Royal Society of Biology

Biology Week

How to run an online event

Help us celebrate Biology Week online

This pack has been produced to help RSB members and volunteers who are looking for help in planning an event as part of Biology Week.

Biology Week is an annual celebration of biology with events all over the UK and beyond for everyone, regardless of background in biology. The week is a great opportunity to share a passion for biology and the natural world.

The week celebrates the whole of biosciences and encompasses events and activities that appeal to all audiences. We're hoping this pack will help you in organising an event with help from a wider team of volunteers, an organisation or committee you are already involved with, or a team from your work or local community.

Getting started

Online events can take any number of forms – you could broadcast a lecture through YouTube, host a zoom networking session, produce downloadable resources for people to do activities at home, run an online quiz, or anything else that is possible with a digital device and internet connection.

Online events have a number of benefits compared to in real life events – they are often cheaper to run with no venue hire or transport costs, and can bring in audiences from all over the world.

Many online platforms offer additional services to save you time and resources, such as event registration, recording and post-event feedback.

We recommend before starting to plan any event you check with current Government guidelines, including those that may only be in effect in your region, to ensure your event is as safe and secure as possible.

Deciding on a target audience

As with any event, online or in-person, it is important to consider who your target audience is going to be.

After identifying your target audience, you can then decide what event format would appeal to them, and what digital platform may be best through which to reach your audience based on their existing preferences.

A lot of popular social media platforms are appealing to many different demographics, so choose a platform that is familiar to your audience, and also enables you to run your event as you wish.

Event ideas

One of the hardest parts of organising an event is coming up with an idea that will translate well into an online format. Common events that work well in this format include:

Panel discussions

Having a number of speakers, with different expertise, discuss a certain topic can work well in an online format. Participants can be muted so as not to interfere with the discussion, and a host can chair the event and pose questions to panellists. To create a more interactive atmosphere, questions can be taken live from attendees.

Lectures

Hosting a lecture on an interesting and informative topic can be very popular as an online event, and many online video conferencing platforms have the capacity to share screens, allowing the speaker to deliver slides with their presentation.

It is important to remember with lectures that the speaker may be the only person visible to participants in the 'room'. It can therefore be even more of a challenge to maintain engagement and encourage participation from the audience, so ensure your speaker is prepared for this.

Quizzes and games

For a more informal and family-style event, online quizzes and games can be very successfully delivered online. Websites such as Kahoot allow event organisers to put together an online quiz, and participants can enter a unique pin to join the quiz and answer the questions.

You can also engage your online participants with live polls, Q&A and quizzes as they are watching your virtual event using Slido or Mentimeter. Combining this with a video conference allows maximum interaction for participants.

Virtual tours

Many museums, galleries, gardens and zoos have online tours to guide you through their exhibits and grounds without leaving the comfort of your own home.

Encourage all your event attendees follow the same route and discuss what they are seeing to maintain a group feel and engagement from your guests.

Check museums and gardens locally to you, or search further afield to larger sites such as the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, the National Aquarium in Baltimore or Kew Gardens.

Craft together

Take inspiration from the RSB's Nancy Rothwell Award and celebrate the convergence of science and art. Many guests may already have supplies lying around the home to participate in virtual origami, painting, or drawing.

Choosing your platform

Finding an appropriate online platform can be a challenge, and although there is a wealth of information and options available it is worth taking some time to assess the costs and benefits of these and what type of experience you want to achieve.

Some factors to consider when choosing your platform:

- What platform is already a preference with your target audience?
- Do you want your online event to be accessible to anyone, or only a select audience?
- Is there a time limit for your meeting? Free zoom packages may limit meetings to 40 minutes.
- Will participants be able to join using just a link or will they need to register or create a profile on the platform?
- Will the meeting be password protected?
- Is there a limit on the number of participants?
- Are you able to record the event?
- Have you got consent from those being filmed?
- How will you share footage or audio afterwards?
- Is there a 'screen sharing' facility for speakers?
- Is there capability for subtitles for guests that are hard of hearing?
- Are you able to control participant interaction to minimise disruption?

