

European Health Forum Gastein

Interactive session formats –
how to engage with your audience



General guidelines

For session organisers:

1. **Define your session's focus:** Outline the specific issues, problems, or the key messages to be addressed.
2. **Limit speakers:** Avoid overcrowding the session with speakers, particularly for interactive formats, even if they hold high-level positions or have valuable insights. Please refer to the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG) session packages that set the maximum number of speakers.
3. **Preparation is key:**
 - Reach out to the EHFG team for advice on developing the session rundown and to obtain speaker suggestions.
 - Choose a moderator based on their ability to facilitate engaging discussions rather than status. Support the moderator by providing a thorough online briefing well in advance of the session, invite speakers to join the briefing.
 - Ensure the moderator has a well-structured written brief and session outline, including back-up questions for the panellists.
 - Brief speakers well in advance about expectations and emphasise the importance of interacting with the audience. A further preparatory meeting for all involved in the session once in Gastein can help to draw out dialogue.
 - Ensure that remote speakers are briefed on the technical set-up.
4. **Collaborate with the EHFG team:** Communicate room set-up plans well in advance to ensure feasibility. Consider various room layouts, sometimes a small change can significantly enhance audience engagement.
5. **Networking:** Arrange post-session coffee breaks when feasible to facilitate informal networking between speakers and audience members/Young Gasteiners.

For panel discussions:

1. **Quality over quantity:** Fewer panellists ensure meaningful audience interaction. We recommend limiting the number of speakers and capping speaking time for “Keynote Inputs” to a maximum of 10 - 15 minutes.
2. **Minimise the use of slides:** If necessary, we recommend limiting them to one – three slides either with short key messages or graphics/pictures that support their input. In-depth information and statistics can be provided as downloadable materials via a QR code.
3. **Focus on key points:** Panellists should focus on highlighting a select number of key issues, and from these pose questions to the audience that will draw upon their expertise. Consider integrating interactive elements such as audience polling, to enhance engagement.
4. **Ensure that panellists align with the EHFG's four pillars:** Government and administration, business and industry, science and academia, and civil society.
5. **Prioritise diversity:** Ensure gender balance and representation from various geographical regions. This fosters a more holistic and inclusive discussion.



Standard session formats – with an interactive twist!

This section introduces various session formats to help you deliver an engaging session. Most of the formats noted can be effectively utilised in a hybrid conference setting, for more detailed information and guidance tailored to your specific session, feel free to get in touch with the EHFG team.

Online polling

All EHFG conference sessions can utilise the online polling tool Slido. It's most commonly used functions include:

- Voting – different types including ranking, multiple choice questions etc.
- Quizzes
- Word clouds – either instantaneous or delayed
- Open text (commenting)
- Q&A function - submitting questions to speakers (with moderation function)

Fireside chat

A fireside chat is an engaging and dynamic format characterised by its intimate nature. Typically featuring a moderator and one or two speakers, it revolves around thought-provoking questions that delve deep into the subject matter. The style is challenging but not aggressive, allowing for audience questions and debate. The informal setting, often with a couch or armchairs, enhances the conversational atmosphere. Fireside chats are particularly effective for shorter sessions (of up to 60 minutes). Please keep in mind that a skilled moderator who can navigate and guide the conversation is key to the success of this format.



Watch examples: [1](#) | [2](#)

Lightning talk / spotlight input



A lightning talk, or spotlight input, serves as a short intervention designed to set the scene for a session. Unlike traditional presentations, these talks are limited in time, lasting around three minutes, allowing for the swift presentation of diverse perspectives. Speakers are encouraged to deliver one or two clear messages within the allotted time, and presentations without slides work best.

[Watch an example.](#)

Oxford-style debate

An Oxford-style debate is a formal discussion where two small teams present arguments for or against a specific motion. Speakers follow a predetermined sequence, presenting their views within specified time limits. The goal is to encourage a thoughtful exchange of ideas while maintaining a disciplined environment. Key elements here are to really consider the wording of the motion, and to invite passionate and persuasive speakers.

[Watch an example.](#)

1-2-4-all

The 1-2-4-all format, recommended to last around 15 minutes, is a structured approach designed to encourage active participation and collaboration. It involves four stages: individuals first reflect on a topic for one minute (1), then pair up to share their thoughts for two minutes (2), followed by forming groups of four to discuss and consolidate ideas for four minutes (4). The entire group then comes together for five minutes to share key insights and conclusions (All).

Watch examples: [1](#) | [2](#)



Fishbowl conversation

A fishbowl conversation is a group discussion format designed to facilitate open dialogue among participants with diverse perspectives. The setup involves arranging four to five chairs in an inner circle, known as the fishbowl, with additional chairs forming concentric circles outside the fishbowl. The method can be either open or closed.

