning.

Excess formality can be counterproductive, especially in the early stages of the meetup group. You may be tempted to actively do things such as prescribing roles, forcing too much structure to the meetups, killing discussions that “stray away” from the initial topics, and so on. This may feel off-putting or even silly to people who would have prefer to start off more informally. It is often best to let the participants bond first, before agreeing upon formalities.

## Beyond the first meetup

If the first meetup goes well, you’ll want to schedule future ones. A group might decide to have meetups at regular intervals (e.g. the first Friday of each month), or to schedule each meetup individually. Regular meetups have the advantage of not needing to be scheduled each time, and they avoid the “we all thought that it would be fun to meet again, but never got around to agreeing on a time” problem. On the other hand, if several people agree on a specific time, it will be more likely that at least a couple of them will actually attend.

When arranging semi-regular meetups, it can be useful for the organizer to set on their phone or computer

a permanent alarm. For example, a group might have the habit of meeting on Wednesdays, with the organizer posting a notice about it on Less Wrong on Thursdays and sending out reminder e-mails on Tuesdays. If the organizer forgets to make either announcement, people might assume that there won't be a meetup that week. Having an alarm helps avoid this.

In the NYC meetup group, one member committed to being at a specific time and place for a minimum of two hours, twice per month. Since enough people liked him and wanted to hang out with him, several people began to show up at his stated time and place, and a regular meetup group was established. You may want to try this yourself: select an easily-accessible public location, bring a laptop or book with you so you haven't wasted your time even if nobody else shows up, and let the others know that you'll be staying there for at least a couple of hours.

Don't spend too much time trying to come up with a time that will be suitable for everyone. Either gather

preferences using [doodle.com](http://doodle.com) and pick the time that works for most people, or simply announce a time and see who can attend. The people who would like to come but are unable to will tell you so, and with enough tries you can settle on something that's good for most people. In general, it's much better to pick something that at least a couple of people want to do and then actually do it, than to spend weeks trying to settle on something that works for everybody.



### Pioneering new meetups

"Then I had an idea [for] an experiment. I was travelling to Budapest last week for 3 days to visit my family and I thought that I would simply try to organise a meetup there. In the worst case, I would spend a couple of hours in a cafe reading a book. My guesstimate was that 3-4 of my friends (whom I reminded several times) and maybe 1-3 people I don't actually know would turn up.

I was surprised to find that 14 people attended the meetup, two of them travelling all the way from Bratislava to Budapest. We spent almost 4 hours in a fantastic discussion, a mailing list was created, and a second meetup is happening tomorrow. My experiment produced a result I didn't expect."

- Alexey Morgunov, [Setting up LW meetups in unlikely places: Positive Data Point](#)

If you are traveling to a major city that doesn't yet have an active meetup group, try creating one there during your visit. This is especially the case if you're already an experienced meetup organizer or participant, but you shouldn't let a lack of experience deter you if you aren't.

To pioneer a new group, start by picking a location and announcing the meetup on Less Wrong. When you post the notice, be sure to mention that you're only visiting and won't be a regular attendant - people are more likely to show up if they think they won't get

an opportunity to meet you again anytime soon. If you are unfamiliar with the area, you may have to rely on someone local to choose the site of the meetup. In the worst case, search for a list of cafés in the region and just pick one that looks nice. Near the center of the city is usually optimal, but if you don't know the city well and are worried about getting lost, then choosing a location near the place where you're staying is better than nothing.

If people show up, you want the meetup to become more than just an isolated incident. Try to identify one

or two people who seem particularly active and talk to them about organizing future events. Get people's e-mail addresses and create a mailing list. Use it to help with choosing a time, a venue, discussion topics and activity ideas for the next meetup. Announce it on Less Wrong. Get the chosen organizers to help you and gradually let them do it. Point them to this guide if they don't know of it already. With some work and a little luck, the group will live on without you.

## Restarting dead or inactive groups

It may happen that a group meets for a time, but never achieves momentum and becomes inactive. While the exact reasons will be specific for each group, the most likely core reason is that the group simply never felt sufficiently interesting to engage the members, or that nobody really took up the hero responsibilities (see the case studies below).

If you want to revive such a group, you have to convince the group members that this time will be different. If the previous problem was a lack of interest, you can try to poll members to find out what they'd be interested in, but note that a public poll can be risky. If people have low interest in the group, it could be that nobody bothers to reply. If everyone can see that nobody replied, this will further reinforce the impression that the group will never amount to anything. It is often better to ask people privately, which also has the benefit of making people being more likely to respond.

The plan below for a revival attempt hasn't (to our knowledge) actually been tried, but it seems like it could work. First, see if you can find one or two other members in the group who are interested in reviving it, and get in contact with only them at first. Divide the most important responsibilities between the two or three of you. Doing things is much more motivating when you're doing them together, and people will be more inclined to believe that the group can be restarted if there are two or three people behind the project instead of just one. Come up with an action plan together, then contact the members and state that you've figured out what went wrong the last time, and that this reboot isn't going to make the same mistakes.

Knowing that you'll correct earlier mistakes will also make people more likely to believe that this time will succeed, and to give it another try. Of course, this presumes that you do know what went wrong the last time. Make the next meetup as fun as possible, then hope for the best.

Because it may help you avoid the death of your group, here is an account of how one Less Wrong group died: I can try to lend some insight into what caused our meetup to dissolve...

- Initial loss of attendees; [o]ur initial meeting attracted more than 20 people. Only about 8 attended the second, and hovered around that, maintaining a core of about 7, and never saw about 15 of the original attendees return.
- Lack of Heroes
  - Tragedy of the commons for organizing meetups between me and Hal; I did most of the organizing and setting up the first meetup, heavily influenced by the big NYC group post, and the "The community needs Heroes" concept. Unfortunately I arrived late to the meetup, and Hal (hwc on LW) had taken initiative and started taking notes, etc. No one else volunteered for any sort of Hero activities, so it was mostly left to Hal and I, but we never really divided responsibilities or anything, so a mini-tragedy of the commons sprung up there.
  - Personal lack of social energy
    - Maybe playing too many roles at once, dividing attention between conducting the meetup and the content of discussion
    - Mental burnout from having so many interesting conversations and topics branching and wandering
    - Predictably, with time, increasing interests outside of the meetup (tied with self improvement of social life, etc) eroded my personal Hero identity
- Increasingly, lack of communication from any member on the Google group

- David Perry, on the Less Wrong meetup group in the Research Triangle region

# How to build your team of heroes

The creation of a lasting meetup group involves many challenges. For one, you need to provide people with a concrete reason to attend. Most people have a lot of things that they could be doing instead, and even non-busy people might be hard-pressed to bother leaving their homes and coming to the meetup site. You may get interested people to visit a meetup once, but unless they have a good time, they're unlikely to return. To create an active meetup group, you need to offer people an experience that they consider better than most of their alternatives. This is a difficult undertaking. People are commonly burdened with many obligations, and when they do have some spare time, they want to spend it doing something worthwhile.

Fortunately, you don't need to face this challenge alone. If your first meetup gets any attendants at all, they're there because they think the meetup has promise. They may not be motivated to put in much effort if they don't think that it will amount to anything, but they'll want to see the meetups be successful. Offer them a concrete plan for making the meetups great, and you can get them excited enough to make that dream a reality. Discuss what everyone wants from the group, and see if you can get people to volunteer to do the things that need to be done.

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A Brussels meetup group came up with the following objectives that excited them:

- Improve their own rationality and that of others.
  - Gain teaching experience while spreading rationality.
  - Learn about building a productive group while working to create one.
  - Increase the truthfulness of their beliefs.
  - Build a rationality movement that gets stuff done.
- 

Below are some of the roles that you will want to see fulfilled. It's not necessary to have a separate person for each of the tasks: if one person has the energy to play several roles, that's great. And it's not a bad thing

to have several people working together on one thing, either. Just keep in mind that these are supposed to be things that people want to contribute to, rather than unpleasant obligations. You're all coming here voluntarily, because you want to build something great. The moment that people get a feeling of "I don't want to do what I've promised to do anymore" is the moment that things start going wrong. It's perfectly fine to rotate the roles and let people do different things.



Ideally, you don't need to specifically designate anyone for these tasks — instead, simply explain the tasks to everyone, and allow everyone to pitch in and perform the role that's the most needed at any given moment. On the other hand, formally designating somebody for a task could make them more committed and motivated to doing it. Use whichever approach works best for your particular group.

You might also try experimenting with after-the-fact designations: for instance if, at the end of the month, you find that a specific person did a lot more to organize meetups than anyone else, name them as the Organizer of the Month. This can help promote healthy competition over the titles and get people motivated to do more. If you take this route, be sure to give everyone an opportunity to explain what they've done at the end of the month, so as to not overlook contributions that might otherwise go unnoticed.

That said, some important roles are:

## The Organizer

This is the person who posts the meetup notice, nudges people into actually making a decision about where to meet next (or is the one to decide, in case nobody has a strong preference), and generally makes sure that something is going on. It might often be the case that people have a vague consensus that “it would be fun to do this again sometime,” but nobody gets around to actually hosting the event. Then it’s up to the organizer to make sure that there is a next event.

