



## Toolkit #02

# Putting on an exhibition about your research

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### About this toolkit

This toolkit is designed to help you plan and hold an exhibition to disseminate your research for a non-academic audience. It draws mainly on our experiences of organising an exhibition in connection with the Living Resemblances project in a community arts centre in Manchester in March 2008.



### Why put on an exhibition?

It really is worth thinking hard about why you want to put on an exhibition. Think through these questions:

1. What is the *purpose* of the exhibition? You should be able to describe this in one or two sentences in Plain English.
2. *Who* is the exhibition for? Be specific, especially if you are tempted to answer this question with "the general public". Why will these people want to come to your exhibition?
3. Do you have the *resources* to put on an exhibition? Especially time, money and energy.

Other dissemination methods could be just as effective for your purposes, and they will usually be a lot quicker, easier and cheaper to do. If you want to disseminate your research to academics, then conference papers could be more appropriate. If you want to disseminate your research to policymakers across the country then produce a good findings leaflet and post it to them, or put a video on your website and publicise it by email. If you have media contacts, use them to get your message across.

Putting on an exhibition can be a good way of disseminating your research to people who might not otherwise find out about it. In our case, the topic of family resemblances was one that a lot of people were fascinated by. It is a topic that it easy for people to identify with and it also lends itself to visual explanation which meant that we could use a lot of graphics and photographs in the exhibition.

## Budget

The costs for each exhibition will be different. Some of the typical costs are:

- Gallery hire (may include a hanging fee and staffing costs)
- Fees paid to other people eg for artwork or producing material
- Printing material for exhibition
- Frames and other fittings, and sometimes the cost of framing
- Publicity eg producing leaflets, signs and posters
- Hiring display stands, tables, chairs
- Hiring audio-visual equipment
- Miscellaneous eg postage, travel costs
- If you have a launch:
  - Printing invitations or leaflets
  - Refreshments
  - Venue costs eg corkage for drinks at launch, staff costs for technicians

Be aware that a lot of these costs can vary widely (especially venue, printing and framing costs) so you will save yourself a lot of trouble by getting estimates for these costs before you start work. Try to include a contingency fund in your budget.

Of course, the biggest cost is likely to be the time spent planning, designing and setting up the exhibition. If you are doing this yourself or with colleagues it might not show up on your budget, but don't underestimate it. Can you afford to spend the time on an exhibition rather than something else?

You could consider showing part or all of your exhibition in other venues at a later date to get the best value out of your hard work.

## Choosing your space

Compile a list of venues that are within your budget that are available when you want to put on your exhibition.

Choose the right venue for your audience. Make sure it is convenient and appealing for them. Visit the venue and see who goes there: libraries, leisure centres, shopping centres or community halls might be more appropriate than galleries or museums, depending on your content. A display stand in a busy place might be more effective than a poorly-attended exhibition in a large gallery.

Consider fitting your exhibition to the venue, rather than the other way round. A small exhibition in a good venue is likely to be more successful than a big exhibition in a poor venue.

We chose a community arts centre for our exhibition. It was a nice place to visit and it had a lively atmosphere. It was in a good location and was within budget. Staff at the gallery were friendly and helpful, too.



