

HOW TO ORGANIZE A TEACH-IN

A teach-in is a powerful way to educate and activate members of your community. By offering qualified speakers of intellectual and/or experiential expertise, a teach-in provides a way to explore crucial local and global issues. Teach-ins are most effective when they supply real solutions and give opportunities to build powerful citizen coalitions. The best teach-ins are those that at once give a boost to your existing organizing efforts while also attracting new people to your campaign. A teach-in can also be an effective way to fundraise for your group.

Preliminary Steps

What to do before you start to organize a teach-in (These steps can occur both simultaneously and in any order).

Select a Speaker(s) and/or Speaking Topic Your Group is Interested In

Finding a topic should be relatively easy considering the focus of your group. Pairing a speaker with a topic may be a little more difficult. Some important factors to consider when choosing a speaker are reputation, availability and cost.

Think about Your Audience and Outreach

What are you trying to accomplish by bringing the speaker? Who do you want to attend the event? How will you conduct outreach? Do you plan on doing media outreach? What about meetings with local elected representatives? Make the most of the opportunity. Flyers, events, calendars, direct mail, email, phone calls, public service announcements, press releases and word-of-mouth are all good ways to get people to the event. When considering all of these questions it is important to plan ahead.

Think about Possible Co-sponsors.

Brainstorm and ask other members of your group for suggestions of other groups (student, community, religious, etc.) that may be willing to co-sponsor the event with you. Keep in mind that co-sponsors are a key component to generating an audience and sharing the workload and cost of organizing an event.

Plan the Event: The When, Where, Who and How

Select a Date

The date obviously is dependent on other factors, such as the availability of the speakers, availability of a venue, and whatever else is being planned in your community around the same time. Try not to have your teach-in coincide with other similarly themed teach-ins. Also, it is a good idea to organize an event around a date that has some significance in relation to the theme. For example, a labor-related teach-in has more resonance around Labor Day. Or, if part of the overall goal of the teach-in is to affect legislation, have the teach-in before a legislative vote is to take place—whether it is a city, state or national vote—so people can talk to their elected representatives.

Find a Venue

The ideal venue is a free venue. Try to get a space donated to you. Churches, community centers, schools and universities are likely to do so. Also, consider the size of the space. The appropriate size of the space chosen is related to how many people are expected to attend the teach-in.

Confirm Your Co-sponsors

There is no such thing as too much group participation or too much outreach. The point is to get as many people to the event as possible. A larger audience will be generated with outside help. Contact the organizations you think would be interested in being part of the event. Explain to them that you are bringing a speaker for an event and that you would like for them to be a co-sponsor. When they say “yes,” suggest that they help with outreach by inviting their members. Among other things, they may be able to help publicize the event by putting it on their web site, or adding their name to a press release. Also, don't be afraid to ask them for financial support. It costs money to host, transport and feed speakers. Explain this to them. This is not too much to ask if the organization's name is associated to the event as a co-sponsor. Offer in return to include their name on any publicity materials that will be produced.

GLOBAL EXCHANGE

Develop Outreach Materials and Conduct Outreach

Key to a successful outreach strategy is the production of materials like event fliers, direct mail invitations, email invitations, public service announcements and press materials. Distribute the fliers as much as possible among friends and colleagues to be disseminated publicly at coffee shops, community centers, cultural centers, other events, churches, schools, universities, etc. Also use the press as a tool to get the word out. Write a press release and send it to campus and local media to get the press to cover the event. Send a flier as well to make sure the event gets announced on by radio stations and included in the community calendar or events section of local newspapers and magazines. The sooner you have materials ready, the better, especially in regards to media.

Prepare to Host

Decide who will pick up the speakers from the airport, bus station or train station. Decide where the host will stay and do your best to make the chosen place as comfortable as possible for the guests. Home stays are fine, but try and make sure that the speakers have their own rooms, if possible. If you have arranged for a hotel, make sure everything is in order. Finally, make sure to have your organization's materials at the event for tabling purposes. And don't forget the all-important donation basket! Use the teach-in to build your donor base so you continue your important work.

Take Advantage of the Speakers' Presence in Your Community

The media can be used as an effective tool to spread your message more widely. A well-planned teach-in may attract hundreds of people, but an article in a newspaper or an interview on the radio can reach thousands of people. Organize visits and/or interviews with the speakers and local journalists. Also, if your work includes a legislative strategy, set up meetings with local congresspersons. (More information about how to work with the media and elected officials is enclosed.)

Evaluation and Follow-up

After the event has ended successfully, consider all that went well and all that didn't. Learn from the mistakes and remember what worked. Thank your co-sponsors, the audience, your members and anybody that helped to make the event a success. Use the teach-in build new relationships and strengthen old ones. Organize!