



# Best practices for engaging and dynamic sessions

AASHE offers educational content in a variety of online formats, including [webinars](#), [workshops](#), [courses](#), and sessions at the annual [Global Conference on Sustainability in Higher Education](#). This document offers guidelines, best practices and tips for how to build and deliver an interactive online session.<sup>1</sup>

## Background

Good sessions leave you feeling energized, inspired and ready to take on the world. A bad presentation, however, can leave you bored, confused or overwhelmed. Typical presentations use a simple format: welcome and introduction followed by the content (usually supported by slides) and a Q&A at the end. However, this format may not be as engaging as you'd like and often lacks the person-to-person connection that attendees look for.

*Typical webinar (60-mins) or conference (45-mins) session formats*

Activity	Timing (minutes)
Welcome & Introductions	5
Individual slide deck presentation	35-45
Questions from the audience	5-10
	<b>45-60</b>

Instead of this approach, we recommend designing your session as a collaborative experience that taps into the expertise of the participants and ultimately leaves them with quality insights and inspiration for the future. To keep an audience engaged, think about changing up what you're doing and limiting blocks of activities to a maximum of 10-15 minutes. Adult learning effectiveness wanes after this time.

We recommend these five simple steps in developing your session:

1. Review your **goals for the session** and design around them (e.g., demonstrating and practicing a skill, reviewing a research paper, brainstorming solutions, rallying the community around an issue, showcasing a project or initiative).

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<sup>1</sup> This resource is inspired by conversations with [Lee Gimpel](#) (founder of [Better Meetings](#)), materials from [Better Meetings](#) and discussions with the Professional Development Professionals Community of the [American Society of Association Executives](#).

2. Decide on a [format](#) that would best support these goals: debate, interview, fishbowl, short individual presentation, case study discussion, etc.
3. Choose the [activities](#) that would work well with the format and goals you decided.
4. [Build your session](#) taking into account your time limitation and [best practices for online engagement](#) and [breakout rooms](#) (if applicable).
5. **Practice** your planned activities at least once or twice to make sure the session flows well and activities are within your intended time limits.

## Alternative formats to classic presentations

- **Point/counter-point sessions or debates:** multiple presenters (or teams of presenters) engage in a debate and then include the audience in the discussion.
- **Fishbowl sessions:** a form of dialog that can be used when discussing topics within large groups. [This format](#) helps people manage a debate on the topic and keep it under control even if many people are participating. At any given time, a group of people will be actively debating while the rest of the group listens in and takes notes of various viewpoints. Through an iterative process, many participants will get to both listen and participate in the discussion about the topic. See this [detailed description with resources](#) for online adaptation.
- **Panel discussions** (which are *not* a series of individual presentations)
  - **bullet-point session** where each panelist discusses 3-5 bullet points each
  - **interview-style** with common questions and a discussion based on attendee questions
- [Pecha Kucha](#), [Ignite](#), [Kawasaki 10/20/30](#): these short presentation formats can be equally or more effective than a longer session by allowing the presenter to distill down the content and then connect with the audience by including other engagement elements (see [Groupwork, Discussion & Questions](#)) throughout the session.
- **Storytelling or Performance-type sessions:** humans are hardwired for stories and various formats can be used to reflect and build upon the authentic experiences of an individual, a team, or a community. See [storytelling examples](#) in the Campus Sustainability Hub.
  - **Case Study** discussion: the best case studies all have one thing in common: great storytelling. They include a proper narrative and storyline including the problem, the resolution, and the (happy) ending. Involve the audience to extract valid insight, credible expertise, and meaningful advice on a subject.
  - **Solution labs:** someone's issue is presented to the audience (by interviewing the person, including questions from the audience or by showing a pre-recorded video clip with the person describing the issue, etc) and the facilitators moderate a series of steps to come up with solutions from the audience; can include brainstorming, breakout rooms, polls, etc.
- **World Café** sessions: drawing on [seven integrated design principles](#), this is a simple, effective and flexible format for hosting large group dialogue. By organizing several rounds with specific questions, attendees are invited to discuss a topic of mutual interest in small groups. This format enables bringing together individual ideas into one comprehensive message. A similar and simpler version is the [Knowledge Café](#). See [World Café examples](#) in the Campus Sustainability Hub
- **Peer Exchange:** this format is a hybrid of a networking event and panel session and it is a great way to foster community. When confronted with a new reality, people want to hear from anyone in the same boat. How are others dealing with the new situation? What changes are people making that hold a job title similar to my own? Collect questions from your target audience in advance and pose

them to the participants of the meeting. Use the responses as a starting point for the discussion. For larger audiences, consider using breakout rooms, so you can split people up for more intimate group conversations

