

Planning your Virtual Talk

A collective guide on what works and how to craft a talk for a Speakers for Schools virtual talk.

Talk Formats

A virtual talk can take many formats. However, we have found that there are two main formats to be considered for your talk. Think about the format that will best suit you, your topic and audience. Whichever one you choose, please be sure to agree it in advance with your school and follow the below guidance.

We recommend that SFS virtual events are between **40mins and one hour long**.

Fireside Chat/ Interview

Ideal for a more informal conversation led by student questions, not requiring any slides or a set 'talk'.

- Speaker and school have a phone call to agree the focus of the 'interview'; in some instances, questions need to be agreed in advance. Be sure to agree which video platform you will be using!
- The interviewer should be a teacher; students can submit their questions in advance or see our ideas on how to run a Q&A [here](#).
- Interview takes place for around 30 minutes depending on speaker and school preference.
- The session is then opened to any impromptu questions from the audience for the remainder of the time. See our guidance on how to run the Q&A [here](#).

Talk with Q&A

Ideal for speakers with a key message, subject or story they want to use as the focus of the event (slides optional).

- Speaker and school have a call to agree the focus of the talk and the context for their students so it strikes the right chord. Be sure to agree which video platform you will be using!
- The talk itself is about 20-25mins followed by Q&A with the students.
- Q&A should be actively moderated and driven by a teacher. See our guidance on how to run the Q&A [here](#).
- Students should be briefed and ready to take part in the Q&A. You can find our prep sheets [here](#).

Virtual Talks with an Impact

Even for a seasoned speaker each Speakers for Schools (SFS) talk is different depending on the school, student cohort and format. We are often asked how our speakers can be sure their talk leaves an impact so we have brought together advice and insights from our 7,000+ talks to help you create the best talk for you and your audience.

We recommend that you begin by selecting a talk format you are most comfortable with, which best suits your speaking style. Then choose from the 5 themes in this guide remembering that different options suit different speakers, topics and students (so be sure to look at all options). You can use the advice and insights in the rest of this guide to ensure that your talk is as engaging, informative and inspiring for students as possible. Taking part in a virtual talk means that more of our speaker network can reach schools that they wouldn't usually have the opportunity to speak to students at!

This Guide covers:

- Talk formats
- Framing a talk
- Talk themes and aims
- Details of themes
- Opening your talk
- Top tips for great talks
- Increasing your impact
- FAQs

Framing a Virtual Talk

After the teacher has given your introduction to the students over your chosen video calling platform, be sure to 'set the stage' at the start of your talk before jumping into your story or topic. Student preparation might vary too as teachers have different amounts of time to do this. The following sections are to help you create a successful event and help students get the most out of your talk.

1. Who are you?

Even if students know who you are, start every talk by introducing yourself to the audience and why you are giving your time to be there. Some students might not realise that this is not a careers talk or a normal assembly. Briefly explain your role and work if needed, explaining jargon like 'FTSE' or misconceptions like 'BAFTA is just an award'...

2. What message do you want them to take away?

Speakers should state the purpose of their talk as this has been shown to help students take more away from the event. Below are some examples from previous talks:

"Nobody starts out successful, and no one feels successful 100% of the time, which I wish someone would have told me at your age."

"I hope you will leave feeling more empowered to be involved in the political system, and understanding the importance of your role in the community."

"I'm here because I want to convince you that creative industries are important and can use your talent; it's more than acting, drawing and music."

I want you to know about the qualities and skills that are useful to anyone in a fast-changing world."

3. What message do you want them to take away?

There will always be some students who are unsure of why your talk is applicable to them or their lives so it helps to take a moment to connect this to the wider world, how it might have an impact on them, or could change their perception of an issue or expectation. For example:

"Being an 'academic' might seem stuffy or just teaching and reading books, but actually my work at the university is mostly about progressing research that is used in government social policy..."

"As a governor of a national bank the predictions and decisions we make can affect the entire economy, even how much you end up paying for a loaf of bread or milk..."

Talk Themes & Aims

The following section has **5 talk themes** driven by their 'aim', each with example structures to help you focus on key points and messages so that your talk has the most impact. You can use this guide before you are in touch with a school to help you decide which theme and approach you might be open to, or combine and tailor the themes as needed.

Logistics to note:

- We will let you know once we have sourced a school that matches your basic requirements and is able to host you virtually.
- Please make sure that you, or your office have a phone call with the school to agree how much you can tailor your talk to the specific cohort of students you'll be speaking to. We recommend that you find out how old they are, how many will be in the audience, whether the talk is an assembly or classroom talk and what their interests are and so on. It is also a good idea to agree with the school the aims of the talk e.g. to demystify, inspire, discuss a subject area etc.
- You will need to agree on the format, talk focus, video calling platform and any preferences directly with the school or college.
- We highly recommend reading all sections of this guide for more ways to add to your virtual event and how to leave students with practical advice for their futures.