The organizer should also guide discussions at meetups. Early meetups will likely be spent talking about meta matters and what people would like the meetup group to be like. It can be difficult to find a balance between discussion and action. A group will probably need somebody who generally nudges the conversation along during the meetup. This involves saying things such as, “So we have five suggestions. What do we want to go with?” and, “OK, so what needs to happen next?”

Even if the other roles are kept informal, it can be a good idea to at least appoint somebody as the official organizer. That way, everyone knows that someone is held responsible for organizing meetups, and the group won’t fall victim to the bystander effect. The organizer can also appoint people to the other roles in the case that doing things informally isn’t working.

## The welcomer

Less Wrong meetup groups often have their fair share of introverts and shy people. If somebody new shows up, there should be someone present to welcome the new person and possibly make introductions. Make sure that veterans from previous meetups get greeted and welcomed, too. Regardless of whether they’re old or new, people who show up should feel that the group values and appreciates the fact that they chose to attend.

## The learning coach

A meetup group should be fun to attend, but it should also be more than just that. Ideally, everyone should be learning new and valuable skills. Learning coaches are people who make sure that the members of the group are becoming more awesome. Ways of doing this in-

clude suggesting more learning activities or projects, as well as introducing new angles on existing activities. For example, if people are having a purely social discussion about some subject, a learning coach might try to nudge the group in a more analytical direction. Just don’t overdo it — trying to make everything into something educational can stress people out. Doing fun things just for the sake of doing fun things should not only be allowed, but encouraged.

## Content providers

People will keep coming to meetups if there are interesting things to do. In general, meetups with only casual “hanging out” on the agenda will attract fewer participants than meetups with a clear agenda and an interesting activity. While organizers try to ensure that there’s something interesting happening regularly, content providers are people who make sure content is provided — presentations, games, activities, etc.

Initially, the organizer might be the sole content provider, but eventually the organizer should only need to nudge the content providers in the right direction. “Hey, you mentioned having that awesome idea for a presentation, how about holding it during our next meeting?” is an example of something an organizer might say while nudging a member to provide content for a session.

## The visionary

“Through rationality we shall become awesome, and invent and test systematic methods for making people awesome, and plot to optimize everything in sight, and the more fun we have the more people will want to join us.”

- Eliezer Yudkowsky,  
Epistle to the New York Less Wrongians

It helps to have a vision of the group becoming something greater than just a bunch of folks who are hanging out. Visionaries convince others that such a higher goal is possible, and keep them inspired about it.

### The networker

A group shouldn't grow too fast, or it will risk losing its purpose. Still, it must grow some to avoid stagnation. Networkers are people who invite fun and interesting people to join. These new people might be members of related groups that share similar beliefs and values, or they could simply be the networker's friends. Ideally, every regular meetup attendant will eventually introduce at least one of their friends to the group.

You've now had your first meetup or two, and it looks like people seem to be having at least a moderate amount of fun. How do you make sure that things will stay at least that good, and hopefully get even better?

### Retain members by being a social group

For the group to be successful, people should be attending it not only to learn interesting things, but also because they have fun and enjoy hanging out with the other members. This can't be emphasized enough. The desire for companionship and social interaction are some of the strongest and most important drives that people have. Not only does a strong and vibrant social community make people more likely to come back, it's also intrinsically valuable: by making it easier for friendships to form, you are making people happier. Friendship is magic!

## Long-term Meetup Group Maintenance



### Informative social activities

Interesting science and philosophy are a big part of why most people attend, so these aspects should not be ignored. Neglecting them would mean that the meetup group would become no different from any other social gathering. Rather, science and philosophy should be made into fun, social activities.

Obligatory disclaimer: when reading these instructions, you shouldn't think of people as pawns to be manipulated, but as people. In other words, think "I am going to plan activities which are fun, and which make people feel at home in the rationalist community; they will enjoy this meetup so much that they'll want to become rationalists!", not "I am going to plan activities that will trick participants into bonding socially, in order to lure more people into joining the rationalist community." You're trying to build a community where people come to have fun, enjoy themselves and grow as people, and it will succeed best if you approach it with that attitude.

Here's an example of a science/philosophy lesson being turned into a social experience:

On Wednesday, I attended Andrew Critch's course at Berkeley, which was roughly mostly-instrumental LW-style cognitive-improvement material aimed at math students; and in this particular session, Critch introduced Bayes's Theorem, not as advanced math, but with the aim of getting them to apply it to life.

Critch demonstrated using what he called the Really Getting Bayes game. He had Nisan (a local LWer) touch an object to the back of Critch's neck, a cellphone as it happened, while Critch faced in the other direction; this was "prior experience." Nisan said that the object was either a cellphone or a pen. Critch gave prior odds of 60% : 40% that the object was a cellphone vs. pen, based on his prior experience. Nisan then asked Critch how likely he thought it was that a cellphone or a pen would be RGB-colored, i.e., colored red, green, or blue. Critch didn't give exact numbers here, but said he thought a cellphone was more likely to be primary-colored, and drew some rectangles on the blackboard to illustrate the likelihood ratio. After being told that the object was in fact primary-colored (the cellphone was metallic blue), Critch gave posterior odds of 75% : 25% in favor of the cellphone, and then turned around to look.

Then Critch broke up the class into pairs and asked each pair to carry out a similar operation on each other: Pick two plausible objects and make sure you're holding at least one of them, touch it to the other person while they face the other way, prior odds, additional fact, likelihood ratio, posterior odds.

This is the sort of in-person, hands-on, real-life, and social exercise that didn't occur to me, or Anna, or anyone else helping, while we were trying to design the Bayes's Theorem unit. Our brains just didn't go in that direction, though we recognized it as embarrassingly obvious in retrospect.

- [Eliezer Yudkowsky, Skill of the Week: Check Consequentialism](#)

## Sharing stories, feelings and ideas

Generally speaking, simply being around someone on several occasions and getting to know them better will make a person more likable. Encourage people to tell their life stories, maybe reserving the time for one person per meetup to talk about their life in detail. You can also try to make it a habit to ask people, at the beginning of each meeting, what they have been up to since last time. This not only gives you a chance to get to know them better, it also provides a natural opportunity for people to ask for advice. Of course, if someone doesn't feel like sharing, they should not be pressured to share. Instead, let them know that it's perfectly fine not to say anything, and that you're willing to listen if they change their minds later on.



It can also help to briefly ask everyone how they're feeling at the beginning of a session. Let people know that they can answer honestly, and that they're being asked so that the rest of the group can take their mood into account. If someone had a rotten day before the meeting and is in a bad mood, telling the rest of the group this lets everyone know that any tenseness on behalf of that person is not the fault of anyone in the group. It can also help the person themselves relax, as they'll know that they don't need to try to keep their mood a secret from the others.

### Name tags

Many people are bad at remembering names, and it can be embarrassing to admit that you've forgotten someone's name. This is unlikely to be a major issue, and people do eventually learn each other's names, but making and wearing name tags can help everyone feel at ease from the beginning. Most people like to hear their names used, so making it easier for people to use each other's names contributes to a pleasant atmosphere.

### Touch

Physical contact and touching is another thing that many people like, but rarely get a chance to do. An environment where it's fine to give each other hugs or braid each other's hair, for example, can feel liberating and pleasant. At the same time, many people do not like to be touched without explicit permission, which is perfectly fine. So ask before you hug, and don't react badly if someone says no. For those who do like to touch, the opportunity to do so often feels great — the New York City meetup group thought that having plenty of hugging made the group members feel much more at home.



### Working and playing together

Anything that involves working smoothly together can feel pleasant. It can be an especially welcome change for people who experience a lot of conflict in their lives, or simply don't often get a chance to cooperate with others. Synchronized behaviors, like singing, dancing or even just walking to the same beat, are a

surprisingly easy way to experience the feeling of cooperating with somebody else. It might sound silly, but people often find these activities enjoyable and feel closer to each other afterwards.

If people feel self-conscious, many might regardless appreciate playing dancing- or rhythm-based video games such as Dance Dance Revolution, Stepmania, or Rock Band together. If you have the space and equipment, you can try putting several monitors and dance mats side by side, and starting the same song at the same time in each game for instant easy line dancing.

Singing together is also fun, and it's often enough if one person knows how to sing the song well, as others can just join in. Drinking songs also work for people who feel more at ease when less sober, but make sure that any non-drinkers don't feel excluded.

### Types of conversations

Be mindful of the different dimensions of communication, and don't jump to immediately having a truth-seeking conversation, especially not with newcomers. If someone says "I like to paint onions", the proper response is not "I'm not sure what good or harm that does; here's an analysis", but rather "Why? What does that mean to you?".

In one meetup group, there was a woman who wanted to talk about evolution and AI. Another person, trained in both subjects, said "No, that's actually wrong, for the following reasons..." She concluded that he was a sexist male asserting his male privilege. The problem was that one of them was engaged in a truth-seeking conversation, the other was not.