## Activities<sup>2</sup>

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Consider these activity categories to choose from to build your session:

- **Welcoming, Icebreakers & Intros**: this section provides energy, rapport and context related to why we're here what to expect (set the stage); keep it concise and on point
  - use icebreakers that frame your conversation and align with the goals of your session
  - for intros with a larger group, consider using breakout rooms or chat storms (give attendees a minute or two to write down their answer to the prompt without sending; everybody sends at the same time in the chat; give them another minute or two to read through all answers).
- (short) **Individual or Panel Presentations**
  - consider individual presentations that are short and engaging like Pecha Kucha, Ignite, Storytelling, etc
  - good panel presentations are *not* a series of individual presentations; see [alternative format suggestions](#): Debate, Interview, Fishbowl, etc
- **Groupwork, Discussion & Questions**: the easiest way to create dynamic sessions is to bring the audience into the conversation in an active way: to discuss an issue, help each other or put their heads together to come up with a solution.
  - include the audience as a co-creator of the session - their expertise will add to the shared learning experience
  - Sample activities:
    - "think/pair/share or pair/share/declare" (1-3-6-All, 1-4, 1-3-All, 1-3-6, etc): break big groups into smaller groups and then bring smaller groups into bigger groups to share and distill ideas
    - Hands-on work: Scenario roleplaying or collaborating in a document
    - Peer Feedback, Problem Solving, or Consulting/Coaching session (takes 30-40 minutes): groups of 3-4 with each participant taking the role of the client: the first client shares his or her challenge or question (2-3 minutes); consultants ask the client clarifying questions (1-2 minutes); client turns off-camera; together, the consultants generate ideas, suggestions, coaching advice (4-5 minutes); client turns back camera and draws conclusions (1 minute); switch client and repeat
    - Case study discussion, World Café, Peer Exchange, etc
- **Breaks**: help us digest information, add energy back into a session or help bring the focus back to the content; add at least a 5-minute break for every 45-60 minutes and don't go without a break for more than 90 minutes
- **Artifacts, Next Steps & Closings**: consider ways to create something with the audience that is lasting and that attendees can refer back to: meeting minutes, a mind map, sign-up sheet, etc.
  - end with purpose, enthusiasm and on a positive note

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<sup>2</sup> Activities and templates are inspired by materials from [Better Meetings](#)' "How to approach a seminar or webinar"

## Examples<sup>2</sup>

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The following are examples of how to approach a presentation by breaking it into blocks of activities.

### New Example #1

Activity	Timing (minutes)
Welcoming - Ground Rules	3
Play pre-recorded presentation	12
Icebreakers & Intros – Paired Networking	5
Discussion Prompt (with poll)	3
Group work, Discussion & Questions – Small-to-Large (1-3-all) to generate questions	10
Report-out (via chat) & Audience-driven Q&A forum	10
Closing	2
	<b>45</b>

### New Example #2

Activity	Timing (minutes)
Welcoming – Hellos / Set the tone / Technology	5
Welcome Performance	7
Icebreaker around performance & Intros – Paired networking	8
Panel Presentation of Case Study (sent ahead of time) – Interview-style	12
Small Group Discussion of Case Study	15
Audience-driven Q&A forum	8
Closings – including action steps and assignments	5
	<b>60</b>

### New Example #3

Activity	Timing (minutes)
Welcoming – Standard welcome	3
Welcoming – Technology primer, Agenda & Timeline	7
Icebreakers & Intros – Introductions via chat storm	5
Panel Presentations – Fishbowl	15
Group Work, Discussion & Questions – Small-to-Large (1-3) to generate questions	7
Artifacts & Next Steps – Post It board of questions (e.g., Jamboard)	8
Breaks – Scavenger Hunt	5
Breaks – Show and Tell	5
Panel Presentations – Fishbowl (continued)	10
Breaks – Journaling (individual reflections)	5
Closings - Recap of what was accomplished	5
	<b>75</b>

