

How do I organise a science performance?

Guidance on developing and delivering performances, with and to the public

Performances ranging from poetry readings and dances to plays and musicals, are great ways to engage audiences in your research. This guide will help you to focus your performance idea and bring it to life.

1 | Why engage through performance?

Performances can be highly memorable activities, making them great for learning. They are also a great way to bring a human or emotional element into science and research. As we describe in our planning resource, you should always work from your aim when planning an engagement activity.

Here are some examples of what can be achieved through performances that are delivered with or to the public:

- Entertainment / provoking thought
- Changing perspectives or behaviour
- Bringing science into a community space
- Targeting new audiences not currently reached
- Hearing the public's insights
- Exploring sensitive issues safely
- Highlighting science as a cultural activity
- Informing others

2 | Should I perform with or to the public?

When it comes to performances, one key decision to make from the outset is whether you are going to design and deliver this performance to your target audience, or whether you want to collaborate with some of them to create it. A collaborative project might involve a small group of your target audience helping to write the script, song lyrics and so on, as well as contribute to the performance.

Benefits of involving the public in design and delivery:

- It will enable public concerns to be voiced, not only allowing you to gain insights but making your performance more relevant to your target audience
- It will have a significant positive impact on those you collaborate with through a deeper and prolonged interaction
- It might help to draw a relevant audience to attend the event as collaborators may be able to use their networks
- It will likely be more sustainable as members of the public who have been involved may be able to deliver aspects themselves going forward
- You may gain better insights as you can ask your collaborators for feedback
- Some of your target audience may be professionals in the arts. This will not only raise the quality of your performance but potentially enable you to reach a different group of individuals with your topic.

Front-end evaluation

If you are not collaborating with your target audience, consider doing some research or front-end evaluation. What do you know about your audience? What knowledge are they coming with and what interests them? These are some of the things you might want to investigate to help you design your performance.

3 | What kind of performance will it be?

Any kind of performance art can be approached from a research perspective, there are no limitations. However to give you some ideas, here are some of the formats we've seen used successfully in the past:

Theatre	Demonstration	Poetry	Clowning
Music	Comedy	Dance	Puppetry
Opera	Magic	Busking	

When selecting a format, consider the merits of each option in relation to your aims and area. For example, if you want to engage your audience with sensitive issues, theatre is great as it allows audiences to empathise with a character as they navigate different challenges. Meanwhile, busking might be a great way to bring

science into a community space. Different audience groups might have preferences over certain types of performance formats, or you might be limited by the space you're using or the time you have with your target group.

4 | Where and when will you perform?

From the outset, it's good to have a vague idea of where you might deliver your performance. Will it be at a theatre venue? Outdoors? In a small café? Each venue will come with different logistical challenges, as well as encourage different audiences to attend. If your performance is complex, requiring equipment, specific props or other resources, you might want to secure a venue before you develop your content. That way you can adapt your content to the space available, as well as promote your event(s) earlier to ensure good attendance.

In a similar vein, timing for your project will be important. With a rough date in mind for your first performance, work backwards giving a rough deadline for each stage. Things to consider will include:

- Who your collaborators and key stakeholders are
- When your rehearsals will be, including dress/technical rehearsals
- Props, costumes and sets
- Promoting your event
- When you might need to order any equipment
- Casting
- When you will need your content drafted by

Generating a timeline featuring all of the above will provide your project with some structure so you can keep track of progress.



5 | Developing and rehearsing the performance

Once you have a rough plan for your project and some content ideas based on your aims, audience and resources, you can start to develop your content. If your performance is solo you can do this alone, but we recommend you seek some feedback on your first draft, preferably with representatives of your target audience. If collaborating with others, you might organise a workshop so you can bring your ideas together and create a draft of the script, score or movements based on the outcomes of the workshop.

With the draft of the content ready you can start casting (if applicable). Do you need dancers? Musicians? Actors? If so, how will you recruit them? Will you need to organise auditions? Are you looking for professional performers or amateurs, from your target communities, the scientific sector or elsewhere?

For high-profile performances, consider investing in a casting director. This will legitimise your project to many professional performers.

However this is managed, once you have all your roles assigned, you will want to bring everyone together to start rehearsing. This helps to map out clear stage directions - everybody knowing which part of the stage they need to be in at any one time or when to exit stage. It may be helpful to use coloured tape to mark the stage during rehearsals until people have memorised their positions. Also consider inviting some people to your rehearsals to give you feedback when the performance is starting to come together. Don't forget to run a dress / technical rehearsal to check that everything works smoothly before opening night.

Top tip

There are many staff and students interested in performance arts at Imperial – make the most of these networks to find collaborators, gather ideas and share your activities. From the Centre for Performance Science (www.performancescience.ac.uk) – a collaboration between Imperial and the Royal College of Music looking to understand the role of performance across a diversity of contexts, to the vast number of student societies (www.imperialcollegeunion.org/activities/a-to-z) dedicated to hundreds of different art forms.

6 | Promoting your event

While there are numerous ways you might promote your event, here are some ideas:

- Set up a **Facebook** or **Eventbrite** page and share this across social media
- **Pay for advertising** through social media (even small amounts can be effective)
- Contact the societal engagement team to share it through our **networks**
- Ask your **venue** if they can help promote it
- Ask your **collaborators** if they can spread it through their contacts
- Leave **flyers or posters** in areas your audience frequents

7 | Making the most of your event

Performances are incredibly rewarding but can be time-consuming and resource-heavy. Make the most of your event by capturing it in some way (e.g. recording or live-streaming it) and taking the opportunity to get some feedback. You might wish to capture some photos or film of the performance – useful when you are speaking about it in future, sharing on websites and other resources, and reflecting on for future activities.



Case study: Mrs X

What is it?

Developed with Theatre of Debate www.theatreofdebate.co.uk, Mrs X is a play that explores antibacterial resistance and our relationship with bacteria from the perspective of two patients and of the bacteria themselves. The story is interspersed with flashbacks to Alexander Fleming's discovery of penicillin through to his Nobel acceptance speech in which he warns of bacteria's potential to develop resistance using 'Mrs X' in an example scenario.

Why is it a good example?

Mrs X was developed with patients, healthcare workers and scientists during workshops at which the playwright, director and actors were also participants. The play was performed at the Great Exhibition Road Festival in 2019 and again at an Imperial Lates event on infectious diseases.

Resources

See the Edinburgh Fringe's guides for more information on how to put on different performances:

www.edfringe.com/take-part

Promote yourself as a science performer on these science presenter networks:

www.sciencelive.net

www.scients.co.uk

More detailed guidance and drawing crowds for your event:

www.billetto.co.uk/l/how-to-promote-an-event