Becoming closer with others and befriending them does have the unfortunate side-effect that one can easily become less willing to express disagreement, even if it is warranted. Try to avoid this by encouraging the notion that because you're friends, it's safe to disagree. Nobody will be punished because of it. Because you're all working towards shared goals, not expressing your doubts if you have them will actually be doing the others a disfavor. If they're doing or thinking something wrong, it helps them to find out about it as soon as possible. If somebody does correct you on something, thank them for making you be less wrong.

## Gender ratio

Let's face it; most Less Wrongers are male. If you can, try to achieve a balanced gender ratio. Or as Will Ryan puts it:

Simply put, if you're winning at life and having enough fun [then] women will want to join you, and a balanced gender ratio encourages more people of both genders to attend. Work hard to find interested women, and be careful in the presence of newcomers when trying to sanely explicitly discuss hot-button gender topics. In case the argument for more women is not sufficiently clear, gender-balanced meetups are a lot more fun, and it provides a unique perspective on ideas and group dynamics.

In a male-dominated context, men can say things which will be taken as sexist, regardless of whether or not they were intended as such. Possibly the most important thing to remember in avoiding accidental sexism is to treat everyone as people with their own personalities, not as representatives of a homogenous group. Even well-meaning statements like "it's nice to see some women here" single out a person's sex as their sole merit. Such statements can be taken to imply that it doesn't matter what kind of a person showed up, as long as they were female. Any unnecessary references to someone's sex are generally best avoided, and suggestions about someone's personality, dislikes, or shortcomings being attributable to their sex should not be tolerated.

## Comfort zones

Be mindful of people's comfort zones when it comes to being alone with someone they don't know yet, or coming to the home of such a person. One person reports that in some (non-Less Wrong) meetups, men were offended when she turned down their offer of a lift home. If such a situation comes up, don't push or take the refusal as something to be offended about —

it's most likely nothing personal.

People may also be reluctant to attend meetups in private residences with people that they don't know. It could help if a member that they know offers to meet them somewhere and go with them.

## Encouraging participation

Take special care to make sure that naturally quiet people also get a chance to speak. They may feel uncomfortable interrupting and may not be quick to start talking when somebody else has had their say. It helps to have a formal way to ask for a chance to speak. You can make it a little silly so that people won't take things too seriously. For instance, you could have small stuffed animals that a person could grab hold of as a sign of having something to say. Or if you feel that this is too silly, come up with something a little more serious.

If you choose not to have a formal system, try to keep a mental note of who hasn't spoken in a while. Every now and then, say something like "James, what do you think?" to those who haven't contributed to the discussion. Note that if you say something like "James hasn't spoken in a while, what do you think of this?", this draws attention to James' silence and might make him feel awkward and even less likely to talk.

Many people feel more comfortable expressing themselves in writing than in speech. In one group, a member brought small whiteboards and colored markers. One could write a question on top of a whiteboard and then pass it around. The first question asked was for meetup activities people were interested in. People could write new ideas down and make tallies next to ideas they liked. The group got a lot of ideas this way, and discussed them quickly after the whiteboards had been around the tables twice.

We also had a very surreal "Add something to this picture" pass. The final product was an alien riding an elephant, while a UFO abducts a confused, tipped cow (there had been a conversation about cow-tipping earlier...). A giant hand is rising out of the earth to grab the UFO (a bunch of us had just watched [a movie

with aliens]). Meanwhile a giant asteroid/moon is blocking out the sun, and possibly about to crash into Earth. It is covered in flags, and encircled by people of all colors (and Cthulu) singing “It’s a Small World after All”. I think there was an Enterprise on there too.

- Erica Edelman [commenting](#) on the use of whiteboards

If you’re having a discussion where everyone is supposed to say something — for instance, you’re asking everyone how they’re feeling today — sometimes the group will get into an extended discussion about what somebody said, after which you move on to other topics. If the person whose comment prompted the discussion wasn’t the last one in turn, changing the topic will leave some people without an opportunity to say how they were feeling. Be careful not to let this happen - either keep extended conversations relatively short until you’ve gone a full turn around the table, or explicitly return to the remaining folks before moving on to new topics.

### Conflicts within the group

Disruptive behavior generally needs to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. If two people in the group can’t stand each other, try to get them into an unemotional state and ask them to share their views of the situation. Getting this to work well often requires special expertise, however. Having a mediator talk with both individuals separately before they meet up again (with the mediator present) may help. If one of the parties is very upset, they might be able to vent the worst of their frustrations by writing the other person a letter that never gets sent. Having written the letter, it can be easier for them to discuss the issue more calmly.

If two people have a conflict with each other and have different interests, they could avoid one another by attending different kinds of events. Also, if people begin experiencing significant amounts of personal growth in the meetups, they might consider the meetups important enough to attend despite minimal social conflict. When people have a cause of purpose that

is bigger than the day-to-day — whether the cause is “spreading rationality in Kansas City” or “Improving my ability to deal with akrasia” — they have a reason to work things out. Otherwise they very well might just go search for a new group of friends.

Some meetup groups have recommended Marshall Rosenberg’s [Nonviolent Communication](#) as a good way for resolving conflicts. Doing it right generally requires training, however. The book [Crucial Conversations](#) has also been suggested.

It may, however, become necessary to ask someone to leave. This isn’t something that should be done lightly, but it is an option if somebody is being disruptive and clearly making others uncomfortable. In the NYC meetup group, there was a person who had been drinking too much and been disruptive over a period of several weeks. After several hours of discussion, the person was asked to continue attending on the condition that they stay sober during the meetups. The person decided not to come back.



## Learn to recognize status conflicts

Here's an example of a status conflict:

**MRS X:** I had a nasty turn last week. I was standing in a queue waiting for my turn to go into the cinema when I felt ever so queer. Really, I thought I should faint or something.

[Mrs X is attempting to raise her status by having an interesting medical problem. Mrs Y immediately outdoes her.]

**MRS Y:** You're lucky to have been going to a cinema. If I thought I could go to a cinema I should think I had nothing to complain of at all.

[Mrs Z now blocks Mrs Y.]

**MRS Z:** I know what Mrs X means. I feel just like that myself, only I should have had to leave the queue.

[Mrs Z is very talented in that she supports Mrs X against Mrs Y while at the same time claiming to be more worthy of interest, her condition more severe. Mr A now intervenes to lower them all by making their condition seem very ordinary.]

**MR A:** Have you tried stooping down? That makes the blood come back to your head. I expect you were feeling faint.

[Mrs X defends herself.]

**MRS X:** It's not really faint.

**MRS Y:** I always find it does a lot of good to try exercises. I don't know if that's what Mr A means.

[She seems to be joining forces with Mr A, but implies that he was unable to say what he meant. She doesn't say 'Is that what you mean?' but protects herself by her typically high-status circumlocution. Mrs Z now lowers everybody, and immediately lowers herself to avoid counterattack.]

**MRS Z:** I think you have to use your will-power. That's what worries me - I haven't got any.

- Keith Johnstone,  
[Improv: Improvisation and the Theatre](#)

It would be nice if everyone could always get along perfectly. Unfortunately, there are times as in the above scenario when the members of a group will become occupied with status conflicts. In the words of Keith Johnstone, the above dialogue is from a "group where

everyone attacks the status of everyone else while pretending to be friendly." Johnstone argues that such conflicts can, to at least some extent, be avoided if people are taught to see the maneuvering for status for what it is, and to treat it as a game.

Some of Johnstone's exercises are listed in the Games and Exercises section below. Learning to recognize petty status fights within the group will help reduce tension, but it won't eliminate the striving for status — nor should it. Startup guru Paul Graham has advanced the hypothesis that within-group status fights become the most fierce when there is no meaningful way to prove one's worth, so people manufacture artificial ways to maintain hierarchy. In a healthy group, people are awarded status for their contributions to the group. Often, awarding others status for their contributions is something that people do unconsciously, and it's enough to ensure that there are meaningful things to do. Sometimes, however, people's contributions get ignored or taken for granted. To avoid this, establish a norm of regularly thanking people for their work. You can even thank people for remembering to say thanks!

It also helps to make sure that the group has useful projects to work on. See the Projects section below for some ideas.

For more on the subject of status, see Johnstone's [Improv, Less Wrong](#) posts tagged "status" (especially "[The nature of offense](#)" and "[The red paperclip theory of status](#)"), and the "status" entry on the [Improv Wiki](#).



## How to attract new members

Sooner or later, you will want to find new members. If you have been posting meetup notices on Less Wrong, any regular readers with an interest in showing up have probably already done so. Still, there could be readers who have seen the meetup notices or who might even be subscribed to your mailing list, but haven't been motivated enough to attend. You can increase their interest by documenting how much fun you're having: write down what you've done at various meetups and how people have found those meetups. If the reports sound fun enough, others will be interested in showing up. If the reports don't sound fun enough, your first priority is to make the meetups more interesting.

