

HOW TO RUN AN OPEN MIC



Open mic with a twist

Heritage Open Days brings people together to share the places that matter to them. Holding an Open Mic event as part of your Heritage Open Days is another way of encouraging individuals and groups to join together to cast a light on their hidden heritage - and on hidden talents.

An Open Mic event can give everyone – from school kids to grandparents, singers, writers to comedians – the chance to make their voice heard and celebrate their heritage; solo or in groups, in whatever style they choose: whether reciting a poem or doing a rap, presenting a photo story or performing a theatrical sketch.

There are only two conditions we would like to suggest:

1. Your Open Mic should take place on the Saturday of Heritage Open Days.
2. The acts on your programme should make some thematic link with heritage, history, or what makes places – yours, theirs, ours – special.

Is it for me?

Hosting an Open Mic event is as much about shouting about your local heritage as it's about raising awareness of your Heritage Open Days event and broadening its reach.

You can use an Open Mic as a hook to engage a wider audience by:

- Drawing on local talent (the recognised – including celebrities – as well as the hidden)
- Involving a wide range of local groups and organisations whom you would find it otherwise difficult to engage, such as youth groups, schools, choir or AmDram societies, music hubs, bands, local writers' groups or creative writing courses of adult education centres, and disability arts groups
- Adding a festival character to your event/s
- Bringing history to the people by staging the event in spaces frequented by non-heritage audiences, e.g. shopping malls or pubs

Your Open Mic can be as small or big as you wish it to be. It can be a day-time or evening event, depending on the type of audience you would like to attract.

Staging your Open Mic

Location, location

Choose a venue that feels right in terms of size, facilities, accessibility and atmosphere. It could be a museum, church, guildhall, train station, conservatory, pumping room, barn, pub, theatre, school or a local youth club. Or you could bring heritage to the masses, say to a market square or shopping mall.

The Heritage Open Days National Partnership



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Prepare the venue

How will the audience be seated? Theatre-style or cabaret style? Will there be an elevated podium? Set up a stage area and make sure it is safe and accessible.

You may want to decorate the space (e.g. Get someone – young people? – to paint large banners that fit the theme of your event. You can use the back of cast-off wallpaper rolls for example.) and think of other ways of creating atmosphere. One idea that we picked up from a successful Open Mic producer is to provide the audience with self-made shakers with which they applaud an act. It's a great ice-breaker.

Special needs

Be mindful as to whether this applies to anyone in the room – performers and audience. Provision will need to be made, for example, for someone who may have trouble mounting a stage. If there are access issues, please indicate this when registering so that people are informed.

Health & Safety

How you arrange the performance space and auditorium is not only crucial with respect to accessibility, visibility and audibility, but also from a safety point of view. Think about power points (you don't want lots of trailing cables) and more importantly fire exits and emergency access. At any rate, you have to carry out and implement a risk assessment before the event. In the Registration Essentials section of your [Organiser Area at www.heritageopendays.org.uk/portal/](http://www.heritageopendays.org.uk/portal/), you will find a risk assessment factfile and template, which you can use as a starting point for your own health and safety planning to prevent personal injuries.

With or without mic?

If the venue is small and the acoustics are fantastic, you probably won't need a microphone. If you are in doubt, use amplification. The venue may have equipment and even a technician to help with the set-up but chances are you may have to borrow some. This is an in-kind support opportunity.

Remember that the acoustics of an empty room are not the same as those of a full room (people absorb sound). If you provide microphones, they should be on a stand. Find out what else the PA can accommodate: some poets for instance come armed with musical backing on a CD (and if they do, they will hopefully tell you this when they sign up).

If you use microphones and loudspeakers, do a sound check before the event. Get to know the sound mixer, so that you are able to adjust the volume during a performance. If people bring instruments, get them to come before the event starts to tune them and do sound checks. Also, have a CD player and/or MP3 player on site in case someone wants to perform to a backing track.