If you are planning a smaller event with audience interaction (e.g. topical talk and Q&A) a webinar platform would be useful. If you want a larger event (e.g. lecture) with limited interaction, a live streaming platform may be preferable.

The following offer free options for setting up an account and are popular options for online talks, discussions and lectures:

- Skype
- Zoom
- Webex
- Microsoft Teams
- YouTube

Before making a final decision on a platform, test the platform out and see whether it meets the requirements of your event.

For more information on hosting a Zoom online event, and for tips on managing attendee participation, you can download our Zoom instructions for hosts.

Accessibility and inclusion

To ensure that as many people as possible can get involved with your event it is important that they are accessible and inclusive.

- Is the platform free to use?
- Could captioning be provided for video footage?
- If there are slides, is the font easy to read?
- Have you ensured a range of demographics are represented across your speakers?

Using social media

Utilising social media platforms is a great way to run or promote your online event, as they already come with a cultivated audience that have signed up to the platform.

You can use social media channels to either livestream your event if it is a broadcast, advertise your event if it is a private talk or networking session, or even run a social media campaign as your event in itself.

Specifications of the media hosted by four popular social media channels are below:

	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	YouTube
Copy	62,206 character limit	280 character limit	2,200 characters	Video description has 5000 character limit
Web links	Supported	Supported	Not supported in posts, just in the bio link of the account	In video description
Hashtags	Supported but rarely used	Supported	Supported	Supported but rarely used
Type of images supported	GIF, JPEG and PNG	GIF, JPEG and PNG	GIF, JPEG and PNG	GIF, JPEG and PNG for video thumbnail only
Image size	Up to 5MB	Up to 5MB	Up to 5MB	2MB for thumbnail
Image dimensions	Recommended: 1200 x 628px	Recommended: 1200 x 628px	Recommended: 1080 x 1080px	1280 x 720 for thumbnail
Image Aspect ratio	Aspect ratio: not defined	Aspect ratio: 16:9	Aspect ratio: between 1.91:1 and 4:5	16:9 (same as video)
Supporting video file types	.MP4 and .MOV	.MP4 for web and .MOV for mobile	.MP4 and .MOV	.MOV, .MPEG4, MP4, .AVI, .WMV, .MPEGPS, .FLV, 3GPP, and WebM.
Maximum video file size	4GB	512MB	4GB	28GB
Maximum Video length	120 minutes	2 minutes 20 seconds	60 seconds	12 hours
Recommended video dimensions	1280 x 720	Landscape: 1280 x 720 Portrait: 640 x 640	Minimum resolution for landscape video is 600 x 315 Minimum resolution for square video is 600 x 600 Minimum resolution for vertical video is 600 x 750	854 x 480 (480p), 1280 x 720 (720p), 1920 x 1080 (1080p)
Video aspect ratio	16:9, but Mobile renders video to 2:3.	Between 1:3 and 3:1	Between 1.91:1 and 4:5	16:9
Ability to livestream?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Livestream chat function?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

More social media specifications can be found online.

Advertising your online event

Social media is a great way to advertise your event, and also document the event as it develops. If you are running a debate or lecture, you can use twitter to take questions from those in the audience or those following at home.

Make sure to use the hashtag #BiologyWeek in all of your posts.

Producing video

Producing video content is great as video content typically performs better on social media channels. You can either publish pre-recorded videos of lectures, talks etc. or broadcast live through a number of social media channels.

Social media livestreaming

Live-streaming with one or two people can easily be done through social media.

On Instagram, you can broadcast from two accounts simultaneously, and it comes with a chat function so you can receive comments from those watching.

On YouTube, you can broadcast live via a webcam or setting up a third party video stream through a YouTube channel, although this is slightly trickier than using a webcam.

YouTube live broadcasts come with a chat function so people can comment and chat with each other in real time. A great introductory video on how to use YouTube to livestream can be found online.

Photo and video permissions

When taking photos or videoing in public spaces, you do not need to obtain permission of those present to take the photos. However, if you are running or broadcasting your event in a publicly accessible space, it is advised you put up signs informing those taking part in your event or activity may appear on film.

