



**CIHR CAFÉ SCIENTIFIQUE**

# Guidelines for Participants

One researcher called it “bloody scary”. An organizer calls it working without a net.

It’s a Café Scientifique.

And you can be a part of it.

Just what are you letting yourself in for?



## What is a Café Scientifique?

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?

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.



## How does a Café Scientifique work?

While there are variations (and no hard or fast rules), the basic model of a Café Scientifique is the same.

- 1 The facilitator starts things off, explaining the ground rules and introducing the speakers.
- 2 The speaker (or panel of speakers) speaks for about 10-15 minutes.
- 3 A short break allows conversation and discussion among audience members.
- 4 Following the break, the discussion becomes more structured, with audience members and speakers together embarking on a discussion.
- 5 Usually after about two hours, the facilitator brings the official Café to a close.
- 6 People often continue to discuss the issues informally among themselves and, over the next few days, with the broader community.

## So what do I have to do?

As a speaker, you will be asked to start off the discussion. You may be speaking alone, in which case you have about 20 minutes in which to speak. Or you may be one of two or three speakers, in which case you will speak for no more than 5-10 minutes. After a short break, the session will continue as a discussion, lasting anywhere from 30 to 90 minutes.

**“Who would have thought you’d have standing room only at a geek event?”**

Dr. John Cohen, founder of the Denver, Colorado, Café Scientifique

**“A lot of people are intimidated by science. Everybody can use a little more science in their lives.”**

Café Scientifique participant

**“Science geeks, unite!”**  
*Globe and Mail*, April 2006

**“We purposely try to pose questions that don’t have a definitive answer. We’re not coming together to arrive at a consensus. We just want to talk about it.”**

Walter Stoddard, host, Toronto, Ontario, Café Scientifique

That’s it, in a nutshell. But there are some things you should and should not do to help make your Café a success:

- ✓ Do use your initial presentation time to pose some provocative questions – even if you precede them with a disclaimer or claim to be acting as a devil’s advocate.
- ✗ Don’t be afraid to take a position, share your passion, explain your ideas.
- ✓ Do make your presentation accessible to people without specialized scientific knowledge.
- ✗ Don’t get lost in the details; 10 minutes is really only enough for the big picture. Don’t worry if you can’t say everything you think is important in this time; all of the key issues will come out in the discussion.
- ✓ Do be conscious of time – both in your presentation and as you’re taking part in the discussion.
- ✗ Don’t rely on visuals like PowerPoint – this is not a lecture, it’s a discussion. Besides, many venues aren’t set up for formal presentations.
- ✓ Do feel free to use props if they are helpful – they can be surprisingly effective – or to provide handouts for the audience.
- ✗ Don’t expect the audience to agree with you, either about content or about direction of the discussion.
- ✓ Do follow the discussion where it goes – you may learn something new about how your research area is viewed.
- ✗ Don’t feel obliged to answer questions or address comments that you are not comfortable with.
- ✓ Do remember that involvement from the audience is the most important ingredient for success.
- ✗ Don’t fall into the trap, as the expert, of answering all the questions and dominating the conversation. Feel free to ask questions of the audience, to spur conversation.
- ✓ Do relax and enjoy yourself!

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