Eventually, though, you may need to reach out to people who aren't already Less Wrong readers. Getting outsiders interested requires framing the purpose of the group appropriately. You could call yourself a philosophy or psychology discussion group, a self-improvement group, a group of people interested in efficient altruism, or whatever best fits the actual goals of your group. Be sure to come up with a description that succinctly matches the function of your group. If you say that your group is about self-improvement when it's actually about discussing philosophy, people who come looking for self-improvement will leave disappointed, while people who are interested in philosophy will never visit in the first place.

## Advertising your group

Once you have a description of your group that seems interesting to outsiders, it's time to advertise it:

- If you have friends who you think might be interested in the topics discussed at the meetups, ask them to attend sometime.
- Post reports of fun meetups where people can see them. If the person writing these reports has a personal blog, they should be posted there. Others can then share a link to the report on Facebook, Twitter or a similar platform, mentioning that they attended the meetup in question and that it was fun.

- Print out fliers that advertise your meetup group and post them in places that have lots of people with intellectual interests. University campuses are ideal.
- See if there are any local skeptic, science, philosophy, etc. groups that you can advertise to. If at a university, try suitable student societies.
- Create a group on meetup.com (this involves a nominal monthly charge).

If the content of your meetups is interesting and fun enough, the new people who visit will choose to come again. The main difference between planning a meetup for Less Wrong regulars and planning it for people who don't know of Less Wrong is that non-readers will have less knowledge of Less Wrong jargon and concepts. So choose activities that don't require a deep understanding of such things, and try to avoid jargon.



## Group norms and epistemic hygiene

“Epistemic hygiene consists of practices meant to allow accurate beliefs to spread within a community and keep less-accurate or biased beliefs contained. The practices are meant to serve an analogous purpose to normal hygiene and sanitation in containing disease.”

- LessWrong wiki, [Epistemic hygiene](#)

A meetup group provides a good opportunity to practice good epistemic hygiene. Learning is more effective when group members can rely on each other to provide accurate information.



While it's still unclear which epistemic hygiene norms are best, here are some suggestions:

- Be comfortable saying things like “I think I shouldn't agree or disagree right away,” or “I'll need to take some time to think through what my real opinion is on that point,” or “I didn't quite say what I really meant earlier.” Support others who say those things.
- Be honest about your evidence and about the actual causes of your beliefs, and focus attention on these things. When communicating a piece of evidence, mention where you learned it from. For example, distinguish between things you know via personal experience, things that you've heard somebody say, and things you read in an encyclopedia. This helps people weigh your information and opinions appropriately.
- Before you stake your argument on a point, ask yourself what you would say if that point were decisively refuted. If you wouldn't actually change your mind, search for a point that you find more convincing.
- Don't use your knowledge of cognitive biases as a fully general counterargument to anyone's position.
- If you basically agree with someone's argument, but want to point out a minor problem, start your response with a statement such as “I agree with your conclusion, but I should probably note that...” This way, if a lot of people want to make minor corrections to somebody's point, the person won't mistake these many small corrections for flat-out disagreement.
- If you're making a generalization, check it for scope. How much do you actually know about the thing you're generalizing from? Could the circumstances have changed in a relevant way? How representative are the examples you're drawing your conclusions from?
- In conversation, when saying things like “I think there's a chance that this theory is right, but not an extremely high chance,” be sure to distinguish “I don't have evidence that this theory is right” from “I do have evidence that this theory can't be right.” This lets people know when you're just thinking about the base rate, and when you have additional evidence.
- In discussions, presume the kinds of conditions that are the least convenient for your argument.
- Reward people for changing their minds when confronted with quality evidence: don't punish people for “losing” debates. Treat debates and discussion as opportunities to explore the truth of things together rather than confrontations. Don't treat arguments as soldiers.
- When asked a question on a complicated topic, try to not just answer but also provide a short list of the facts that make you believe what you believe. This helps allow others come to their own opinion instead of allowing entirely on yours.

## Solving specific problems

### How to get other people to help in running the group

If nobody is stepping forward, explicitly say that you need help running things. If this doesn't get you anywhere, choose somebody specific and ask them to help. Otherwise, everyone may be left thinking that somebody else will take care of it. Some people are clearly more willing to come forward than others. Ask the person who seems the most willing, and after a while, ask them if they can get more people to join in organize things.

### How to move from just hanging out to planned content

Having somebody taking up the task of scheduling content is a big step. Announce that you're going to do X on some occasion, and see if you can find somebody else who also wants to come up with something. When one or two people start coming up with activities, oth-

ers will be inspired to suggest things that they'd like to do as well. Show people the activities list in this guide and ask them whether they see something they'd like to do. Ask them for their own ideas first, however, or they may feel reluctant to present those ideas if the ideas are too different from the ones shown here.

The whiteboard technique (see the Encouraging Participation section above) is also useful for getting people to propose activities they'd like to do.

If people do come up with activities they'd like to do, encourage them to schedule that activity for a future meetup. If they feel too shy to do so, do it on their behalf once. After something has been tried out, others are more likely to suggest doing it again (if they found it fun).

The secret to having organized content is to simply plan something; it matters more than you might think. Just make sure that when the meetup happens, you actually do the things that you scheduled — it can be disappointing for people if they show up to do something, but then never get around to doing it.

# Meetup Content

Meetups with a specific purpose tend to draw far more participants than mere unstructured discussion. Unstructured discussion generally gets very few people to attend: most people can find plenty of other opportunities for just hanging out and talking with someone.

## Discussions and Presentations

Discussions with too many participants can be ineffective, as people will need to spend too much time waiting for their turn to speak. Quieter people may not get a chance to speak at all. When discussing a specific topic, it's often best to split into smaller groups of no more than four people. After some time has passed, combine the groups and present each group's insights to the full group.

## Presentations

Meetups can draw a diverse crowd, and it is often the case that one meetup group member has skills or knowledge that the others do not. People can share their skills by holding presentations about those skills for the others. These presentations can draw a large number of participants, but the choice of topics will have a major influence on how many people will attend. If someone is uncomfortable with public speaking, you could hold a session of mini-presentations for the sole purpose of getting people more comfortable with presenting things.

The presentations should be at least five minutes long, but note that lectures are a bad form for learning and group attention drops off dramatically after 25 minutes. If someone wants to hold a longer talk, have frequent breaks and rehash the content covered before the break when you reconvene. For example, you can have an illustration accompanying each major talking

point and then, following the break, present all the pictures and ask the participants to write down the major points from memory. Rehearsal considerably improves future recall.



### Topical discussion

Topical discussion is discussion about a pre-determined topic. Everyone can read something in advance and discuss it, or if people might not have the time to read something outside a meetup, the meeting can start off with a mini-presentation. Short articles or blog posts can also be read while at the meetup.

The extent to which people will want to stick to the topic will vary depending on the group. However, if the conversation gets consistently off-subject during topical discussions, people may start to consider them general unstructured discussions and participation levels could drop. So try to stay on topic. The group may choose to appoint a moderator for the discussion, or individual participants can chime in on their own accord when the discussion is digressing too much.

After the mini-presentation/reading is over (or if

people did their reading before the meeting), a good way to start is to go through each participant and let everyone state their initial reaction. Allow everyone to speak for only a minute or two, and try to go through the whole group before getting into extended discussion about anyone's points.

Possible discussion topics include thought-provoking blog posts (on [Less Wrong](#) or elsewhere), essays, papers, or talks. If you're starting the discussion with a mini-presentation, note that it doesn't necessarily need to be held by someone present — you can use an interesting [TED Talk](#) or other short talk on the Internet.

### Discussion groups

Everyone may not be interested in the same discussions. Particularly with larger meetup groups, you can run multiple discussion groups within the same meetup. Come up with a number of topics before a meetup, and let one or two people briefly study each topic. At the meetup, each topical group starts their own discussion with a mini-presentation of five minutes or so. The other participants then choose which discussion group they wish to join, moving between groups as they see fit. At the end of the session, one person from each group summarizes the discussion for everyone else. If there's sufficient interest, the same topic can be repeated at different meetups, with different people.

### Meta discussion

Meta-discussions are discussions about the group and about what to do next. If this is all you're doing for a particular meetup, these meetups tend to have low attendance. If a meetup group gets together regularly, it may be a good idea to hold an extra meeting dedicated to planning rather than using one of the scheduled meetups for that purpose. This way, the planning will not disrupt the normal frequency of meetups. Alternatively, do a little bit of meta at a meetup dedicated to another activity.



## Games and Exercises

### Biased Boardgaming

Biased Boardgaming is an exercise in recognizing cognitive biases in yourself and others. It requires a list of cognitive biases (see [Wikipedia](#) or [Less Wrong Wiki](#)) and a game (usually a board game) in which the players are working on the same team to achieve a common goal.

The exercise was originally developed using the game [Pandemic](#), but other co-operative games can be used as well. [Boardgamegeek.com](#) offers a [list of games with co-operative mechanics](#) that can be used to look for such games. Sort by “rank” to get the games that the BGG community considers best.

In Biased Boardgaming, each player secretly chooses a bias at random before starting play. The game is otherwise played as normal, except that everyone attempts to exaggerate their chosen bias in their arguments and decisions during the game. In addition to role-playing their own bias, everyone attempts to identify the biases of the other players. When someone’s bias is identified correctly, they give up that bias and pick a new one at random.