Theme 1 – Industry Insights

Aim: "I'd like to spark new interests or change how students see an industry, sector or role"

With a key focus on demystifying and/or challenging misconceptions, speakers can help translate their work in a way that leaves students thinking differently about an industry, how it affects the world and future opportunities. Although it can link to future careers, all SFS talks are meant to be useful for a diverse student audience so a talk should focus on sparking new understanding and insights about the industry rather than a vocational talk on job roles.

Recommended outline for an industry insights talk

1. Framing the talk: see our advice on page 4 for the key points to cover at the start.
2. Explain what it is that your industry does and how it relates to young people or touches their lives. Ask the audience questions about the industry/sector to see what it is they know or if there are preconceptions - what do they associate with it?
3. Share insights into your journey and experience of your industry/sector.
 - a. What do you enjoy or find fascinating about your work?
 - b. Why do you continue your work in this profession or industry? Did you have preconceptions about the industry before you joined? Has this changed?
4. Share your view on the key transferable professional skills, experience and characteristics that could help young people be successful in a changing world. What it is that you look for when hiring? Does it apply to other industries?
5. How might the future of your industry/sector impact on young people?
6. Towards the end do mention career pathways for those interested. What can different parts of an industry offer, or jobs that might be lesser known? Does your company offer apprenticeships or graduate schemes?

Increase the impact...

Most schools welcome you bringing an apprentice or graduate to your talk. They can speak about their experiences after the main talk and answer any practical questions for students interested in your industry.

Top tip from feedback

Short videos (1-3 minutes) or strong visuals can be great way to give students a behind-the-scenes look at your work or industry, but be careful to avoid slides that are 'sales-y', long or company pitches.

Theme 2 – Life Lessons

Aim: "I'd like to encourage students to rethink what's possible, and not to feel like they have to have it all figured out"

This is a popular theme where speakers share their advice, experiences and 'life-lessons' to help students see their potential and opportunities differently. Often successful figures can do this through sharing candid reflections that might challenge what students think is required for success.

Recommended outline for a life lessons talk

1. Framing the talk: see our advice on page 4 for the key points to cover at the start.
2. Explain what it is that you do and your passion for your role. How does your role or sector impact on young people and what attracted you to it?
3. Reflecting on your personal journey and how you got to where you are today. Consider discussing the below with students:
 - a. Did you know what you wanted to do when you were at school?
 - b. Have you had several different careers or worked in different industries? Discussing this and transferable skills could help students think about their futures and the paths they might take
4. Share candid examples of failures and successes and what you learnt from these different scenarios
5. What useful advice or mentorship have you received? Was there anyone you looked up to or continue to reference when feeling less confident?
6. What is it that you look for when hiring? Are there any key characteristics, transferable skills and experiences that you believe are crucial?

Top tips from feedback

Avoid reciting your CV from point to point. Instead share why you took certain chances, what you learnt and how it has shaped your outlook.

Theme 3 – Inspiring Action

Aim: "I'd like to share something I'm passionate about and encourage students to create change"

This kind of talk will be driven by speakers' passions and an area where they hope to inspire action, such as democracy, the environment, public service, human rights etc. to encourage student interest and empowerment in global or local issues. Talks are designed to be a dialogue and should welcome other views, leaving students more confident in their role in the future and inspire them to think about wider society.

Recommended outline for an inspiring action talk

1. Framing the talk: see our advice on page 4 for the key points to cover at the start.
2. Why are you passionate about the subject you are speaking about e.g. democracy, activism, environmental issues and so on.
 - a. What sparked your own interest?
 - b. Are you an expert or a more general supporter (not everyone is an absolute expert but you can still be passionate about change)?
3. Reflecting on your personal journey and how you got to where you are today. Consider discussing the below with students:
 - a. Did you know what you wanted to do when you were at school?
 - b. Have you had several different careers or worked in different industries? Discussing this and transferable skills could help students think about their futures and the paths they might take
4. What is the broader context and why should young people care?
5. What does the future of this topic look like?
6. How can students get involved in the selected topic?

Top tips from feedback

These talks have worked well with an interactive element (either a part of or in addition to the talk) such as a quick group session about the policy issues students are most concerned about, or even workshopping their solutions to a major societal problem.

Theme 4 – Own your strengths

Aim: "I'd like to encourage self-confidence and for students to embrace their individuality"

Some speakers have a personal message for students who are often at an age where they can be navigating difficult social or identity issues and trying to figure out where they fit into the world. Whether it's about embracing their accent or ethnicity or challenging the status quo on gender expectations, this is a great talk for a speaker who wants to help students see past their identity, backgrounds or circumstances as a barrier to their potential or success.

Recommended outline for an own your strengths talk

1. Framing the talk: see our advice on page 4 for the key points to cover at the start
2. Share your journey so far; how has your thinking changed over time about your own identity and confidence?
3. Students can feel they are starting on the back foot if they don't fit into the imagined idea of success or the ones you see in magazines or on TV. How can they overcome this 'imposter syndrome'?
4. Have there been moments that have triggered epiphanies or realisations on this subject in your career or personal life?
5. What useful advice or mentorship have you received? Was there anyone you looked up to or whom you continue to reference when you're feeling less confident?
6. What change do you want to see for the next generation when it comes to this issue?

