

How do I organise a behind-the-scenes tour?

Guidance on setting up and leading a walking tour

Tours are a great way to provide an interactive, behind-the-scenes look at what you do. Before you begin planning your tour make sure you've considered your audience and your aims.

Tours are great for:

- Providing an 'exclusive' or 'behind-the-scenes' feel
- Engagement around large equipment that cannot be moved
- Visual or hands-on science (e.g. demonstrations in a lab), or historical or place-based stories
- Smaller groups

Not so great for

- Larger groups
- Facilitating longer or more in-depth discussions and debate

1 | Timings and your key message

Tours tend to last anything between 15–120 minutes. While it might be tempting to include as much as possible, it's often helpful to focus on one key message you want to get across. If your visitors could only remember one thing, what would you want that to be? This might be 'robotics is fascinating' or 'scientists are relatable' for example. Use our resource *How do I plan a public engagement activity?* to help you develop your goals and think about your key message.



2 | Plan the journey

Some tours will take place in multiple locations (walking tour), while others will stay in one room (static tour). Either way you might want to consider the ‘journey’ you will take your visitors on.

When designing your journey, think about:

- What locations and/or objects are most exciting for the visitor? Can you run a demonstration? What can you offer them they would otherwise never see?
- What stories might be interesting to visitors and are there locations or objects that can be tied to those stories? E.g. an anecdote of someone who used to work in the building could be given in their old workspace or next to a plaque.
- Is there anything that is particularly mind-blowing or inspiring to look at? Is there a place suitable for a photo opportunity?

Pick-up and drop-off point

Ideally this is the same location and is very easy to get to. The pick-up point should also be spacious, ideally indoors and be close to a toilet. Tell people to arrive 10 minutes early to help you keep to time.

Route order

If possible, start off with your second-best location to set a good mood and finish with your best to leave your visitors on a high. For longer tours, identify where toilets are and include bathroom breaks and/or opportunities to get refreshments!

Your spaces

Assess your spaces. Determine how many people will fit in each space comfortably and decide on a maximum capacity (this sort of planning will form part of your risk assessment). If there are any areas that will be difficult for some people to access, either address these by changing your route or be up-front about them when promoting your tour.

3 | Make it memorable

Consider what you can add to your tour to make it unique and memorable to your visitors. Ideally there could also be points which are interactive, such as items the visitors can touch, smell or even eat. Even better, can your visitors participate in a demonstration? If participation in the demonstration is limited, think about how you might manage expectations so that nobody is disappointed!

If suitable, think about any free giveaways you could offer visitors. A 3D printed keyring or a bookmark are cheap items but will provide a souvenir that will keep your tour in your visitors’ minds. If you do include a giveaway, try to make it relevant to your research area to make it even more unique, and bear in mind sustainability and minimising your item’s impact on the environment.

Another way to make your tour interactive is including something for visitors to fill in or answer along the way. This could be a quiz with answerable questions or a treasure hunt, asking them to identify the locations of different objects. You could make this competitive by entering those who answer correctly into a raffle.

Note: While it’s good to include some of the above elements to make your tour special, sticking to one or two will help the tour to run smoothly and won’t overwhelm your visitors. The more components you add the less each one stands out.



4 | Deciding who will speak

It can be tempting to have a different guide at each location. However, sticking to one guide who leads the tour from start to finish can help build rapport with visitors and ensure timings are kept to. You could have other demonstrators at locations, especially for live demos, but having a leading guide will help give your tour continuity.

5 | Write your tour in advance

A good tour will give insight not only to locations but also the work you are doing. Think about what you could say at each location and form a narrative from this. While you don't need to read your script verbatim, practicing in advance and having key bullet points for each location will ensure you are focused and keep to time.

Top things to include:

- **Introduce yourself** and what you do here at Imperial and show your passion! Visitors will be keen to hear from you about what you do and what your typical day is like.
- For longer tours with a smaller group consider introducing the group to one another.
- Explain what visitors can expect from the tour – including how long it will be, and when they might get a refreshment/bathroom break.
- Housekeeping – it's crucial you let visitors know of any rules at the beginning, as well as information about fire safety and toilets. Be sure to include this in your risk assessment.
- Don't keep visitors at the pick-up point too long as they will likely be anxious to get moving. Take them to a new location before diving into your main script, even if it's only a short walk away.
- Write bullet points for what you'll say at each location but try not to be too 'scripted'. Try to leave time for questions and keep the delivery of your tour conversational.
- Estimate rough timings for each location (include a minute or two for questions) and anticipate spending more time at the most exciting locations.
- Use anecdotes and stories as well as facts and figures. Try and give your visitors a feel for what it's like to work in the space you're showing them. You could gather experiences from others who work in the space.
- Keep language audience-appropriate, using simple terms and avoiding jargon.
- Plan for some extra time at the end of your tour. This can act as a buffer if you spend longer at certain locations but will also ensure there is time for further questions.
- Encourage visitors to find out more if they are interested. If your tour is part of a larger event or festival make sure you know of the other related stands or activities you could direct people towards. They might want to hear about further engagement opportunities and events or even follow you on social media!
- Ask for feedback. This can form a valuable part of your evaluation. Perhaps you have a form you can hand out? Or is there a way you can embed your evaluation into the tour?

6 | Practice

Being a tour guide is not just about being a good public speaker, it will also involve some crowd management as well as being able to interact with your visitors informally, for example when you're walking between locations, you can chat with your visitors. If you are passionate about your content and enjoy working with people, much of this will come naturally. But practise makes perfect so take the opportunity to do a few test runs.

Walking through the tour locations could help you identify any particularly noisy spots where you might need to speak up. You could even do a full test run with an audience of your colleagues or friends – this will help you iron out any content or time-related issues.

7 | Before and during the tour

Before the tour:

- Provide visitors with clear directions to your pick-up point
- Share information about the tour and the tour guide to spark interest and begin to build rapport
- Put clear signage up at your pick-up point so visitors know they are in the right place
- Prepare your locations and cordon off any restricted areas
- Think about how you will manage any spaces from no-shows and whether you might have a waiting list or area where others who did not manage to book on initially could join if there is space.

During the tour:

- Expect (and embrace!) a range of questions and try to prepare for any difficult questions in advance
- Prepare to go off-script if conversations with your visitors arise – just keep an eye on the time!
- There may be distractions or disruptions – but this is all part of the experience!
- Enjoy it! You are showing people around a space that you know well and they will be excited to hear from you about it.

Case study: Carbon capture plant tour

What is it?

This was a 45-minute tour, led by Dr Colin Hale, of the carbon capture plant at Imperial. The tour took place as part of the Great Exhibition Road Festival in 2019.

Why is it a good example?

The tour entailed dressing up, a demonstration and an interactive activity that made the tour fun and memorable for attendees. Attendees were given a hard hat, lab coat and safety goggles at the beginning of the tour so they could dress the part. Hale made the control desk move as an interesting visual and simulated a 'melt down' where attendees had to press a button really quickly. Hale also created a game during the tour around the plant where attendees had to find the Homer Simpson cardboard cut-out linking to Homer's job in a power plant.



Further reading – Let us know of others!

You might try seeking advice from campus services about the logistics of running a tour at Imperial:
<https://www.imperial.ac.uk/visit/campus-tours/>

Go on a nearby tour to get inspired about what you could plan for yours:
<https://www.discoversouthken.com/itinerary/tours-talks/>