Less Wrong user “freyley” provides the example of [Biased Pandemic](#), a game in which the players are doctors trying to cure a global disease outbreak:

One player, playing the Negativity Bias, went around the board treating cities which had outbroken earlier in the game and ignoring other issues. Another player with Hyperbolic Discounting went further: he treated cities, any city near him, while carrying 5 red city cards in his hand and pointing out, in response to entreaties to cure red, that red wasn’t much of an issue right now. A player with Reactance had the winning yellow card and simply refused to be told to go somewhere to give it to the player with the other four. He even went so far as to refuse a half a dozen offers of an airlift so he could give up that card. A player with Hindsight Bias claimed that he had predicted that the player with 1 red card would get two more on his next draw, and was upset that he’d let the other players argue him otherwise. A player with The Ultimate Attribution Error suggested that if we weren’t doing well because no rationalist could ever win this game because we were terrible at it. A player with the Authority Bias attempted to suggest that we should do things because it’s what Eliezer would want us to do. A player with Illusion of Control declared that his next draw, he simply would not draw an epidemic. There were many others.

A suggested order of play is as follows. At the beginning of a player’s turn, everyone discusses what to do for a specified amount of time. The amount of time could range from one to five minutes or more, depending on the complexity of the game. Once the time allotted for discussion has run out, the player says what their intended move is. In response, every other player may make a single attempt to guess the bias. If a guess is correct, the player whose turn it is stops playing that bias, plays the turn in an unbiased manner, and then picks a new bias at the end of his turn. A bias is consid-

ered to be correctly guessed if the guesser fully describes the bias, not just the biased behavior. For example, “Joe seems to overestimate the probability of favorable things happening” (for wishful thinking) instead of “Joe keeps predicting things that don’t actually come true” (which could describe several biases). Knowing the standard name for the bias isn’t usually necessary.

Variant rules include:

- Have an option to draw “none” as one’s bias.
- Have players initially start out with no biases, but have them become biased by various events within the game. For example, in Pandemic, it could be biases that spread throughout the world, and a player would have to play a certain bias if their city became infected with it. In Arkham Horror, each increase of the Terror Track or Doom Counters could infect a player with a bias. Closing a gate would give each player a single opportunity to guess someone’s bias, with it being removed with a correct guess. Additionally, sealing a gate would allow the removal of a single player’s bias, even if nobody could guess it. Alternatively, just let everyone make a single guess in the Movement Phase, as per the normal Biased Boardgaming rules.
- Instead of drawing a new bias each time someone has their bias identified, have each player only draw a new bias for the first 1-5 times that their bias is revealed, depending on the skill of the players. After that, play the game without bias, making it possible to actually win the game.

It is recommended that everyone is roughly familiar with the normal version of the chosen game before starting, otherwise it will be difficult to recognize biased strategies as such. Likewise, the extent to which people emphasize their biases should depend on the extent that they’re familiar with biases and Biased Boardgaming. Experienced players will want to play their biases subtly, but it is recommended that beginners be as obvious as possible.

Recognizing the biases accurately is often difficult, even when they are purposefully exaggerated. If other players have difficulty recognizing a bias, the person

playing the bias may attempt to play up aspects of the bias that the other players aren’t noticing. As freyley illustrates:

For example, a lot of the different biases look like simple overconfidence. One player was playing The Illusion of Control in such a way that the rest of us thought he was overconfident. His response was to start declaring that he simply wasn’t going to draw an epidemic card, and when he drew one, he declared that it was my fault for making him draw the card. This was obviously not simply overconfidence.

### Behavioral Analysis

Knowledge of cognitive biases and the science of decision-making can sometimes improve one’s life. But somebody might believe that a thing is having a big impact on their life simply because they think about it a lot. One way to combat this fallacy is by explicitly thinking about times when one has taken action, as well as times when one hasn’t, and try to think of both good and bad outcomes. As an exercise, let everyone try to fill in the following table with experiences from their own life, and then discuss the results.

	<b>behaved irrationally</b>	<b>behaved rationally</b>
<b>bad results</b>	e.g. “I really wanted something to happen so I believed it would, with these bad consequences.”	e.g. “I started wondering whether I had enough evidence to believe what I did, and became indecisive and lost my chance to act.”
<b>good results</b>	e.g. “Wishful thinking motivated me and made me succeed.”	e.g. “I noticed that I didn’t have the necessary evidence to believe what I did, so I changed my mind and avoided a lot of trouble.”

## Bust-a-Distortion

In Bust-a-Distortion, participants are encouraged to come up with personal examples of situations in which they fell victim to one of the below distortions, which are targeted in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Laugh at them together and share in the fact that you've all been victim to silly emotional exaggerations.

- All-or-nothing thinking. Presuming that things must be perfect in every way, or otherwise they're complete failures. "My presentation went otherwise great, but I fumbled a couple of slides in the beginning, so it was a complete failure and now I'm depressed because I never manage to do anything right."
- Catastrophizing. Developing overblown scenarios about how things might go wrong at the slightest provocation. "My daughter said that here would be here at 5 PM, and she's ten minutes late, so she must have gotten in an accident and died."
- Disqualifying the positive. Rejecting positive experiences by insisting that for some reason, "they don't count." "Yeah, I got a PhD at age 23, but it was in a really easy subject where anyone could get a PhD at an early age if they just wanted to."
- Emotional Reasoning. Presuming that any of our feelings must be true, especially negative ones. "I feel stupid and useless, therefore I must be stupid and useless."
- Personalization. Seeing yourself as the cause of some negative event for which you weren't actually responsible.

(For more cognitive distortions, see [Wikipedia](#).)

Because this exercise has the potential to touch upon very sensitive topics, it's important to stress that people should only share experiences that they are genuinely comfortable with sharing. If the participants do not yet know each other well, a less personal exercise can be used. Instead of sharing examples of cases when you've been guilty of a distortion, come up with imaginary examples of such distortions.

Windy Dryden's book [How to Make Yourself Miserable](#) has also been suggested for its ironic exercises targeting various cognitive distortions. "Practice the belief that uncertainty means that bad things will inevitably occur", for example.



## Calibration Game

The Calibration Game requires a large number of numerical trivia questions and their answers. A couple of examples might be "how many lakes are there in Canada" or "which percentage of the world's countries are landlocked". The game [Wits & Wagers](#) comes with a large number of such trivia questions and answers.

There are several possible variants of the Calibration game:

- Personal Calibration. One person reads the question aloud, and everyone writes down their 50% and 90% confidence intervals. For example, if you're 50% sure that 20% - 40% of the world's countries are landlocked, write that down as your 50% confidence interval. After ten questions, the correct answers are revealed. People can now check whether half of their guesses in the 50% confidence interval really were right, and whether they really only got one question out of ten in their 90% confidence interval wrong. Alternatively, the correct answer may be revealed as soon as everyone has made their guess, rather than waiting until all ten questions are asked.

- **Single-Round Aumann.** Same as Personal Calibration, but after everyone has written down their initial confidence intervals, they state them aloud. People then have one chance to alter their guesses based on what the others guessed.
- **Multiple-Round Aumann.** Same as Single-Round Aumann, but repeat the “state your guess aloud” part until nobody changes their opinions.
- **Aumann with Discussion.** Same as Multiple-Round Aumann, but people are also allowed to discuss the reasons for their estimates instead of just stating them.
- **Paranoid Debating.** Same as Aumann with discussion, but one person is secretly designated as the traitor. The traitor tries to make the group’s guess to be as off-mark as possible. For variants and accounts of this game, see [the LW Wiki on Paranoid Debating](#).

Another alternative is to use yes-or-no questions instead of numerical ones. Then, instead of providing a confidence interval, everyone states their subjective probability for the claim in question being true. In the end, players can check to see how well their subjective probabilities correlated with a claim being true or false.

## Cause and Belief

In this game, people state various beliefs of theirs. The beliefs don’t necessarily need to be anything controversial: even ordinary beliefs will work. So anything from “I believe global warming is happening” to “I believe I have an intuition that people are generally good” to “I believe my neighbor’s car is red” works. Note that “I believe I have an intuition that people are generally good” is a distinct belief from “I believe that people are generally good.”

Next, each person thinks of reasons for why they’ve come to have this belief. You can either think about why you believe you have such an intuition, or, presuming that you do have that intuition, why you have it.

Feel free to go as many levels deep as you feel is necessary, either for explaining your belief or for keeping the discussion interesting. If you state that you believe in global warming because an expert said so, it’s probably worth also mentioning why you believe this expert in particular, since it’s a contentious subject. On the other hand, if you state that you believe your neighbor’s car to be red because you’ve seen it and it was red, you may want to elaborate on how you know it was your neighbor’s car in order to get to the crux of the exercise.

Try not to challenge each other’s beliefs. The goal is not to have a debate, but to engage in an open-minded deconstruction of the reasons why you think what you think. By making the game into an exercise where everyone is free to name even the silliest causes for their beliefs, people become more likely to adjust beliefs that they come to realize are on shaky ground. If somebody asks others for an opinion on whether their reasoning makes sense, feel free to answer, but try to use a non-confrontational tone.



