

How do I generate ideas for my public engagement activity?

Developing unique and creative engagement activities

Some engagement activities start with a crystal-clear idea – but this isn't always the case. Whether you've decided on working with schools, but not sure how, or you have a great topic you know your audience will love, but haven't fleshed out the details, this guide will help you get creative with ideas.

1 | Get inspiration

A great way to generate ideas is to find out what others have done in the past. Try to see and experience other public engagement activities – look at what other universities, museums, science centres and arts organisations are doing.

You can also get inspiration by thinking about your audience. Doing a bit of research into their hobbies and interests could help you identify different angles that would be of interest to them. Think broadly – even if an interest or hobby seems unrelated at first, there

may be great links and connections that come to you later on.

A great example of this is an event run by the botanical gardens in Edinburgh. They put on an event about plant science but made it appeal to their younger audiences by framing it as a Harry Potter themed potions class.



2 | Generate new ideas

Coming up with an idea can feel like an automatic process – where inspiration strikes from nowhere. But there are steps you can take to spark inspiration when you need it. James Webb Young writes more about this in his book, 'A Technique for Producing Ideas' but includes the following tips:



Research - Collect the information you need to get the ball rolling with your ideas. Consider the different aspects of your own research topic or area of work, research your audience and their interests, and investigate (and ideally experience!) different methods or activities that might lead to quality engagement with your audiences.

Organise your thoughts – Start organising the important factors and try to identify the relationships between them. What elements of your research do you want to communicate? What are your audience's interests? Writing these down in a mind map may help you get a sense of your idea, even if it's not fully formed. Ideas may spring from identifying new connections between areas.

Relax – After you've processed the information, let your sub-conscious get to work. Take a break from your project and allow yourself to mull over your ideas so far.

Eureka – When you've taken a break from it, a thought may pop into your head that will tie everything together. This is your 'eureka moment! Be careful not to dismiss

ideas that seem unrealistic straight away – there may be some version of it you are able to achieve.

Analyse – Now you've had an interesting idea it's time to analyse it in detail. Will it actually work? Share your idea with others to flesh it out.

3 | Workshop with others

A good way to share your idea is to workshop it. Sitting down face-to-face with others is a great way to get the creative juices flowing as well as for identifying potential hurdles for your idea.

Note

Don't just limit conversations to your immediate colleagues. Talk to your friends and family or people who represent the audience you want to engage with. New perspectives are important in coming up with innovative ideas! Ask them lots of questions and listen actively to what they discuss.

Focus your conversation on both practical and conceptual elements of your idea. Some things to think about are:

- Your intended audience
- How the activity will work – how will people take part?
- The venue and other logistics
- How you will advertise your idea
- Whether the activity will have the impact you hope for

We offer space for workshopping with others planning public engagement activities at our 'Engagement Ideas' masterclass. Book onto the next one here.

Further resources - Let us know of others!

A technique for producing ideas

This book by James Webb Young is available from the College library as well as online. It provides further details on Young's theory of how ideas are generated.

Instant creativity

This book by Brian Clegg and Paul Birch is available from the College library. It lists numerous activities designed to boost creativity, such as random word association and others. Activities are ranked in terms of difficulty and how well they generate new ideas as well as other criteria.