Picking a date, time and length of your event

Depending on the nature of your target audience, some dates or times for an event may be more suitable than others.

Having a selection of potential event dates in the early stages of organisation is useful to ensure the speakers and committee members are available.

For online events, audiences may benefit from screen breaks, so what may have once been a full day of talks and discussions may work better as multiple shorter sessions online, maybe over the course of a few days.

Funding your event

Another benefit of running an online event is the low cost as expenses such as venue hire and refreshments do not apply. However, speakers may request fees or an honorarium for attending, and some online video platforms will charge for extra features such as recording.

You can charge guests a nominal fee to help guarantee attendance and add value to the content of the event, however this could restrict the numbers who wish to register in the first place.

There are a number of ways to ensure you can afford to run your event, with many grants and schemes available that offer financial support:

Sponsorship

Some businesses and companies are often willing to sponsor an event. Depending on their size and budgets they may be willing to cover some of the costs, help with resources, or both, potentially in return for often logos on communications, banners or more.

When obtaining sponsorship, consider:

- What sort of sponsors you would like to be associated with and if there are criteria that may make a sponsor an inappropriate choice to align with your event
- Whether you will offer exclusive sponsorship; some sponsors may prefer and will provide more funds for an exclusive partnership but bear in mind if this is appropriate
- What you can provide in return for sponsorship, such as logos or artwork on banners, posters, email footers, a speaker slot etc

Consider putting a sponsorship package together, detailing different levels of funding companies could offer you in return for different benefits.
Offering packages means a company can then clearly see what they'll receive in return for their sponsorship.

If you are able to secure sponsorship, draw up a contract that details the exact agreement, to ensure there are no misaligned expectations on either side.

Safety, security and back-up plans

Risk assessments

It is advisable to complete a risk assessment for your event to ensure you have considered all possible risks, who they may effect and how this might occur.

The main risk when holding an online event is being able to maintain control over participants (i.e. capacity to mute/hide cameras), and manage any technical difficulties that may occur.

Ensure that only those who have registered are able to access private events – this can be done by sharing URLs or login details only once an audience member has registered on the day of the event.

It is important that you have a good internet connection and you are familiar with the platform you are using for the event. There is also a reputational risk should the event go wrong in any way.

Some other security and safety considerations include:

- Do you have relevant insurance for your event if it is required?
- Will you need DBS checks for those involved?
- If the event involves working with children, young people or vulnerable adults, have you taken all the reasonable steps needed to ensure their safety?
- Will you be taking photos or recording on the day? If children are involved, are the necessary notices and permissions in place to take their photos?
- Do you have contingency plans in place should a technical error occur?

An example risk assessment form can be found on the our branch resources page.

Creating a backup plan

Having a backup plan or second option in the event of any major issues will ensure that your event can run smoothly no matter what. It is important to remain flexible and be quick to adapt to solve any problem that arises.

Testing your platform ahead of time is essential to make sure you understand the technical capacities of the software, as well as making sure you can smoothly and efficiently maintain control over attendees, speakers and hosts.

Holding an event run-through a few days before the event with any other speakers or organisers, will help you iron out any creases and establish everyone's role in advance.

If you are using an online platform such as Zoom, it may be useful to schedule two different meetings, in case there is a technical issue with the first link or meeting ID. This way, you can quickly let all your attendees know and resume the event with minimal delay.

As with an in-person event, it is important to ensure that you have a contingency plan in place if a speaker is running late, or does not show up on the day. This may involve having a back-up speaker, or having one of the event organisers step in to give an overview of their role and the importance of the event to buy some time if the speaker is running late.

The main thing to remember is to keep attendees informed, and try and act quickly and calmly.

Marketing and promotion

The success of your event relies in large part on successful marketing and promotion. During Biology Week, we want to advertise as many events as possible to help increase your audience!

We can help promote your event on our social media, and advertise your event on the official Biology Week calendar.

If you wish to include any Biology Week branding in your marketing, check out our one-stop branding shop on the RSB website.

To add your event to the calendar, submit your event details to the RSB via our online form.