## Fermi Calculations

Fermi Calculations are a quick way to come up with rough numerical estimates of various things, and some companies use Fermi problems as interview questions. Coming up with various Fermi problems, breaking them apart into various assumptions and then checking to see whether the calculations were correct can be an entertaining activity. The skill of doing Fermi Calculations is useful, as is the knowledge of how accurate your Fermi Calculations tend to be.

Here is an explanation from Wikipedia:

The classic Fermi problem, generally attributed to Fermi, is “How many piano tuners are there in Chicago?” A typical solution to this problem involves multiplying a series of estimates that yield the correct answer if the estimates are correct. For example, we might make the following assumptions:

- There are approximately 5,000,000 people living in Chicago.
- On average, there are two persons in each household in Chicago.
- Roughly one household in twenty has a piano that is tuned regularly.
- Pianos that are tuned regularly are tuned on average about once per year.
- It takes a piano tuner about two hours to tune a piano, including travel time.
- Each piano tuner works eight hours in a day, five days in a week, and 50 weeks in a year.

From these assumptions, we can compute that the number of piano tunings in a single year in Chicago is

$$(5,000,000 \text{ persons in Chicago}) / (2 \text{ persons/household}) \times (1 \text{ piano}/20 \text{ households}) \times (1 \text{ piano tuning per piano per year}) = 125,000 \text{ piano tunings per year in Chicago.}$$

We can similarly calculate that the average piano tuner performs

$$(50 \text{ weeks/year}) \times (5 \text{ days/week}) \times (8 \text{ hours/day}) / (2 \text{ hours to tune a piano}) = 1000 \text{ piano tunings per year.}$$

Dividing gives

$$(125,000 \text{ piano tunings per year in Chicago}) / (1000 \text{ piano tunings per year per piano tuner}) = 125 \text{ piano tuners in Chicago.}$$

To make this into an exercise, you start by coming up with a number of questions about various quantities. Some further examples are “how many paperclips would it take to fill this room”, “what’s the combined weight of all the cars in this city”, “how many pieces of paper could a package of pencil lead cover”, “how many licks does it take to get to the center of a tootsie roll pop”, and “how many McDonalds hamburger are eaten daily in this country”. Then answer the questions, either individually or in small groups. If you want to compete on how well you do, you can use these [Science Olympiad scoring rules](#):

In Science Olympiad, answers to Fermi questions are given in powers of ten. For example, if you estimate that it would take 400 licks to get to the center of a tootsie roll pop, then you put it in scientific notation ( $4 \times 10^2$ ) and use the exponent on the ten as your answer, yielding 2. If the you got 600 licks ( $6 \times 10^2$ ), then your answer would be 3, as you round up. Generally, fives can round either way, depending on if you think your answer is high or low.

Points are usually given as follows: 5 points for the correct power of ten, 3 points for one away from the correct power of ten, and 1 point for two away from the correct power of ten. For example, if the correct answer to the number of licks to the center of a tootsie roll pop is 2, and you answer 2, you get five points. If you answer 3 or 1, you get 3 points, and if you answer 4 or 0, you get one point.



## Five-Minute Debiasing

Five-Minute Debiasing is a simple brainstorming exercise in which participants take a list of cognitive biases, break up into groups, and spend five minutes discussing each bias with regards to three questions.

1. How do we recognize it?
2. How do we correct it?
3. How do we use its existence to help us win?

One group played this game by using six rounds of five minutes, a quick break, another six rounds, another break, and then a group discussion of the exercise. Here are some of the answers they came up with for Confirmation Bias:

- Notice if you (don't) want a theory to be true.
- Don't be afraid of being wrong; question the outcome that you fear will happen.
- Seek out people with contrary opinions and be genuinely curious why they believe what they do.
- How do we make people genuinely curious? Perhaps encourage childlike behavior?
- If your theory is true, every test should come back positive. Rather than worrying about it, make a game of disproving your hypothesis.
- Be more suspicious of confirmatory results when you do run tests.

And, for Fundamental Attribution Error:

- Critical: make observations, not moralistic judgments
- It helps to be around other non-judgmental people
- Observe your own behavior as a third party: visualize the scene with someone else in your place, and ask yourself how others would explain your behavior in the situation
- Increase information about the situation; we are more inclined to simple explanations (e.g. good/evil, right/wrong) when we have less data

Will Ryan summarizes the results of the group's exercise:

Everything written above was created in a sum total of one hour of work. How many of these ideas had never even occurred to us before we sat down and thought about it for five minutes? Take five minutes right now and write down what areas of your life you could optimize to make the biggest difference. You know what to do from there. This is the power of rationality.

## Hypothetical Apostasies

A Hypothetical Apostasy is a debiasing technique intended to counter confirmation bias and motivated stopping. If a belief has grown important for your identity, you have acquired a stake in believing it to be true. Over time, you've memorized various standard objections and you repeat them as cached thoughts, without truly considering your belief's weak points anymore. Writing a Hypothetical Apostasy forces you to actually question the belief again. Here's Nick Bostrom:

Imagine, if you will, that the world's destruction is at stake and the only way to save it is for you to write a one-pager that convinces a jury that your old cherished view is mistaken or at least seriously incomplete. The

more inadequate the jury thinks your old cherished view is, the greater the chances that the world is saved. The catch is that the jury consists of earlier stages of yourself (such as yourself such as you were one year ago). Moreover, the jury believes that you have been bribed to write your apostasy; so any assurances of the form “trust me, I am older and know better” will be ineffective. Your only hope of saving the world is by writing an apostasy that will make the jury recognize how flawed / partial / shallow / juvenile / crude / irresponsible / incomplete and generally inadequate your old cherished view is.

There are two ways to write a Hypothetical Apostasy: either the whole group chooses a belief that all the participants share and attempt to construct an argument against it, or everyone writes their own personal apostasy in private.

In the private version, everyone simply takes a computer or some pen and paper, and spends a while writing their own apostasy. These apostasies are likely to be highly personal. A person might not have the courage to truly question their beliefs if they think that somebody else will read it later. Therefore, if a group chooses to have everyone write their private apostasy, the expectation should be set that nobody will need to show their apostasy to anyone else. People are allowed to share their apostasies with others if they choose to, but it must be strongly emphasized that nobody will be judged negatively in any way if they choose not to share.

In the public version, a belief is chosen for questioning, after which everyone tries to find the best evidence against it. Split into groups of two to four people for this purpose. In the private version, you were imagining that you'd need to defend your attack against earlier versions of yourself. In the public version, you can think in the same way, only now it's earlier versions of everyone in the group. After each group has spent a while coming up with their shared apostasy, present it to the other groups and see whether they agree.

## Liar's Dice

**Liar's Dice is a game of luck with a heavy bluffing component, useful for learning skills involving bluffing, probabilities, and social interaction. [Wikipedia on the rules:](#)**

Five six-sided dice with traditional dot faces are generally used per player, with dice cups used for concealment. Poker dice can also be used, but some systems for bidding become difficult or impossible to use.

To begin each round, all players roll their dice under their cups and look at their new 'hand' while keeping it concealed from the other players. The first player begins bidding, picking a quantity of a face 2 through 6. The quantity states the player's opinion on how many of the chosen face have been rolled in total on the table. The 1s ("aces") are often wild and count as the face of the current bid, however the game can also be played without wilds (see variants). In a five-dice, three-player game with wilds, the lowest bid is "one 2" and the highest bid "fifteen 6s".

Each player has two choices during his turn: make a higher bid, or challenge the previous bid as being wrong. Raising the bid means either increasing the quantity, or the face value, or both, according to the specific bidding rules used. Different bidding rule sets are described below.

If the current player thinks the previous player's bid is wrong, he challenges it, and then all dice are revealed to determine whether the bid was valid. If the number of the relevant face revealed is at least as high as the bid, then the bid is valid, in which case the bidder wins. Otherwise, the challenger wins. A challenge is generally indicated by simply revealing one's dice, though it is customary to verbally make the challenge, by saying "I call you up", "I call", "You're a liar", or simply "Liar."

See [Wikipedia](#) for a number of variants, as well as detailed information about the bidding systems.

Skill in Liar's Dice involves an ability to combine evidence from a number of conflicting sources. The expected quantity of any particular face value is one-sixth the number of dice (two-sixths, if wilds are used), but a player's bets should incorporate the private information about the number of dice in front of him. If he has more (or less) than expected of a particular value, he is justified in betting the number of dice of that value to be higher (lower) than the expectation. At the same time, everyone knows that the other players will use each other's guesses as evidence, so people have an incentive to make misleading bets.

### Other Bluffing Games

A number of other games also incorporate a strong bluffing element, the most well-known being poker. A blog run by some Less Wrong regulars, [rational-poker.com](#), is dedicated to explaining how poker in particular can be used for reducing cognitive biases. [Mafia](#) (also known as Werewolf) is a game where each player is secretly assigned either the role of an ordinary townspeople or a mafiosi, with only the mafiosi knowing each other's identities. Each day, the townspeople vote to kill one person who they hope is a Mafia member, after which the Mafia members choose one townspeople to kill. [Resistance](#) is a similar game with the advantage that players are never eliminated and get to play in every round. Players also have more accurate information at their disposal in Resistance, whereas Mafia is more luck-based.

