



Canadian Institutes
of Health Research

Instituts de recherche
en santé du Canada

CIHR CAFÉ SCIENTIFIQUE

Guidelines for Organizers

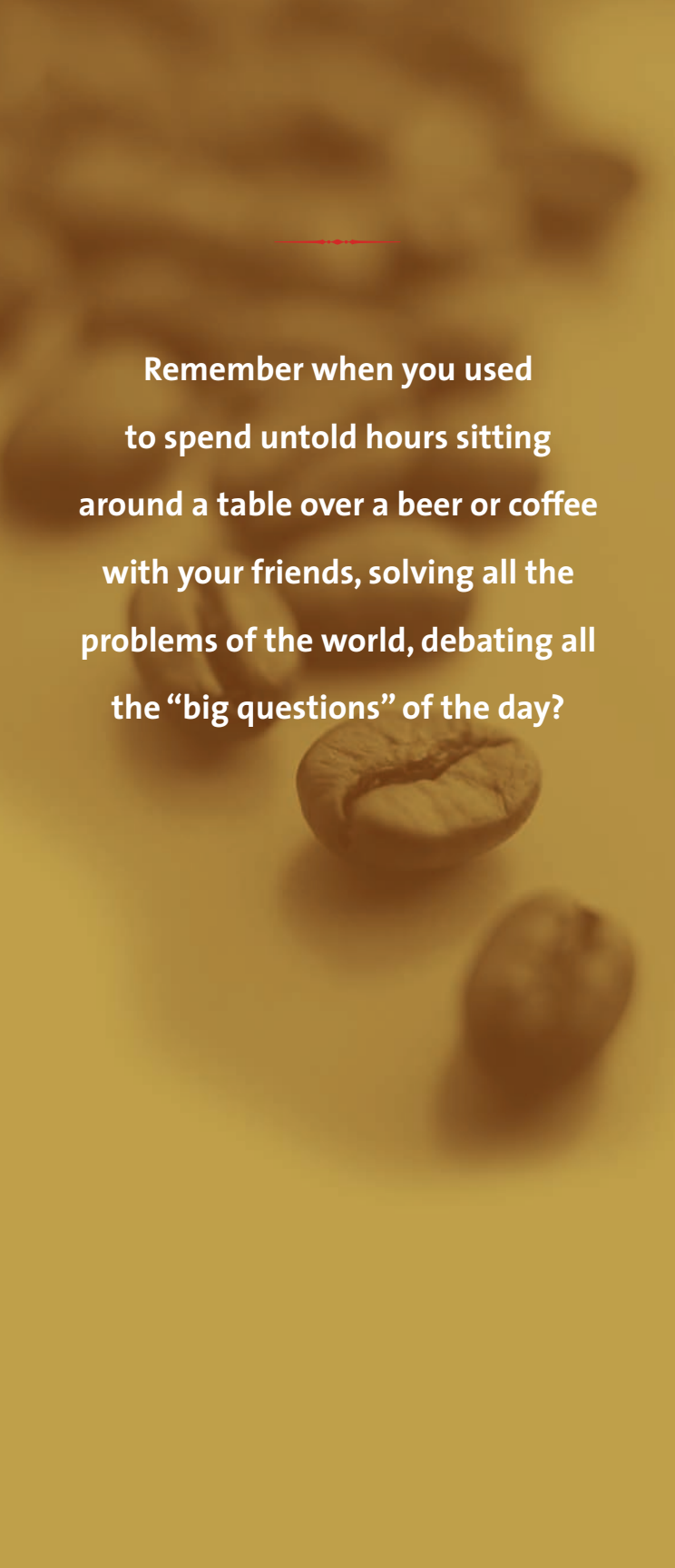


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Remember when you used
to spend untold hours sitting
around a table over a beer or coffee
with your friends, solving all the
problems of the world, debating all
the “big questions” of the day?

What is a Café Scientifique?

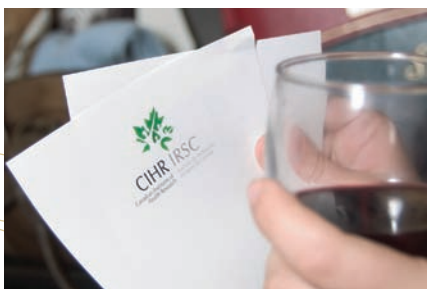
Café Scientifique is, simply put, a larger and slightly more organized version of those conversations. It's an opportunity to bring together researchers with members of the public to spark a discussion about some of the most interesting – and sometimes contentious – research currently underway in Canada.