Tasks for before the event

Guest lists

Depending on the platform you choose to use, you may need to keep a secure list of people who have registered for your event if applicable. Some platforms, such as Zoom, and Skype's Meet Now, do not require attendees to create an account, and all guests will need to join the online event is a joining link.

Some platforms have the functionality to take bookings for you, and will automatically generate a post-event email for you, meaning you do not have to handle people's personal data yourself.

For broadcasting platforms that do not allow guests to register, other platforms like EventBrite can allow people register their interest or even purchase tickets. Those who register can then be contacted with details of the event nearer the time.

For events not openly being broadcasted to the public, this contact is essential to let guests know what platform to use and any passwords or access codes they will need to join the event.

Event test run

A few days before the event, it is a good idea to set aside time to do a test run on the platform chosen. This can be used for everyone involved to familiarise themselves with the platform and additionally acts as a briefing session so that everyone is aware of their role during the event.

During the event

Setting up the event

If you are running an online meeting or discussion, begin the session on your chosen platform five to 10 minutes before the scheduled start time. This will give you time to check everything is working as it should, your audio is playing through the right audio device, etc.

If you are broadcasting live, ensure all of this is done before the broadcast begins and is available to the public. Consider running pilot broadcasts that can be set to private so only those with the URL can see to test out settings and functionality – this is possible on YouTube broadcasts, but may require setting up dummy accounts for Instagram Live or Twitter.

Use computer audio instead of phone audio whenever possible, as it will give far better quality of sound. The use of headphones is also important for good audio, as they improve the experience for everyone.

For larger online meetings, having someone other than the chair or presenters look after the technical running of the meeting, muting people, keeping an eye on raised hands or chat messages, etc, will make for a smoother experience overall for everyone.

Hosting or chairing an online meeting or discussion

Allow up to 10 minutes after the beginning to start to allow for latecomers due to internet or setup issues.

At the beginning of the online event, it is a good idea to notify guests whether they are muted or not, and to highlight other ways they are able to communicate with the hosts such as through the chat.

For any call involving more than two people, adopt the practice of muting all participants that aren't talking – it will greatly improve the audio, reduce feedback, and stop all sorts of ambient noises from many different quarters creating a distracting environment in your meeting.

When sharing documents or screens, don't share multiple screens at once and ideally use the software feature to share only a specific application window rather than the screen.

Even more than in physical meeting, ask participants to not talk over each other and actively manage the floor in this way. Where available in the software, ask people to use the "raise hand" or similar function if they want the floor or want to ask a question rather than trying to get your attention verbally.

Finishing the event

Ensure you remind participants how they can leave feedback or find out further information if appropriate. Be sure to properly close all livestreams, broadcasts or any other live webpages.

After the event

If possible, try to obtain feedback from those who attended the event, alongside offering your thanks for them taking part. Do this for both attendees and any speakers you have invited to help deliver the event.

Evaluation techniques

Some online platforms will include the option to send out a post-event feedback form on your behalf, or include a couple of feedback questions at the end of the event for your information and evaluation.

There are a number of ways to evaluate online events including during the event through polls, voting and a post event survey. You can ask questions about accessibility, topics covered, joining information and include space for suggestions and improvements.

Self-reflection

It is also important to take time to record how you as the activity organiser felt about the event.
Things to consider and record include:

- How you felt the event went on the day
- How you felt organising the event went
- Challenges you faced and how you overcame them
- Successes of the event and how you might replicate them in the future
- Improvements you can make
- Lessons you can take forward for future events
- People you met and potential future partnership opportunities

Contact your local branch

You should contact your local RSB branch who can help you run your event and make sure they're aware of the work you are doing. They are a great source of support and can let you know about any grants that are available to help towards the cost of your event.

They also have a lot of resources already available to help with event planning, publicising and running, and can also put you in touch with others in the area who are interested in biology and may want to get involved too. Find your local branch on our website or find out what events are already happening near you.

Many of the RSB branches also have their own social media channels. You can find their Facebook pages by searching on Facebook using the branch name, and there is a list of branch Twitter accounts online.

Need more help or information?

For further information on Biology Week or advice on running an event please contact:

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We can offer advice and guidance from our outreach and engagement team.