### Paranoid Debating

See [Calibration Game](#).

### Prediction Tournament

Here's a way to test your calibration and rationality by making predictions. At each meetup, come up with a number of short-, medium- and long-term yes/no questions (three of each, say), have everyone estimate their probability, and post the guesses on [prediction-book.com](#). If you're having a hard time coming up

with ideas, you can look at the Prediction Book website for inspiration, or just make guesses on existing predictions. The predictions can be about anything. Some examples:

- [Friday will be 'Sunny' as the weather report has suggested.](#)
- [A Japanese whaling ship will enter Australia's territorial waters between 7 February 2012 and 10 April 2012.](#)
- [I will successfully complete an internet programming job \(PHP/Rails/something like that\) on oDesk and be paid for it before May 1.](#)
- [I will retest my IQ in 60 days and it will be at least 5 points greater than it is today.](#)
- [Philadelphia will get past the first round of the 2012 NBA playoffs.](#)

[Predictionbook.com](#) offers each registered user statistics about their aggregate accuracy — of the times when you've said that you're 60% sure about something, how often have you actually been correct? If meetup participants are up to it, this provides a chance to maintain a scoreboard of how everyone is doing, and the person who's been doing the best each month could be awarded a meal or given some other sort of prize. Having a social incentive to be accurate is very helpful in making us actually put thought into avoiding biases, and the lessons are much more likely to carry over into other situations once they've been used in "real life" over an extended period of time.



## Rationalization game

What does it feel like when you're rationalizing? In the rationalization game, one is given an opinion that they consider false, and told to come up with clever reasons for why it's true. The more clever and persuasive the arguments, the better the score. However, the goal is not to become a clever arguer, but to notice what it feels like to be arguing for a conclusion which one does not consider correct. (On the other hand, becoming genuinely convinced that the belief is actually mistaken may be worth a bonus.)

Some descriptions of what rationalization feels like may help:

Cue: Any time my brain goes into "explaining" mode rather than "thinking" ("discovering") mode. These are rather distinct modes of mental activity and can be distinguished easily. "Explaining" is much more verbal and usually involves imagining a hypothetical audience, e.g. Anna Salamon or Less Wrong. When explaining I usually presume that my conclusion is correct and focus on optimizing the credibility and presentation of my arguments. "Actually thinking" is much more kinesthetic and "stressful" (in a not-particularly-negative sense of the word) and I feel a lot less certain about where I'm going. When in "explaining" mode (or, inversely, "skeptical" mode) my conceptual metaphors are also more visual: "I see where you're going with that, but..." or "I don't see how that is related to your earlier point about...". Explaining produces rationalizations by default but this is usually okay as the "rationalizations" are cached results from previous periods of "actually thinking"; of course, oftentimes it's introspectively unclear how much actual thought was put into reaching any given conclusion, and it's easy to assume that any conclusion previously reached by my brain must be correct.

- [Will Newsome](#)

Cue for noticing rationalization: I find my mouth responding with a "no" before stopping to think or draw breath.

(Example: Bob: "We shouldn't do question three this way; you only think so because you're a bad writer". My mouth/brain: "No, we should definitely do question three this way! [because I totally don't want to think I'm a bad writer]" Me: Wait, my mouth just moved without me being at all curious as to how question three will play out, nor about what Bob is seeing in question three. I should call an interrupt here.)

- [Anna Salamon](#)

When I can't explain my reasoning to other person without a feeling of guilt that I am slightly manipulating them.

- [Villiam Bur](#)



## Rejection therapy

Rejection therapy is a game for developing social confidence. In this game, participants try to be rejected by a person or a group by asking for something they probably won't be granted.

You may come up with your own sure-to-be-denied requests, or buy a deck of cards with various suggestions about how to try to get rejected. For example, you can ask for a discount when buying something at a store, ask someone out on a date, or ask a total stranger to be your friend on Facebook. [Wikipedia](#) summarizes some of the rules as:

There is only one official rule to Rejection therapy, which is to be rejected by another person at least once, every day. There are also stipulations as to what counts as a rejection and what does not:

1. A rejection counts if you are out of your comfort zone
2. A rejection counts if your request is denied
3. At the time of rejection, the player, not the respondent, should be in a position of vulnerability. The player should be sensitive to the feelings of the person being asked.

Over time, players get used to the idea of asking people things, and begin to no longer fear rejection. The game has two official winning conditions: a player getting rejected for 30 consecutive days, and the fear of rejection no longer inhibiting the player.

Rejection therapy is sometimes cited as one of the most life-changing games one has ever played.

## Repetition game

The Repetition game is an actor's exercise that helps develop an ability to read people as well as be in the moment. It involves two people who sit facing each other and look each other in the eyes. They take turns saying something that is true about the other person,

or if they can't come up with anything quickly, they repeat what the other person just said. An imaginary example:

**A:** You're sitting in a chair.

**B:** I'm sitting in a chair.

**A:** You're sitting in a chair.

**B:** You're sitting with good posture.

**A:** You're shifting to sit more straight.

**B:** I'm shifting to sit more straight.

**A:** You're conscious of your posture.



As the game continues, the participants eventually start picking up subtler and subtler nuances and information. For example, a later statement may become “Your lips are twitching. You're trying not to laugh. You thought that my words were funny.” (Note that it's perfectly okay to laugh in the exercise.) Over time, the participants may learn to interpret not only each other's expressions, but also those of other people, with exceptional sensitivity. With an improved ability to understand other people comes an ability to connect with them better, so the Repetition game may help meetup participants bond more strongly.

## Status exercises

Status exercises are intended to make normally unconscious status signals visible and something that can be consciously controlled. Once a person learns to treat status as a game, it becomes easier to consider it as such and to not take it so seriously. According to Keith Johnstone, whether we act high- or low-status is constantly reflected in all of our speech and body language.

Without the status work my improvisation group, the Theatre Machine, could never have toured successfully in Europe; not without preparing the scenes first. If someone starts a scene by saying 'Ah, another sinner! What's it to be, the lake of fire or the river of excrement?' then you can't 'think' fast enough to know how to react. You have to understand that the scene is in Hell, and that the other person is some sort of devil, and that you're dead all in a split second. If you know what status you're playing the answers come automatically.

'Well?'

'Excrement', you say, playing high status, without doing anything you experience as 'thinking' at all, but you speak in a cold voice, and you look around as if Hell was less impressive than you'd been led to believe. If you're playing low status you say 'Which ever you think best, Sir', or whatever. Again with no hesitation, and with eyes full of terror, or wonder.

- Keith Johnstone,  
[Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre](#)

An excerpt of Johnstone's status-related chapter can be [found online](#), though it doesn't include the exercises. Here is a brief summary of some status-related exercises:

Make people see status by asking them to play scenes where both lower status, where both raise status, one raises while the other lowers, and where the status is reversed during the scene. Insist that they have to get their status to be just above or just below their partner's status, so that they really have to pay attention. People can experiment with [various status cues](#) and see how they alter their behavior. One experiment involves picking a cue, but not telling it to the others or letting them look at the list and ask them to guess. Johnstone reports that asking someone to adopt a cue like holding their head still while talking or starting each sentence with an "um" changes several aspects of their behavior, and others may often have a hard time pointing out exactly what within them provides a feeling of changed status.

Other exercises include taking the same bit of dialogue (e.g. A: "Hello", B: "Hello", A: "Been waiting long?", B: "Ages."), and playing it with A as high-status, B as high-status, or with the status differences being constantly swapped around, using only body language and no changes to the actual dialogue.

## Zendo

Zendo, also known as "Science, the game," involves one player picking rules and creating structures that follow that rule. The other players try to discover the rule by building their own structures and asking whether those structures follow the rule. See [Wikipedia for the exact rules](#).

Traditionally, the names of these roles are 'Master' and 'Students', but one may also call them 'Nature' and 'Scientists' because the players can be thought of as researchers conducting experiments in an attempt to uncover the hidden laws of nature.