Café Scientifique democratizes science, taking it out of the domain of the expert and allowing everyone to voice an opinion. It pulls science away from its usual habitats of the classroom and the laboratory and into cafés, bars, restaurants, even theatres, demystifying new developments and opening them up for public debate.

Café Scientifique is more informal and accessible than a public lecture. It appeals to people who are interested in science, but who generally don't have the opportunity to discuss their views with and ask questions of scientists. No scientific knowledge is required to participate – just an interest and a willingness to express opinions.

The Café Scientifique concept goes back a long way – to the salons of 19th century Paris, where people would gather to talk. About a decade ago, the idea was revived, independently, in both the United Kingdom and France. Since then, the concept has spread around the world, with Cafés being held in countries as diverse as Morocco, Rumania, Denmark, Spain, Argentina, Cameroon, the United States and, of course, Canada.

Variations on the Café Scientifique concept that have been developed include video-cafes, linking audiences as far afield as Brussels and Mumbai, junior cafés for high school students and traveling cafés, which bring the same discussion topic and speakers to a range of different locations.



How does a Café Scientifique work?

While there are variations (and no hard and fast rules), the basic model of a Café Scientifique is the same, whether for a one-off event or a series of regular Cafés.

Before:

- Choose a topic
- Choose a venue
- Find your speakers and your facilitator
- Advertise, advertise, advertise!

During:

- The facilitator starts things off, explaining the ground rules and introducing the speakers.
- If there are multiple speakers, each speaker speaks for about 5-10 minutes; if just one speaker, he or she speaks for about as little as 10-15 minutes or as long as 20-30 minutes.
- A short break allows conversation and discussion among audience members.
- Following the break, the discussion becomes more structured, with audience members and speakers together embarking on a discussion.
- Usually after about two hours, the facilitator brings the official Café to a close.
- People continue to discuss the issues informally among themselves and, over the next few days, with the broader community.

The nuts and bolts of a Café Scientifique

Of course, it's not quite as simple as the bare-bones description above makes it sound. A lot of work goes into planning a Café Scientifique, whether it's a one-off event or part of a regular series.

Those with experience in planning these events say there are five key aspects to a successful Café Scientifique:

- 1 The venue
- 2 The audience
- 3 The subject
- 4 The speaker
- 5 The facilitator



1 The venue

Experienced Café Scientifique organizers say this is probably the most challenging aspect of organizing a Café. The trick?

Choosing a venue where your target audience already goes. So to attract university students, a campus pub might be the ticket, while to attract adults who aren't in the scientific field, a popular neighbourhood gathering spot could be ideal. Even a bookstore can provide a good environment for a Café. Once found, a venue can be used just once, or for a series of Cafés.



Here's what you need to look for:

- A venue that attracts your target audience, is easy for them to get to, is accessible to everybody and is relaxed and informal.
- A separate space within the venue to hold the Café. It's unlikely the venue will close down to all other comers while you're holding your event, and you want to make sure that the discussion can go forward without loud music or other conversations overwhelming it.
- A time when the venue is not otherwise busy. Late on a weekend afternoon or a weeknight that's not normally a high-volume time may be best. While a venue might not be willing to give a significant part of its space when it's busy, operators could be very glad to have customers at a time that's otherwise quiet.
- Drinks and food that are reasonably priced, to encourage a wide range of people to attend. A free flow of food and drink can set tongues wagging, stimulating a better discussion!
- A sound system, preferably wireless. You may not need it, but nothing dampens discussion more than not being able to hear what's being said by others. Two or three wireless microphones that can be passed around from speaker to speaker are more conducive to a discussion than having people line up behind stationary microphones.
- Minimize the physical barriers between the speakers and the audience. For example, rather than having the speakers and facilitator sit behind a conference table at the front, try having them on bar stools, with the facilitator roaming through the audience. Or place them at tables with audience members.

2 The audience

Who is your target audience? And how do you attract them to coming to the Café Scientifique?



The objective of the Café Scientifique is to draw people who would not normally participate in such a discussion into a discussion about today's health research, where it is leading, its possibilities and its pitfalls. A diverse audience is essential; a knowledgeable audience much less so.