# Best Practices

## Considerations for online engagement

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- Plan for a 5-minute break activity (e.g., “email-checking” or bathroom break; a breathing, yoga or stretching activity; take an outside walk) for every hour of content.
- Plan to change what you’re doing every 10-15 minutes.
- If adapting in-person content, trim at least one-third - it takes longer to get things done in a virtual setting.
- Open with a short performance or music, end with a poem.
- Gamify the opening, for example, a virtual scavenger hunt to start things off. "The first three people who find something in their house that is red, square and old will win bragging rights." Participants then rush to find something like what was asked for and show it on their camera. Make it fun.
- Assign reading materials prior to the event and do more pre-work separately, then skip the slideshow and start the discussion from a point that is further along.
- Pre-record your presentation and join the broadcast to chat with attendees and contribute to the conversation and then continue with a live discussion and activities.
- Don’t overwhelm your slides with text and data. Make slides more illustrative. Provide handouts with more detailed information for people to review later.
- Get the audience to interact with each other and/or the presenter. Questions can be asked throughout the presentation and not just at the end.
- Use polls effectively:
  - Self-diagnostic to take during the presentation and tailor activities accordingly.
  - People take a "magazine quiz" followed by a poll with where they ended up and then the content is adjusted based on the largest response group.
  - Use music during quiz/poll questions.
  - Use polls as an ice breaker and ask attendees a fun or current question.
- Use [zoom whiteboard](#) like a flip chart with annotation for all participants to contribute.
- Incorporate intentional spaces to reflect and think:
  - Silence is ok! We are so uncomfortable with silence in the virtual setting and it is ok to allow it in the virtual spaces the same we do in real-world spaces.
  - Consider breakout rooms of 1 for reflections (with a prompt!).
- Create something with the group; it’s easier to engage an audience if they understand you’re building towards something: a template for a project, a list of best practices, etc.
- Add real-world elements, for example: look out the window and tell us what you see; bring an object and share something about it; go outside during a break, etc.
- Let people work at their own pace or out of sequence, be flexible and get creative with timing and flow.

## Breakout rooms best practices

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- For facilitators:
  - Breakout rooms allow you to split your meeting into 50 separate sessions. The participants can be assigned randomly or they can choose which breakout room to enter. Before planning to use breakout rooms, think carefully about what you want to accomplish during this time.
  - Activities that work well with breakout rooms:
    - **Intros:** Paired Networking
    - **Groupwork, Discussion & Questions:** Brainstorm Ideas; Peer Feedback; Think-Pair-Share (1-3-6-all); Scenario Roleplaying; Problem Solving (see [examples](#))
    - **Artifacts, Next Steps:** Shared Document (Feedback Document, Jamboard, Mural, Spreadsheet, Mind Map, etc.); Reflection & Takeaways
  - Always breakout with a prompt - provide guidance to participants for what they should discuss, work or reflect on while in the breakout.
  - Set a timer: allocate a time limit to the breakout rooms to keep your agenda on track and also for the participants to know how much time is remaining as they work through their exercise/task
  - Encourage participants to start with brief introductions if they don't know each other, maximum of 30 seconds per person, encourage them to use the included timer.
  - If multiple roles are needed, make it clear before they breakout: facilitator, notetaker, report out, etc.
  - Breakout room teams can work on the same document: for example different tabs on a shared spreadsheet that you prepare in advance and number each tab by the breakout rooms numbers, a Jamboard or [Mural](#). Having one central space helps keep all the input in one place and it is easy to review and refer back.
  - If pairs are not required for your activity, it is better to have a minimum of 3 participants in each breakout room - helps with the flow of the conversation and the "randomness" of participants in the rooms.
- For participants:
  - A good practice is to keep your camera on if possible.
  - Try to actively listen to your partner: pay full attention, engage and respond.
  - Make sure everyone in the room is included in the conversation; try to give each participant equal "air time".
  - If roles are needed (e.g., facilitator, notetaker, report out) or a share-out is expected, designate who does what at the beginning of the breakout session.

## Additional Resources

[The Art Of Online Hosting: From Powerpoint To Powerful Multi-stakeholder Partnerships Tools and Methods](#)