

# HOW TO RUN A PANEL DEBATE



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Panel debates allow decision makers and young people to discuss issues which affect them. A good panel debate can engage an audience and give them a chance to have their say.

There is no single way to run a panel debate, but this guide will give you some things to think about when organising a successful debate.

## WHO IS GOING TO HELP YOU SET UP THE EVENT?

Firstly, decide who can help you to organise the panel debate. Ideally you'll want a couple of people who can volunteer their time up to the day of your youth panel debate and help out on the day itself! The amount of people you ask to help depends on the size of the event you are going to hold.

## WHO IS GOING TO CHAIR THE DEBATE?

You also need to think about who you would like to chair the panel debate. The role of a Chair is demanding and requires strong time management and communication skills. The Chair encourages full participation from the audience and panel during the debate. The Chair also promotes effective discussion, covering all the relevant areas in the time allowed, with everyone getting a fair turn to speak without being interrupted.

Ideally this would be a chair who is 16 or 17. Remember, you need a Chair who is not shy about forcing people to stick to the timetable you've agreed.

## THE PURPOSE OF YOUR PANEL DEBATE IS...

Take time to make sure you have clear objectives for your panel debate. What do you want to achieve?

## TIMING

Make sure that the meeting doesn't clash with any other major events. Decide on a date and time of day that will maximise how many young people can make it.

Decide how long the panel debate will last. As an example, this might be 40 minutes with twenty minutes for questions from the floor. Remember that a debate that overruns can be frustrating and counterproductive, especially if one person is talking too much or panellists get stuck discussing one question too long.

## LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Where you going to hold your event is an important consideration. Make sure you think about the following:

- Can you get a venue for free or will you have to pay for it? If you have to pay where is the money going to come from?
- How big should the venue be? Choose the size of your venue according to how many people you think will turn up. It will be disappointing if you book a room for 500 and 50 turn up. It is better to book a room that can seat 40 and have ten people standing at the back.
- Does your room have an area where the panellists can sit and be heard, such as a stage? Will everyone in the room be able to hear them?

## WHO ARE YOU GOING TO INVITE TO BE ON THE PANEL?

The panel might consist of local councillors, Assembly Members, Members of Parliament, other experts and decision makers both young and old who will debate a topic and respond to questions.

You should aim to get representatives from each of the main political parties in your area to ensure there's a good debate. You probably do not want more than five panellists, including the chair of the debate.

Ensure your email or letter to your MP and your local councillors contains practical details about the event – it's time, location, plus information about the reason why you want to hold a youth panel debate.

When you receive a response from a panellist make sure you ask for a contact number for them on the day of your youth panel debate, in case you need to get in touch with them for any reason.

Decide how many young people you want to invite and set up a way of managing who wants to come. For example you might want to set up an event on Facebook, or if it's a larger event use a free events management system such as [Eventbrite](#).

## HOW TO PROMOTE YOUR PANEL DEBATE

To get people to the event you will need to do some promotion. Decide where you are going to talk about the event – it may be posters, through social networking, blogs or even asking your local radio station to do a shout out about it.

Offer an incentive to those who turn up early you may even think of offering prizes to the first 20 people to arrive and then give them each a lollypop (or something equally cheap and silly!)

You should be careful that any materials produced are not too supportive to the policy position of any candidate or political party; or so obviously opposed to an individual candidate or political party. Not only can this make your debate seem biased, but it could be seen as campaign funding, and therefore against electoral law particularly if an election is due.

According to the law, once an election has been called any placard or poster published, posted or distributed, which refers to the election must include on its first page the name and address of the printer and publisher.

For example:

*“Printed and published by X” followed by your address*

or

*“Printed by X Printers, 123 Typeset Street, Printerbury. Published by X” again followed by your address.*

This information may be put in a form of an imprint at the bottom of the page. If you fail to comply with this you may face a hefty fine.

## WHO SPEAKS WHEN?

You need to decide who is going to speak and in what order. There is no set order of discussion. Sometimes the debate starts with each panel member giving a speech. Then it will move to questions. It all depends if you are going to use prearranged questions or non prearranged questions.

## ARE YOU GOING TO HAVE PREARRANGED QUESTIONS OR NOT?

Whether you have prearranged questions or not, panel debates can still be successful. But it is a good idea to consider both options so below are some tables showing the pros and cons of both options:

### Having Pre-Arranged Questions

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They can give structure to the whole panel debate</li> <li>• Allow the panel experts to prepare answers</li> <li>• Help the audience to know what the topic is and so prepare for the debate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They can be too structured</li> <li>• Restrict the flow of the debate because you have to move on to the next topic</li> <li>• Do not allow for the panel to be surprised!</li> </ul>

### Not Having Pre-Arranged Questions

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They encourage a free debate</li> <li>• Allow for in-depth debate on one or many topics of interests within the time period</li> <li>• Allow spontaneous discussion to take place</li> <li>• Give everyone the space to think and have a freedom of ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They can be too unstructured</li> <li>• Can cause the debate to over-run</li> <li>• Can be a sign of weak planning and make you look under prepared</li> <li>• The panellists may feel under-prepared</li> </ul>

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## WHAT TO DO ON THE DAY OF THE PANEL DEBATE:

On the day of the panel debate make sure you bear the following points in mind:

### SET UP:

Make sure you and your team get to the panel debate location early enough to set up the seats and an information and sign-in table.

### CONTACT DETAILS:

When young people arrive ask if you can collect their e-mail addresses so you can give them follow up information after the event.

### TAKE NOTES:

Ask a member of the team to write notes of what people said. This means you can email them to people who gave you their email address to give them a summary of what happened. You also have a record of what the panellists agreed.

### MEET THE PANELLISTS:

Make sure a member of your team meets panellists as they arrive and show them to their seats.

### TAKE PHOTOGRAPHS:

Ask a member of your team to take photographs or film the event (make sure you announce to people who are attending the event that if they don't wish to have their photograph taken or be filmed to make sure they tell you).

### CLEAR UP:

Make sure you have people to help you clear up afterwards!

## CELEBRATE YOUR PANEL DEBATE

The final step is to let people know about the results of your panel debate. One way to do this is to send some information to your local newspaper through a press release. You can do this by:

- Finding out the contact details of your local newspaper such as email address or address. Deciding what you want to tell the local press. Did 50 young people turn up at your event because they wanted the voting age to be reduced to 16?
- Writing a short press release. Make sure your first paragraph says what happened, who attended the event, where and when the panel debate took place and why.
- The press release shouldn't be more than three paragraphs long. Make sure it has a snappy and short headline.
- Asking your panellists for a quote for your press release (to save time you might want to do this at your youth panel debate).
- Sending a photograph of your event to the local newspaper as well as your story. Sometimes a photo is all that a newspaper needs to tell a story. You could also get your story heard in different places - why not write a piece for your local student paper or blog about it?
- Let the Votes at 16 Coalition know how your panel debate went!