To gain their attention, it is important to advertise or get media coverage. Some of the ways to do this are:

- publications people go to when they are planning to go out;
- community newspapers;
- notices in the events sections of local newspapers;
- posters hung in the neighbourhood where the Café will take place;
- postcard notices that people can take home, distributed in the neighbourhood;
- online notices; and
- electronic invitations (from e-mail lists).

All of these, and any more that you can think of, can all help spread the word. If a Café Scientifique is a new thing for your city or the topic is particularly noteworthy, you may also be able to generate some media coverage before the event that can publicize your event and attract audience members.

If you hold Café Scientifiques regularly, you'll start to notice that the same people come to every one. The "regulars" may even form a kind of club of their own. Plus, if you collect their e-mail addresses, you'll have the start of your electronic invitation list.

All of which raises the question – how many is too many? A Café Scientifique is intended to generate discussion – something that can't happen when the room is too crowded. There's no real consensus on the ideal number of participants and much depends on the size of the venue, but 30 tends to be a good environment; take that up to 70 and the discussion becomes much more difficult. As one organizer noted, 60 people tends to turn into a question-and-answer session, while 15 people feels like a dinner party.

At that point, you can consider different options. First, celebrate your success! Then, think about breaking the discussion into smaller groups after the presentations have finished, with speakers rotating among the groups. Or maybe adopt the traveling Café concept, holding the same Café Scientifique, with the same presenters, on different nights or in different venues.

3 The subject

This is one area where you don't need to reinvent the wheel! There's no shortage of provocative and discussion-provoking topics out there. Don't feel you need to come up with something original. It's not so much the topic, says one experienced organizer, but how it's framed.

Here are some examples of previous topics that various Café Scientifiques have used:

Does your brain have a gender?

The end of disease: Is genomics the magic bullet?

The obesity epidemic

A clone of your own: The science and ethics of cloning

Alcohol: Bad for the young, good for the old?

Designer babies: Born and made

The scientific basis for herbal medicines: Is there one?

Alzheimer's disease: Is it an illness, or just your brain's normal aging?

The human genome: Gift or goldmine?

The science of pleasure

Is creativity genetic?

Spend a little time online, and you'll discover that these are but the tip of the iceberg. Ideas are everywhere. Try building on the local expertise available to you, or something that's been in the news. August 2006, for instance, would have been a great time to have a Café focused on AIDS, to coincide with the international conference in Toronto. Feel free to "borrow" – the topic, the title or both.



4 The speaker

This is in many ways the most difficult aspect of organizing a Café and the hardest to control.

There are two models for speakers: the first, which is the British model, features one expert who speaks for about 15 minutes to half an hour before the discussion opens up. The other model brings together more speakers – usually two or three – who each speak for about 10 minutes before the discussion gets going.

There are pros and cons to both approaches. Having three speakers means you can get a balanced set of opinions that cover a broader scope. It permits you to get speakers who complement or, possibly, oppose each other, which can help to spark a more animated discussion. One speaker, on the other hand, can present information in a more in-depth fashion and prevent the event from turning into the audience watching the three presenters debate each other. And, from a practical point of view, if you are organizing regular (say, monthly) Cafés, it is a lot easier to arrange one speaker than three every month.

Whichever model you choose, your goal is to get speakers who are interesting, provocative, clear and have a point of view to offer. They need to be able to speak without the aid of PowerPoints or other visuals (though props can be useful). They need to understand that they are not delivering a formal lecture; they are serving as the jump-off point for a discussion.

Ultimately, it's a leap of faith. But there are some things you can do to increase the probability of getting speakers who will keep the audience on the edge of their seats and start the room buzzing:

- Contact university research offices to connect with people who can tell you who the best researchers and communicators are. Federal funding agencies such as the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) may also have information on their websites that can point you toward researchers doing exciting and important work.
- Don't limit yourself just to university-based researchers. Ethicists, advocates and people affected by the topic, together with researchers, can deliver a potent mix almost guaranteed to get the discussion going. And don't forget industry or journalists as a source of experts.

- Start early. People's lives are complicated. Finding the right person – or three people – free at the scheduled time can be more difficult than you think.
- Put the word out that you're looking. Help can come from the most unexpected places. Often, one speaker can point you toward other potential speakers who would be good counterparts in a discussion.
- Much of our lives is carried out through e-mail. This doesn't work well for Café Scientifique presenters if you don't already know them. Try to talk directly to your potential speaker – this can often give you a sense of whether they have the right personality to be a Café Scientifique presenter. A face-to-face meeting before the Café takes place can be valuable.
- Emphasize the lack of preparation required. A good presenter should be able to talk for 10 minutes about his or her field almost without preparation – and is often more interesting than someone delivering a carefully prepared dissertation.
- Look for someone who says he or she loves talking to the general public, or something similar. It's a sign that their presentation will not be pitched somewhere at the postdoctoral level or above.
- Be clear about what is expected of presenters. If they are well prepared, it bodes well for your event.
- Invite possible speakers to attend other Café Scientifiques, so they can get a first-hand view of how they work and how interesting the experience can be for both speakers and audience.