In an open fishbowl, a few participants initially fill the fishbowl, leaving one chair empty. The moderator introduces the topic, and the discussion begins. Any member of the audience can, at any time, occupy the empty chair and join the fishbowl, prompting another participant to voluntarily leave. This cycle continues, ensuring a constant exchange of perspectives until closure.

In a closed fishbowl, the initial participants speak for a set time then a new group takes over. This rotation continues until all audience members have had their turn. Once the final group has concluded, the moderator closes the fishbowl and provides a summary of the discussion.

Variations include:

- **Heterogeneous fishbowl:** One person from each viewpoint discusses the topic.
- **Homogeneous fishbowl:** Individuals with similar viewpoints discuss the topic in rounds.
- **Visitor's fishbowl:** An extra chair is placed in the fishbowl and members of the audience are invited to join the discussion. To facilitate smooth transitions, consider limiting occupancy time or use a standing signal for when new participants want to join.

Watch examples: [1](#) | [2](#) | [3](#)



Highly interactive session formats

Shaking up your session format not only captures the attention of participants but also fosters new ways of engaging, learning, and collaborating. If you are looking to gather new ideas and input, we recommend considering the following methods.

World café

The World Café format is designed to promote open and collaborative conversation, foster connections, and generate exchange of ideas. It is a flexible and creative way to tap into the collective intelligence of a group and encourages diverse perspectives on a topic. Participants begin the session seated in a circle of chairs, or concentric circles for larger groups. The facilitator introduces the café topic and poses one or two open-ended questions. Participants then break into small groups of about five for a 45-minute discussion, followed by a reflective session where insights are shared with the larger group. Ideally involving 15 to 50 participants, the process typically takes one to two hours and emphasises conversation over formal presentations or feedback sessions.



[Watch an example.](#)

Six thinking hats

This format is ideal when participants need to explore a specific topic from different perspectives. The metaphorical “hats” represent various roles or viewpoints, such as data-focussed (White Hat), best practices (Red Hat), value and benefit (Yellow Hat), barriers to action (Black Hat), opportunities (Green Hat), and summarisation (Blue Hat). This method is effective for debating ethical issues or implementing evidence into action.

[Watch an example.](#)

Roundtable / break-out group discussion

A roundtable discussion offers an alternative to a theatre-style layout by using several round tables, typically accommodating up to eight participants each. This format encourages interaction and is well suited to sharing learnings, brainstorming, or structured discussion. Each table is given a question or topic to discuss, with key findings recorded and shared through table rapporteurs, post-it notes, or flip charts.

Roundtable discussions are also effective for scenario-based work. For example, an anonymised country is described in a handout alongside an issue to be addressed, with each table making recommendations that form part of a facilitated discussion.



Watch examples: [1](#) | [2](#)

Open space / unconference

Open space or unconference is a participant-driven format characterised by spontaneity and collaboration. While an overall theme guides the session, discussion topics are generated by participants, with no predetermined schedules or speakers. The format fosters open and dynamic conversations that encourage knowledge exchange and community building, and can be adapted by introducing light structure, such as setting an overall topic in advance or including one or two pre-identified speakers.

[Watch an example.](#)

Balloon debate

In a balloon debate, the audience is invited to imagine that speakers are onboard a sinking hot-air balloon. To keep the balloon afloat some people must abandon the balloon. Each speaker represents a sector or specific point of view, vying for audience support. At the end of the debate, the audience vote, by electronic means (on Slido) or by a show of hands, for the speaker who secures a place in the balloon. Bear in mind this is not the consensus building approach that can be achieved through facilitated dialogue. However, it can be very lively and participants enjoy it.

[Learn more.](#)

Dynamic facilitation

Dynamic facilitation is an open group discussion method for eight to twenty participants that draws on collective creativity to address complex issues, particularly when emotions are heightened. The process follows a structured sequence using four posters labelled challenges/questions, solutions/ideas, concerns/objections, and information/perspectives. The facilitator records participant input under each heading, capturing all proposed solutions regardless of feasibility, noting concerns or objections separately to maintain clarity and acknowledge emotional aspects, and listing facts and observations without assessing their accuracy. Once contributions are captured, space can open for new ideas to emerge and for a shared creative breakthrough to develop, although limited time may require more conventional decision-making methods.

[Learn more.](#)

Walking session

A walking session is an informal and interactive format that takes place outdoors, making use of the natural surroundings of Gastein to support discussion and exchange. Participants walk together along a predefined route, creating a relaxed atmosphere that encourages open dialogue and helps break down traditional speaker–audience dynamics. The format can include short inputs or reflections at selected points along the route, followed by discussion as the walk continues. Walking sessions are particularly well suited to exploratory topics, early-stage ideas, or reflective conversations, and typically conclude with a brief collective wrap-up or keynote reflection.

[Watch an example.](#)





**EUROPEAN
HEALTH FORUM
GASTEIN**

Imprint

Publisher

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Conference Archive

<https://www.ehfg.org/archive>