Money, money

As your Open Mic is part of Heritage Open Days, entry has to be free of charge. But this isn't to say that you can't pass around a bucket or a hat for voluntary donations or sell refreshments to cover your costs. And you might be able to get sponsorship from a local company. You will find a

sponsorship letter template in the “Useful stuff” section of your [Organiser Area](#) at www.heritageopendays.org.uk/portal/.

True to the voluntary spirit of Heritage Open Days, your acts should agree to perform without fee; the experience and time on stage is their reward. But maybe a local company could sponsor a goody bag, especially if you’ll be involving children.

Catering

Do you consider selling refreshments and snacks? That’s an especially good idea if your audience will be seated at tables. But you need to be aware of food safety requirements and regulations. Depending on the scale of your event and your catering activity, you may need to apply for a Food Hygiene Certificate. It’s best to check with your local Environmental Health Officer.

You will also find guidance on food hygiene, the latest food safety regulations and a lot more useful information - including how to list allergenic ingredients - on the Food Standards Agency’s website www.food.gov.uk

Getting your acts together

Sign-up policy

First decide how participants will be able to sign up. If you want to have some control and a degree of predictability over the programme, it may be a good idea to start booking acts ahead of your Open Mic. To this end, we’ve put together a sign-up form template that you can customise.

If you’re feeling brave, you can take names on the day only – perhaps an hour before the start-time. You or the compere will then need to make a decision whether the order of appearance follows the order in which your performers have signed up or whether you want to mix it up.

Whatever your preferred sign-up policy, bear in mind that the word ‘open’ implies that there will be some slots available when the house opens, and you have to be prepared for no-shows anyway. It also implies that there should be no vetting of potential performers (do not, for instance, ask them to submit examples of their material in advance).

Allocating slots

Be clear how many slots will be on offer, and – based on this – how long each one will last. Ideally, it will be somewhere between 5 and 10 minutes each. Make sure that the performers know, before the show starts, how long they will have. Do try and stick to whatever schedule you decide on; Open Mics can go very pear-shaped if left too free-form. Also, don’t forget to include a break.

If more performers turn up than you can reasonably accommodate, by all means put their names on a reserve list, which can be resorted to in the (very rare) event of the show underrunning.

Spreading the word

The best way to get local groups to take part is by delivering your invitation face-to-face. When you get in touch with a group, ask when their next meeting is and whether you could address their members at the beginning and leave some flyers with all the necessary information.

Every performer you sign up is likely to draw in people they know: family, friends, colleagues. If you have a dozen people taking to the stage, that will already secure you a decent turn-out. But if you want your Open Mic to be a bit less intimate, you'll need to promote it more widely.

The “Useful stuff” section in the [Organiser Area at www.heritageopendays.org.uk/portal/](http://www.heritageopendays.org.uk/portal/) has a media toolkit to help you attract publicity. In addition to registering with Heritage Open Days to feature on our national event directory, try to get listed on local What's on websites or diary sections. And of course, you can use our Heritage Open Days posters to advertise your event at a wide range of outlets in your community (you will know best where lots of people will see it).

But successful Open Mic organisers will all tell you how important social media channels are for their marketing. If you haven't got a facebook page or twitter stream, you can easily set one up (see our how-to guide in our online Media toolkit), and then let all your performers know and ask them to share the news with their networks. It's a digital form of word-of-mouth.

Learning from others

Check out other Open Mics in your area. Not only will you pick up some valuable ideas on how to do it – and how not to, you can also use the opportunity to make links, share acts and cross-promote etc.

Legal stuff

Copyright issues

It is likely that many of your Open Mic acts will perform original material, poems, songs or stories that they have written themselves. But it is well possible that some will also choose to perform music, literary or dramatic pieces that are not their own. In this case, you will need to check with the Performance Rights Society (PRS) whether you require a specific licence for their use and, should royalties apply, factor in licensing costs.

For premises, the proprietor is normally responsible for arranging a licence. So if you own or manage the Open Mic venue, you will have to arrange a licence if you, or anyone else, is publicly performing or playing copyright protected work there.

