Work

Your story

Send your careers story to: naturecareerseditor@nature.com

ILLUSTRATIONS: BRATISLAV MILENKOVIĆ

TWENTY-TWO EASY WAYS TO POWER UP YOUR LAB MEETINGS

Scientists share help and advice on how they got their research discussions flowing. **By Hannah Docter-Loeb**

Laboratory meetings are part and parcel of the research experience. Regularly meeting with your colleagues can foster collaborations, build a sense of community and help with problem-solving.

Every group does things in its own way, but meetings usually involve presentations from one or more team members, discussions of relevant papers and updates from the institution.

Lab meetings don't always have to be so formulaic, however. We collected 22 tips from researchers about traditions or recurring agenda items that can liven things up.

Do some improv

"We do an improv-style lab meeting in which everyone prepares a few slides from their work and another lab member has to present those slides without having seen them before. It always brings lots of laughs and reveals who the more evil colleagues are (those who bring the hardest slides to present). More importantly, it plugs lab members into each other's projects and lets people learn how to speak without extensive preparation." — **Holly Jones, restoration ecologist at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois**

Have a simple ritual

"In our weekly lab meetings, we start with a 'flashlight' round, during which each person briefly shares something from the past week or the week ahead, whether scientific,

professional or personal. It gives everyone a voice, helps the group to follow each other's progress and enables people to share challenges, celebrate small wins or thank colleagues for their support. Over time, this has made our meetings more inclusive, empathetic and connected." – **Johanna Joyce, tumour immunologist at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland**

Take it outside

"Sometimes, each term, we move our meeting outdoors to a local park, lakeside or hiking trail. We discuss research progress, career plans and personal goals while walking or sitting in nature. Being outside lightens the mood, encourages quieter members to speak up and creates space to talk openly about work–life balance, future paths and family life." – **Ruijie Yang, chemical engineer at the University of Calgary, Canada**

Offer offline options

"Getting lab members to post asynchronous threaded comments before a lab meeting (we use Basecamp and Bench) gives introverts, international trainees and anyone uncomfortable asking questions publicly a real way to contribute. Our best scientific ideas consistently come from the comment threads, not the live room, and that happens because people had more time to formulate their thinking." – **Matthew Hirschey, cellular biologist at Duke University School of Medicine in Durham, North Carolina**

Ten-minute teach

"We are a very interdisciplinary lab, from cell biologists to software engineers, computer scientists and microbiologists. All of our lab meetings begin with the main presenter doing ten minutes of teaching about something from their background. Notable examples include cell culture techniques, Western blotting, molecular bonds, free energy, entropy and modular cloning. It's a great way to get a bit more perspective about other people's expertise." – **Harriet Smith, cell biologist at the Francis Crick Institute in London**

Read before you meet

"Instead of having each presenter walk the group through their work from scratch, we circulate a detailed progress note in a shared document beforehand – what they've found so far and at which points they're still stuck. Everyone arrives having already read it, which frees up the meeting for real discussion rather than passive listening, and pushes students to engage with each other's work, not just their own. Over time, these notes have also become a searchable record that new members can learn from." – **Zhang-Ren Chen, hospital pharmacist and researcher at the First Affiliated Hospital of Jiangxi Medical College, Nanchang University, China**

Break bread, literally

"Our lab shares a meeting, as well as space and equipment, with the principal investigator's spouse's lab, and a recurring theme that strengthens the group's bonding is the cookies, nuts and breads that they both bring in. Every meeting starts with passing food around. It's a small way of livening up the group, and our meetings definitely benefit from breaking bread together." – **Benjamin Menarchek, electrophysiologist at West Virginia University School of Medicine in Morgantown, West Virginia**

Reproducibility matters

"Lab teams bring together people with different backgrounds and at various career stages. We use some of our meetings to improve and refine detailed protocols for each new experiment. What seems obvious to one lab member today might be unclear later, either to that person or to others. Clear, step-by-step records make it easier to reproduce the work accurately, even years later. These detailed protocols should be easy for everyone to access, both inside and outside the lab." – **Mariana Souza da Silveira, neuroscientist at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil**

Leave the door open

"My PhD supervisor, Reshmi Das at Jadavpur University in Kolkata, India, always kept her door open and we could walk in whenever we needed guidance. Whether it was about science, career decisions or even personal struggles, she was always there. The culture of constant access made the lab feel less like a hierarchy and more like a community. Her natural ability to put others at ease, especially in lab meetings, made even an introvert such as me feel comfortable speaking up and sharing ideas without fear of judgement." – **Iravati Ray, geochemist at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore**

Divide and conquer

"Rather than having one student present all of their work at a weekly meeting, each lab member shares updates with supporting slides simply showing the data we got that week. This gives an opportunity to ask for feedback on specific things, as well as a mini, low-stress deadline to make sure progress is made, which I think is very important as a PhD student." – **Mary Anna Ebbert, mechanical engineer at the University of Toronto, Canada**

Give a status report

"For me, being transparent and straightforward with lab members is one way of showing them respect, granting them ownership and

helping them to see themselves in the bigger picture of how the lab functions and survives. I discuss topics such as finances, publication goals and how everyone fits in and is crucial for our combined success. What I'm really trying to say is, 'I trust you to understand the situation, what we're up against and what I'm trying to do. I hope that you'll work with me on this.'" – **David Fay, molecular biologist at the University of Wyoming in Laramie, Wyoming**