And take heart. One experienced Café Scientifique organizer says she almost never talks to her presenters before the event and has never been disappointed. She relies on the fact that the style of a Café Scientifique attracts a certain kind of personality who is going to deliver. Quirky questions, she says, attract quirky minds.



5 The facilitator

Your facilitator has a heavy task – and the success or failure of your Café Scientifique can depend on how he or she carries out this work.

The facilitator is the host of the evening. His or her main tasks are to:

- welcome everyone;
- introduce the presenters;
- set out the ground rules for the event;
- keep presenters to their ten-minute speaking limit;
- recognize speakers from the floor; and
- deal with the questions and/or comments that none of the presenters wishes to respond to.

The facilitator is usually someone who fills this role exclusively. At least one regular Café, however, invites the speaker to “self-facilitate”. It has found that, in most cases, the speaker is prepared to take on this role and it works well. This usually only works, however, in Cafés where there is one speaker, or where one speaker on a panel is chosen in advance to also act as facilitator.



Facilitating is as much an art as a science. A good facilitator has to think on his or her feet, interpreting and, if useful, reframing questions and sparking discussion while keeping track of everything going on around him or her. Some more helpful hints include:



- A good facilitator keeps the event from turning into a question-and-answer session by seeking responses to what has been said. Often, this may require deflecting a question addressed to a presenter back to the audience, or having several questions prepared in advance.
- While keeping track of the order in which people request to speak is important, it is sometimes equally important to let someone, either an audience member or a presenter, respond immediately to the point that has just been made, as this can be what turns a question-and-answer session into a discussion.
- Sometimes it is necessary to step in to prevent any one participant – a presenter or an audience member – from dominating the discussion. This includes, if necessary, taking the discussion back from the presenters if they are dominating and throwing it back to the audience, so that the audience remains involved.
- While tangents are often fascinating, it is important for the facilitator not to let the discussion range too far off topic.
- If the discussion is flagging, get it going by posing some questions for discussion.

And, of course, as a final note, the facilitator, in the course of doing all the things noted above, must be careful not to dominate the conversation!

Tying up the loose ends

Your Café Scientifique has been a rousing success. The presenters were incisive and provocative. The audience responded with a discussion that seemed as if it would never end. You could have gone on longer, but the pub staff were putting the chairs on the tables, trying to get you out the door.

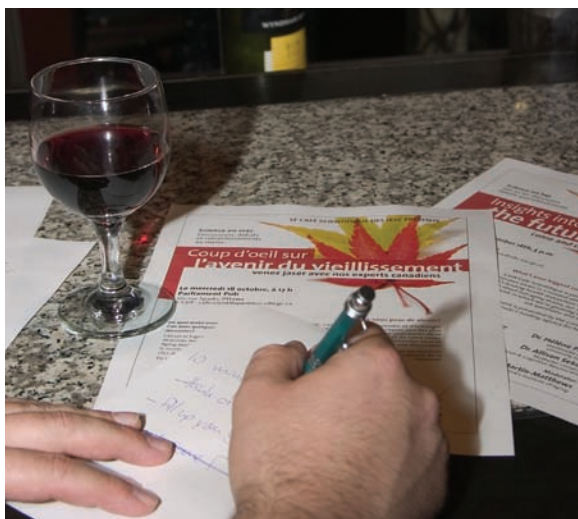
Now what?

Well, don't let people leave without soliciting their feedback. Ask audience members for suggestions for future discussion topics. Get their e-mail addresses – there's your contact list for your next Café Scientifique. Make sure they have your e-mail, so they can get back to you with more feedback after the fact. Some Cafés have started blogs to enable follow-up discussion. Others podcast the Cafés, to reach an even broader audience.

Don't forget, as well, to send a thank-you note to your presenters and to thank your venue hosts.

Now, sit back, congratulate yourself, have that drink you didn't have time for while the Café was going on – and start planning the next one!

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