

Finding the right format

Getting creative with your research

The right event format can help you get creative with your research, introduce it to new people and provide a way to initiate engaging and interesting conversations. While your university might hold public lectures or seminars, these can often produce one-way dissemination of knowledge, in which the public are allowed access to research through academic formats. Public engagement formats remove these constraints, often focusing on how to make research interactive and engagement a two-way conversation.

The right format can help make your research relevant to people's everyday lives. Communicating your research through engaging formats, like live music performances or food tastings, can make topics feel open and accessible to everyone. They can also help draw in a crowd as an interesting format will make your event an appealing offer in the crowded market of free cultural activities.

Top tips: successful formats

Here are some (but not all!) popular formats:

- **Performances** that are relevant and help to meaningfully illustrate your topic e.g. plays, music, comedy nights.
- **Food and drink** based activities such as shared or themed meals, tastings or café encounters.
- **Pop-up activities** in busy places that have a passing audience e.g. stalls in shopping centres, object handling stations in museums.
- **Walks and tours** that connect research to the physical environment e.g. bus tours, behind-the-scenes tours, walking tours.
- **Maker events** where people can get hands on and creative such as craft workshops or community builds.



Matching a format to your audience

When choosing an event format a good starting point is thinking about what would be most appealing to your intended audience. It's the perfect time to work with your community partners to build something tailored to your audience, asking questions like:

- What type of activities would my intended audience normally attend in their free time?
- What would be the most engaging and clear way for me to share my research with them?
- What would be a comfortable level of interaction for them?
- How long can they spare to attend an event? What time of the day works best for them?
- Have your community partners found particular formats popular with your intended audience?

If we apply these questions to an event about the history of magic with a family target audience, we could conclude that a hands-on craft session about optical illusions would work well. Making it a weekend drop-in session at a local museum would also allow families to stay for as long as their children can focus.

Keeping focus on the research

It is important to remember that you are not just organising a cultural experience for attendees. Formats such as performances, food tastings and craft activities should be used as vehicles for engaging attendees with research. Try to always keep a focus on the following:

- What is the point of the event? What research are you trying to get audiences to engage with?
- What impact do you hope the event will have on attendees? What impact do you want the event to have on you/your research?
- What new knowledge do you hope attendees will leave the event with? What do you want to learn?

There are simple ways to do public engagement with research. For example, do a 10 minute contextual flash talk before a performance and include a Q&A at the end to explore how the research inspired the piece. Chat with attendees while doing craft activities and produce some take-away leaflets. Never feel that your research gets in the way of making an event fun, because if you present it in a jargon-free, accessible way people will be interested.



Simple is often better

While conducting public engagement activities can be very rewarding, if an event format becomes too complex it can become stressful to organise and take up too much time in your busy schedule. Events with many moving parts or multiple activities over several sessions can quickly become unwieldy. Often simplifying an event idea will make the process far easier to organise and will often result in a focused and high-quality activity.

Simplifying your event can also make it easier to promote. Think about the classic elevator pitch – would you be able to explain what will happen at the event quickly and succinctly. No one likes attending something where they're not sure what is going to happen, so making the event's format clear can be a real benefit.

Practical considerations

When choosing your event format make a step-by-step plan of what you will need to do to make it a success (see the 'format lab' overleaf). Ensure that it is not only a great idea but that it is feasible. Remember to work collaboratively with your community partners as they will offer valuable insights.

Try and get the balance right between finding a fun and creative format and one that is practically and financially viable. Will you need to employ professional actors for example, and if so will you need to provide them with costumes and pay for rehearsal time? Can you find a suitable venue to host it and does the format raise any health and safety concerns? Take time to think through the idea before rushing ahead to deliver it.

The format lab

The format lab can help you see the potential benefits and challenges of using a particular format. Test whether you have found the right format that will fit perfectly with your intended audience, research and partners. If the format doesn't react well at each stage of the process, you might want to re-think your choice!