Let the people speak

"As lab head, I do a lot of the talking in meetings, which might not always be conducive to motivating the quieter members of the group to participate. To encourage more contributions, I'm now trying to adopt the 'seven seconds rule' after posing a question. That is, counting seven seconds before I speak again, giving others the opportunity to fill the silence." – **Andrew Brown, biochemist and lipid researcher at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia**

Shake up the journal club

"We dedicate the last 30 minutes or so of our journal-club meeting to the question: 'What was creative here and how can we build on this?' I think this is important, because it leads to reflection about the good parts of the paper, not just the criticism. Over time, I have been collecting a library of ideas that came from these discussions." – **Matthias Rillig, plant ecologist at the Free University of Berlin**

Make it easy to talk about mistakes

"In lab meetings, tell your trainees that even careful, well-trained people make mistakes. A culture of 'blaming and shaming' doesn't lead to fewer errors; it leads to people hiding their errors. Communicate what to do when people make (or nearly make) mistakes, and use those moments as opportunities to improve lab protocols for the future." – **Julia Strand, psychologist at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota**

Book talk

"We take it in turns at each weekly meeting for a lab member to discuss a fiction or non-fiction book that they have read or are reading. They briefly share what attracted them to the book and why others should read it, and then the lab engages in a discussion about its subject matter. This lets lab members speak about topics that are not directly related to their work and practise 'storytelling' without slides." – **Jalees Rehman, cell biologist at the University of Illinois at Chicago**

Reality check

"In our lab meetings, when a student presents promising results, we ask them to add a 'reality check' slide after showcasing the originality. They must describe how the material or technology could be used, identify any company that might adopt it or, if none exists, explain what is still missing before it can be applied in the real world. This simple addition trains our team to think beyond publications and towards real-world integration." – **Xia Long, energy materials chemist at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, China**

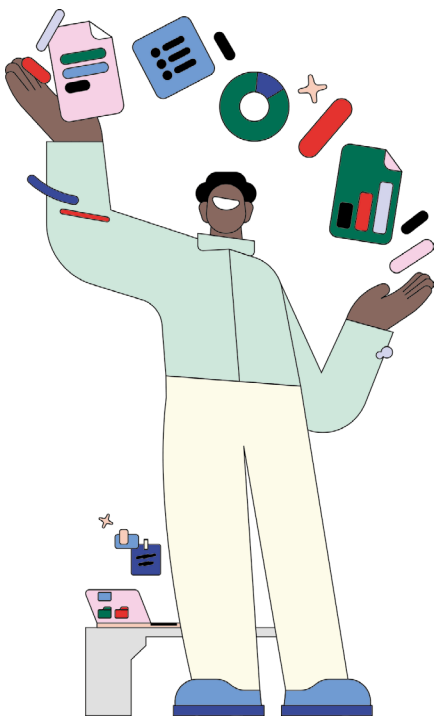
Unleash creativity through crafts

"I dedicate one meeting a term to a hands-on art activity, such as tie-dyeing lab coats or carving pumpkins with science-themed designs. This relaxed, creative outlet helps lab members to bond outside their strict class or research routines, ultimately fostering a more collaborative research environment." – **Elle Barnes, microbial ecologist at Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York**

"What seems obvious to one lab member today might be unclear later, either to that person or to others."

First slide surprise

"Our lab meetings are fairly conventional, except for everyone's first slide. Like a drab businessman wearing spotty socks or a loud tie, presenters tend to include something unexpected. Sometimes it's 'on this day in 1632', sometimes it's 'today is World Muffin Day' and often the most captivating of all is when a meme appears that is related to the forthcoming talk. This divides the audience into those who 'get it' at once, and those (often me and the more senior folk) who remain perplexed until we are walked through the unfolding story." – **Merlin Crossley, molecular biologist at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia**



Skip the slides

"We've tried lab meetings without slides. This removes the crutches and forces the presenter to think harder about the big-picture story, rather than hiding behind data-heavy presentations. I think it's also better for the audience because people get less bored. This can work especially well if the presenter sends the slides, or even just a short one-page summary, before the meeting, so the data that need to be shared are seen in advance." – **Oded Rechavi, biologist at Tel Aviv University, Israel**

One lab, two modes

"I use a hybrid approach to meetings, with both internal and open sessions. Core meetings stay internal, so we can go into detailed project updates and maintain accountability for what's happening in the lab, because everyone already knows the ongoing work. By contrast, when a student presents an idea or results in detail, I open that lab meeting up to anyone interested or considering joining, which can turn it into a small colloquium. It keeps our internal discussions deep and consistent and gives newcomers a low-stakes way to engage with our work." – **Eileen Roesler, cognitive psychologist at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia**

Culture sharing

"One lab-culture tradition that I am quite fond of is to bring in a food item or share a photograph from your travels or home town, especially when meeting after a break. This helps with learning and exposure, builds awareness and often introduces an openness to new ideas, cultures and opinions in diverse lab groups." – **Kadambari Devarajan, ecologist and National Geographic Explorer in Mumbai, India**

Supervisor speaks last

"When someone presents data, I try not to give my interpretation. Instead, I ask the presenter and the group 'what do you think this result means?' or 'does anyone see the data differently?' It changes the room: students and postdocs stop trying to guess my answer and start testing their own reasoning. It creates space for disagreement, builds confidence and allows people to take ownership of the science that they do." – **João Conde, biomedical researcher at NOVA University of Lisbon**

Hannah Docter-Loeb is a science journalist in Amsterdam.