If you are using someone else's premises, for example if you hire a hall or use local authority premises, then the proprietor is the one to arrange a licence. Check with them that a licence is in place; they may already have one.

If you are running an outdoors event, say in a park, on your village green or in the street, you will probably be responsible for arranging a PRS licence to permit your music use.

Provided fees apply, costs are determined by what you intend to do and how many people attend the event (if applicable) and/or the audible area of the music.

For full information, go to the [PRS's website](#)

www.prsformusic.com/users/businessesandliveevents/musicforbusinesses/charityandcommunity/ or call them at 0845 309 3090.

If you are going to play CDs, tapes or music videos at your Open Mic (e.g. as background music), you'll also need to look into obtaining a licence from the [Phonographic Performance Ltd \(PPL\)](#) (www.ppluk.com), which collects fees on behalf of rights holders of sound recordings.

Entertainment and alcohol licensing

For events that include entertainment, you may need to apply for a Temporary Event License. Interpretations vary locally. So to be on the safe side, check with the Licensing department at your Local Authority. Don't leave it to the last minute. Factor in at least four weeks to apply for a license if this turns out to be necessary.

For more information about alcohol licensing, visit the Home Office's website

www.homeoffice.gov.uk/drugs/alcohol/alcohol-licences/

In some situations, the venue you are using will already hold a Premises Licence to allow such activities to take place. Check with the venue manager.

Compering an Open Mic event

Who's the host?

Picking the right person to comper your open mic will be as important as choosing the right venue. You may be a great event organiser but may feel uncomfortable addressing and entertaining a larger audience. In this case, try and find a good, seasoned comper. Not only will he or she be the glue holding the event together, they may well turn out to be the most accomplished act on the bill. As they have to own the event, they should be involved right from the beginning of your Open Mic planning.

How to be a great comper

As a comper, you will:

- Assist in signing people up and placing them in the order you feel works best.
- Welcome the audience and introduce the event, its purpose, as well as yourselves.
- Set an appropriate tone for the event, and reset it between juxtaposed acts that may, potentially, be poles apart.
- Introduce the performers on stage and make them feel at ease. This includes pronouncing their name correctly, and not showing undue favouritism.
- Engage the audience by encouraging applause, but don't try to bully them into clapping long and loud for a performer who just wasn't that brilliant.

- Keep an eye on the time, and indicate to performers if they are overrunning (and, if need be, removing them from the stage). There is usually a small amount of leeway in this, but some acts will take liberties if left unchecked. You can use a small armoury of recognised hand-signals: for instance, 'one more', 'come to an end', 'time to stop'. But whatever the signalling system, you need to ensure your participants are briefed and are able to read them.
- Keep things moving along smoothly and relatively quickly. It is not usual for the host to perform much of his or her own material. At most, it may simply be a case of one performance to kick off the show, and another one after the interval.
- Ensure that the mic-stand is adjusted to the correct height for each successive poet. If in doubt, practise the correct way to do this before the doors open.
- Ensure order in the room. Heckling and audience chat should not be accepted.
- Encourage performers to stay to the end of the event. You don't want them to rush away once they've performed.

But most of all have fun, and let us know how you're getting on!



This how-to guide was compiled with kind contribution from national performance poetry charity, Apples and Snakes, sharing their guidance on staging spoken word open mics. For more information about the work of Apples and Snakes, visit www.applesandsnakes.org

Appendix

You will find the following two documents in a separate [word document](#).

Sign-up form template

The sign-up form template can help you programme your event and promote your Open Mic to potential performers.

Simply add the details for your Open Mic, your logo/s, and any other relevant pieces of information and delete the bits highlighted in yellow.

Some tips for Open Mic performers

You can print these tips aimed at performers who may not have taken part in an Open Mic before on the back of the sign-up form or on a separate sheet accompanying the form.

The tips were adapted from the Beginner's Guide to Performance Poetry by Russell Thompson, London Programme Coordinator, Apples and Snakes.