The arts centre we used for our exhibition

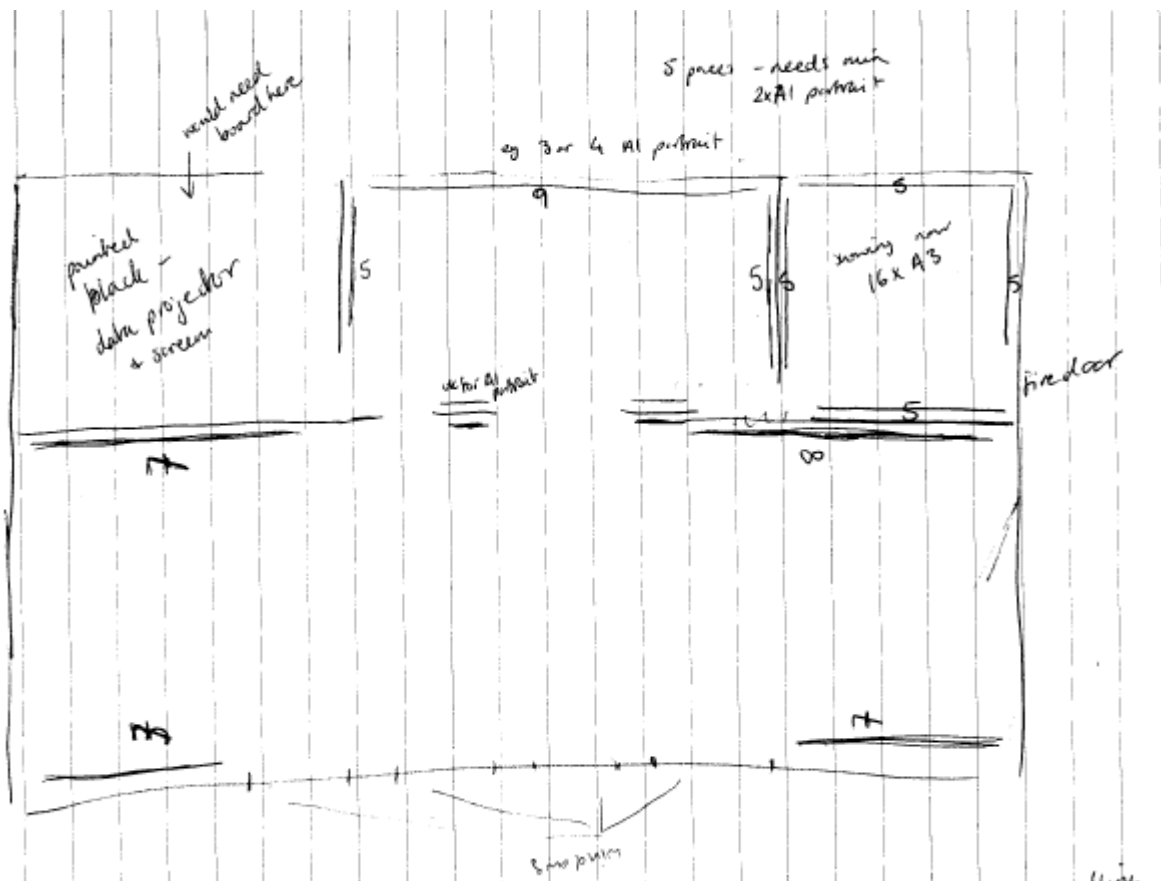
## Exhibition layout

Some venues will have a plan of the exhibition space. If not, you will need to make your own. In any case, you should visit the venue to plan the exhibition layout.

Take a camera, tape measure, squared paper and a pencil with you. Draw out a rough plan of the space and mark wall measurements, windows, doors etc. If there is a display on the walls, note how they have used the space (what size display boards/pictures have they used, how are they displayed and how many fit on one wall). Take photos of the exhibition space. Check the height of the ceiling and the lighting, if appropriate, and make notes for future reference.

It can be helpful to take posters or pieces of rough paper the same size as your display materials with you to give you an idea of how much space you have. Blu-tack them to the walls (ask first) and move them around to see how they look. Take photos. This will give you a good idea of how many display boards or pictures you can fit into the space.

Think about how people will walk round the space and mark this on your plan if possible. Try and plan it so there is a logical route through the exhibition if you want your audience to follow a story through your exhibition.



First sketch of our exhibition space

## Planning content

This stage will be a lot easier if you have chosen a venue and have a feel for how the space might work. Think back to your audience and the purpose of your exhibition and try and draw your content plan out of this.

Our exhibition was about how and why family likenesses in appearance, character and behaviour were important to us. The exhibition was part of the ESRC's Festival of Social Science and so we also wanted to show how the research had been done. We had a set of display boards commissioned from a photographer and winning photos from a competition on the theme of family resemblances. Our first content list looked a bit like this:

1. Title board
2. Project summary
3. Methodology
4. Findings
5. Sample questions on the research theme for visitors to try out
6. Photo competition winners
7. Commissioned photos
8. Acknowledgements

At this stage, you might be able to start allocating these sections to the map of your exhibition space. This should give you an idea of how much display space you will have for each section which will help you plan the number and size of your display boards or other content. This is particularly important if space is tight.

Once we had a rough list of our content, we started adding in more information about each section, for example:

Display board title *	Content	Size	Notes
How we did the research	Research methods	A1	Text, plus photos taken at interviews, sample questions
What we found out	Findings	A1 x 2	Text, family photos, diagrams
	Sample question boards	A3 x 4	3 boards with sample questions from the research for visitors to think about and respond to. One board introducing the idea and inviting response.

\* The titles on your display boards will probably be different to the ones on your original list of content: boards titled Introduction, Methodology etc wouldn't have been very appealing!

When we had a table like this we knew that what we were planning fitted the space available and we also knew how much display board space we had for each section. From here we began to produce the content for each board.

Our display boards were printed and then mounted onto 5mm foamboard, or foam-corr, by the printer. This meant that even the A1 boards were light and easy to carry

around and fix to the walls. Foamboard is also the cheapest option. All these factors meant that it suited our purpose well. The disadvantages are that boards can get scratched or marked (though ours survived fairly well). You might prefer hanging photographs in frames for a more glamorous finish, though this is more expensive.

Other ideas for displaying materials are: videos, slideshow projections, music or sound, books, games or other activities for visitors.

## Writing content

The main thing is to write in a style that is appropriate for your audience, avoiding all jargon. Try testing this on non-academic friends. Always keep the format in mind: you won't be able to develop one continuous argument through the exhibition like you would in an academic paper, because visitors will pick and choose the bits of the exhibition that look interesting to them. Though you can plan a route through your exhibition, your visitors will make their own minds up about the order they read things in!

If you are using visual data or quotations from participants do you have consent from the people involved to use it in this way?

Remember that type sizes will be much higher than everyday documents because people will be reading them at a distance rather than at arm's length. So although A1 sounds big, you typically won't fit much more than 200-250 words on the board, which is about half a page of A4 in standard type. Don't assume that people will read everything you write: the only visitors that will even attempt this will be your close family and friends!