One author, Nick Bentley, writes that he [uses Zendo for teaching the scientific method](#), and names four issues which relate to the scientific method and also pop up in the game (the whole essay is recommended reading):

Here's the great thing: issues that pop up in real science also emerge in the game. Here are four:

1. ***Ambiguous Hypotheses*** - Sometimes, a Scientist will state an unclear hypothesis. In this case, the universe must ask for clarification to construct a counterexample. This is one of the central problems of real science too: how to construct testable hypotheses? Zendo's a forum in which to practice the kind of precise language needed to do so. Awesome.
2. ***Superstitions based on spurious correlations*** - Sometimes, thanks to the Scientists' experimental choices, a pattern of white and black stones builds up on the table which all conform to an incorrect hypothesis about the law of nature. This is how real Scientists get stuck too. And just like in real science, you get unstuck by finding an experimental counterexample to the incorrect hypothesis, at which point the Scientists undergo a "Paradigm Shift". Paradigm Shifts also happen when new investigators without the usual biases (who can interpret experimental results in a new way) enter the field. For this reason it's said that science proceeds by retirements (the older biased Scientists retire and make way for new and differently-biased ones). In Zendo, the same thing happens when someone who's not even playing walks by the table, glances at the experiments, and points out a hypothesis that the players missed due to group-think. It makes clear the value of fresh perspective and independent thinking.
3. ***The value of simple, systematic experimentation*** - In Zendo, it helps if Scientists do experiments in series, where each experiment differs only slightly from the last. This allows Scientists to quickly pinpoint the variables that matter to the experimental outcome. Scientists also learn to minimize the number of variables in each experiment, to minimize the chance for spurious correlations as described in point 2 above. These are essential practices for real Scientists.

4. ***The value of Occam's Razor*** - Scientists quickly learn how to make their hypotheses as simple as possible, because then it's easy to interpret the counterexamples that disprove them. The more parts a hypothesis has, the harder it is to infer from a counterexample what part is wrong.

These are the fundamentals of the scientific method, and Zendo presents them as no real-life lab exercise ever could, because it presents them free of the distracting technical details of real-life experiments. There's no faster or clearer way to learn them.

Thus, becoming better at Zendo involves becoming better at the basic skills that are used for forming hypotheses about reality. In particular, it teaches one to be wary of confirmation bias, as players quickly realize that even hypotheses which fit all the existing data can easily be wrong. It is also useful in becoming more aware of the illusion of transparency, as it is common for the Nature player to develop a rule which seems easy and obvious to them, but which turns out to be very hard for the players to guess.



## General bacchanalia

Not everything needs to be serious. Sometimes it's good to just go out and have some fun. Games (computer games, board games, role-playing games, sports...), movies, karaoke, picnics, hikes around the city, going to watch a solar eclipse... anything that the group finds fun and enjoyable.

## Example activities

Here are some example activities at real meetup groups:

We'll usually have someone prepare about 15 minutes of material, or I'll get people to do some short exercise (calibration exercises, for instance), or we'll just play some game. Zendo and The Resistance are favorites. Other weeks, someone picks a few things on some topic for everyone to read, and we discuss that topic in more depth. These are usually at someone's house, though if no one is willing or able to host some week we'll hold it a coffee shop. The readings are usually LW posts, but not always -- we had an especially good conversation started by Yvain's consequentialism FAQ. The reading group meetings tend to seed the rest of our meetups with interesting conversations.

-Meetup group at Madison, WI, USA.



We usually meet in Seattle at someone's house/apartment, have some named discussion topic at the beginning, transition into arbitrary discussion and dinner, and then maybe more talking or playing a game or in the summer occasionally we'd walk somewhere. Sometimes we meet on the eastside at my house, where the meetups look similar but are more likely to involve board games and (to our surprise) have generally higher attendance. Which is about 6-9 in Seattle and about a dozen on the eastside.

- Meetup group at Seattle, WA, USA.

At the meetings we've been going through the sequences. We usually get the assigned reading of like five little articles in a sequence ahead of time and then discuss them at the meeting. Then we have a chance to ask questions or talk about things in our life that relate. We also add topics that people are interested in. One time we did cryonics.

- Meetup group at London, UK.

We alternate between an informal gathering at a pub, and a more focused discussion group on Singularity issues, which are held at someone's residence if available, or the Duke if not.

- Meetup group at Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Practical rationality meetups on the first Friday of each month, social and rationality outreach meetups on the third Friday of each month.

- Meetup group at Melbourne, Australia

# Projects

Talking about rationality and philosophy is fun and interesting, but by itself, it's likely to remain as just that: talk. For some meetup groups, this is fine: the group isn't intended to accomplish anything more than that. If people are serious about learning and growing, however, they need to actually practice their skills. Even if people are only interested in philosophical and theoretical goals, such as learning to better understand how their thinking works, doing concrete things in order to pursue that goal will be much more effective than only reading and talking about it. And if the group intends to actually improve at life, doing things becomes even more important. Simple exercises like the ones listed above provide some benefit, but being able to apply one's skills in the real world is the real challenge. If the ideas conveyed on Less Wrong don't lead to any actual behavior, talking about the ideas will have been useless.

Doing things together also helps with group bonding and motivating people to attend. Coming to meetups feels considerably more worthwhile if it provides a chance to talk about the things you've achieved.

At the same time, however, there will be people who don't want to participate in projects. They may be too busy with other things, or they may consider particular projects a waste of time and effort. Try to have non-project activities going on as well, so that the people who can't or won't participate in them don't feel entirely excluded.

The choice of a project will depend on your group. Start by coming up with a goal that you'd all be motivated to achieve. Maybe it's something related to personal growth, or to overcoming cognitive biases, or maybe you want your group to make its own contribution to the Less Wrong pool of knowledge.

Note that these examples are not goals, but categories of goals. It's fine to decide on a category first, but the goal should be something concrete. "Personal growth" is a category, while "become more comfortable talking with strangers" is a goal belonging in that category. The most important thing is that the goal is something

concrete, and something that everyone feels is worthwhile.

Once you have a goal, come up with a project to implement it. If your goal is "become more comfortable talking with strangers," a project could be "start ten conversations with strangers." If your goal is "find a researched bias that hasn't been covered on LW yet and make a post about it," the project could be to search for places covering academic heuristics and biases research, read them to find mentions of biases that haven't yet been covered, produce an outline of what needs to be included in a post, and write the post together. (Initial projects, though, should be nowhere this long.)



Projects can be something that you do together while at the meetup, something that everyone does on their own between meetups, or both. Again, to make more progress, it's probably best to also have projects involving doing things "in real life" — on your own, not just in the social context of the meetup.

If the project has a do-it-on-your-own component, include a follow-up part. If the project is to start ten conversations with strangers, keep a log of how many conversations you've started and how they went. Report this in the next meetup. If the project was to produce a bias writeup, the follow-up is the writing or other work that you promised to do for the next time. It's better to start with small, easy-to-complete projects rather than multi-stage projects where you do one thing the first week, another thing the next week, a third thing the week after that, and so on. Activities that are quick to complete and don't have an extended delay before the reward are much more likely to actually get completed.

Here are some example projects from [calcsam at Designing Rationalist Projects](#).

- **GOAL:** To become better at noticing [logical fallacies](#) as they are being uttered
- **PROJECT:** A certain Less Wrong group could watch a designated hour of C-SPAN - or a soap opera, or a TV show - and try to note down all the fallacies.
- **FOLLOW-UP:** Discuss this on a designated thread. Afterwards, compile the arguments and link to the file, so that anyone in the LW community can repeat this on their own and check against your conclusions. Reflect communally at your next LW meeting.

- **GOAL:** To get into [fewer arguments](#) about definitions.
- **PROJECT:** "Ask, "Can you give me a specific example of that?" or "Can you be more concrete?" in everyday conversations." Make a challenging goal about how much you will do this - this is pretty low-hanging fruit.
- **FOLLOW-UP:** Write instances in your journal. Share examples communally at your next LW meeting.

One easy way to come up with projects is to simply have a meetup, and then at the end of your discussions, give everyone a slip of paper and ask them to write down one thing they are going to do differently next week as a result of the discussion. For two minutes total at the beginning of the next meeting, let people report on what they did. However, here you need to be careful. If five people all declare that they've learned a lot during this meeting and they're going to do something noble-sounding, it can be hard to be the only one to say that you didn't really learn anything from this meeting, though you had an excellent time. Still, if that's the truth, that's what you should say. Make sure to tell people that it's okay to say this, and have it actually be okay as well, by rewarding people if they do it.

# Recommended Reading

## Self-Improvement (popular writing)

- Wiseman, *59 Seconds* (2009)
- Steel, *The Procrastination Equation* (2010)
- Halvorson, *Succeed* (2011)
- Dixit & Nalebuff, *The Art of Strategy* (2010)
- Burns, *Feeling Good* (1999)

## Social Groups and Social Effectiveness (popular writing)

- Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936)
- Goman, *The Nonverbal Advantage* (2008)
- Ferrazzi & Raz, *Never Eat Alone* (2005)
- Petz, *Guide to a Successful Meetup Group & Meetup Events* (2011)

## Rationality (popular writing)

- Yudkowsky, *The Sequences* (2006-2009)
- Muehlhauser, *The Cognitive Science of Rationality* (2011)
- Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011)
- Stanovich, *What Intelligence Tests Miss* (2010)
- Ariely, *Predictably Irrational* (2008)

## Self-Improvement (academic writing)

- Weiten et al. (eds.), *Psychology Applied to Modern Life, 10th edition* (2011)
- Roth & Fonagy, *What Works for Whom? 2nd edition* (2005)
- Lopez & Snyder (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology* (2011)

## Social Groups and Social Effectiveness (academic writing)

- Myers, *Social Psychology, 10th edition* (2009)
- Sprecher et al. (eds.), *Handbook of Relationship Initiation* (2008)
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