It is also worth noting that often, the more you write, the less people read. Images and graphics are very important. They can be functional, to illustrate a particular point, or decorative, to make your display boards eye-catching and appealing, but it is hard to use too many images.

Go to other exhibitions in different kinds of places. Look at how material is presented. How big are the display boards? How much writing is on each? How big is the writing? How is the material grouped on the walls? What is the lighting like?

## Designing material

You may prefer to pass this part of the work over to a designer. Ask for samples of their previous work or find somebody on recommendation.

If you are sending your content to a designer, you will need to provide the written material (a Word file should be fine) and the pictures to be used (or you can ask the designer to source images for you though there will be an extra charge for this). You should send a list of display board sizes and the images and text to go on each.

Don't forget to supply the logos of your institution and the funding body, if applicable. Most organisations will have rules about how and where the logo is used.

You can also provide information to help the designer:

- Tell them what the boards are for and where they will be displayed. You might like to stress that legibility is more important than cutting edge design.
- If you need to use particular colours because of institutional branding, send them the colour references.
- Check when you will receive the proofs for correcting
- Make sure they know when you need the work done by

If you are showing photographs or other artwork you can get captions printed and mounted on smaller pieces of foamboard which is cut to size. Ask the printer to do this – it's impossible to cut neatly at home!



One of our display boards and its caption

## Hanging your exhibition

We found that this took longer than we expected so allow plenty of time. It's worth thinking about transporting your materials: display boards, fixing materials and other bits and bobs can be quite a lot of things to carry around.



You will need to arrange a time for you to hang your exhibition with the gallery (as well as a time to take it down). Check with them if there are any rules about this: some venues might want their technicians to do all the fixings. We found it very helpful to have some help from gallery staff who set up the lighting for us and helped us with vinyl wall lettering and drilling holes.

Things to take with you:

- All your display materials
- Spirit level, plumb line (or small weight tied to a string)
- Tape measure
- Fixings
- Other bits and bobs, eg: pens and paper for visitor activities, project leaflets and leaflet holders, scissors
- Your list of display materials
- Your map of the gallery space noting where all your material will be displayed
- A friend (this is a two person job, for practical picture-hanging purposes and moral support)

Display boards mounted on foamboard are light and can be fixed to the wall with Velcro dots. This gives you some room for manoeuvre if they need adjusting slightly. Framed photos or heavier materials will need fixing more securely.

It's your choice how to hang your materials. Some consistency will give your exhibition a more ordered appearance. One of the gallery staff advised us to hang all our boards so that the horizontal mid-point of each was 1.5m high. This worked for us and was a reasonable reading height.

## Events



Events connected with your exhibition can be a good way of getting more people to come. Having a launch on the opening day gives people a reason for turning up at a particular time, especially if you can provide a drink and a few snacks.

You could invite different groups of people to visit on different days or at different times of the day. For example, you could arrange a school visit to the exhibition during the day with extra workshop activities if you wanted to engage with young people. Real Life Methods colleagues who have also organised exhibitions have held special days for policy-makers, local people and participants in the research.

Make sure you plan your event for a day or time that suits your audience or nobody will come.

## Publicity

It is very important to put a lot of effort into publicising your exhibition: think how you would feel if you put together a brilliant display and nobody came!

Allow enough money and time for publicity and start it early enough. Refresh your memory about the purposes and audience of your exhibition and keep these in mind when you plan and produce your publicity. Ideas include:

- A leaflet (probably A5 or postcard size). Print a lot and leave them in places where your audience will see them
- Posters (probably a mixture of A4 and A3) for display in the local area and outside the exhibition
- Doing a press release about your research and plugging the exhibition as a way of people finding out more
- Listings in local magazines and newspapers and on local radio and community websites
- A banner outside the venue
- Telling as many people as you can think of.



Postcard advertising our exhibition

When you are designing your leaflets, pick up a few examples from other exhibitions and see what information they have on them. This should make sure you have all the basics (title, venue, opening times, details of a launch event if there is one, brief summary, logos) and it might give you other ideas too. Include a small map if you can.

## During and after the exhibition

You should think about whether you need to staff the exhibition at all times. We went to the launch party and then made sure that we checked the gallery about once a day to make sure that the exhibition still looked alright (were the boards still on the wall, had anybody written anything offensive on the comment postcards and were there enough pens and paper for visitors).

Our gallery space was in a community arts centre which was open all day so people could get access to the gallery at any time. We didn't need to hire anybody to staff the exhibition when we weren't there.

Taking down the exhibition will should be quicker than hanging it. When you go to take the exhibition down it might be useful to take:

- Packing materials: boxes, cardboard, packing tape, bin bags, bubble wrap
- Scissors
- Bin bags
- A friend (more for the practical help than the emotional support this time)

**Feedback welcome!** If you have any comments on this toolkit or if you can tell us how you have used it in your research or teaching please do drop us a line at [realities@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:realities@manchester.ac.uk) and let us know.



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