Don't worry...

SFS talks aren't expected to be 'motivational' talks rather successful figures opening up personally about how they have grappled with difficult issues such as not fitting in, race and religion or even feeling less advantaged. Topics like these can really strike a chord with students.

Theme 5 – Expert Insights

Aim: "I'd like to leave students well-informed on a specialty or expert subject that links to their studies"

This talk is ideal for speakers expected to give students access to expert insights and knowledge that they wouldn't get elsewhere, providing students with a crash course in a specific area. These talks are useful for smaller, focused student groups (e.g. A-level students) but there are also tips below to appeal to broader audiences too. N.B. The below can be covered within your slides or as an aside to help contextualise them.

Recommended outline for an expert insights talk

1. Framing the talk: see our advice on page 4 for the key points to cover at the start
2. What is your area of expertise and what in your background might help students understand or contextualise the subject (links to what they have seen in the news, well-known companies etc.)?
3. Why is it important now? How does it link to current affairs or issues?
4. What would be essential basic concepts or knowledge of this subject that you believe students might not be hearing elsewhere such as important issues to keep in mind, if they are serious about understanding it?
5. If students are interested in pursuing it as a career or subject further, depending on their age, what are some useful insider tips on developing their own understanding?

Helping the talk land...

These talks are not designed to be lectures or long speeches, so you should be sure to speak to the teacher about how you can pitch your talk at the right level depending on the students' age.

Top tip from feedback

If you are an academic, schools and colleges will often hope you will also spend time demystifying higher education life to help students understand if it is right for them. You can suggest students speak to you after the talk for any advice or questions about your specific university or degree area.

Top tips for great virtual talks

Do...

Find out as much as you can about your audience in advance. Have at least one phone call to cover things such as the students' age, their subjects and general interests. It could be a great idea to have the planning phone call using the same video calling platform you have chosen to use to check that the technology works! You can see our guidance on virtual talk platforms [here](#).

Test the technology works before you begin! Make sure you to close all applications that could interfere with you sharing the screen. If you have agreed to record your talk, be sure to remove anything from the background that might not be appropriate for students.

Tell teachers in advance if you expect or prefer their help moderating the Q&A, would like them to open the event etc. Most teachers take a 'relaxed' speaker as someone who will facilitate their own event entirely. For virtual events, there are many different ways the Q&A might work so be sure you are aware of how it will work in the classroom/hall.

Provide practical advice to quash misconceptions about post-school routes and who they are 'right' for. Many might be put off going to university because they don't know how tuition fees work and worry about family debt. Others will have no knowledge of the professional routes offered by modern apprenticeships. Both are bigger issues than speakers might realise.

'Brag' a bit or name drop when it helps contextualise your work or life, especially if you are in a lesser known industry.

Open up with the message you hope they will take away. Some speakers can give great unprepared or impromptu talks, but students will get more out of your stories and experience if they know what the underlying message is.

Introduce a controversial statement as a tool to get their attention or challenge a common misconception. Be prepared to have an open and balanced dialogue in response.

Avoid...

Tip-toeing around a subject and don't be afraid to admit if there were advantages or disadvantages you had. Students appreciate candour from adults.

Repeating your CV or biography. Talk to the students about why and how, not what.

Jargon specific to professional life or your industry, or explain it. e.g. What does a CEO actually do?

Try not to refer to a film, TV programme, band, politician, etc., that predates 2005, or at least don't be surprised if they don't know Bowie or the Rolling Stones...

Don't expect jokes to land; many speakers say to avoid them. Nothing is more disheartening than opening with your best gag, only to have it fall completely flat.

Should you have any questions, do not hesitate to get in touch

inspiration@speakersforschools.org

FAQs

What types of talks do speakers give?

SfS talks are meant to be inspirational events that allow speakers to share their unique insights and advice with students as someone leading in their industry or discipline, to help broaden horizons and encourage students in their potential. They are also a chance for a real conversation with figures who are shaping the world today – ranging from real stories of how a speaker got to where they are, to how their industry is changing society as we know it.

Virtual SfS talks are usually 40mins - 1 hour with a chance for a Q&A session. There must always be a teacher present for your virtual talk.

For more information, see [our speaker guides](#) for specific formats, planning steps and suggested talk themes.

How should speakers prepare for a talk?

Once a speaker has been introduced to a school, it is a requirement that the speaker (or their office) have a phone call with the school to agree the format of the talk, the key messages and takeaways for students, and to finalise the logistics of the visit.

[Our guides](#) will help you craft your talk and outline the format and themes we recommend to ensure your talk has the desired impact on students. Our team is also on-hand to assist should you have any questions.

Is a Disclosure and Barring Service check (formerly CRB check) needed for speakers?

DBS checks are not required as the speaker will not have unsupported or unsupervised access to students. Schools and colleges have their own processes for vetting external speakers and expect these to be used when hosting Speakers for Schools talks. School staff are required to be at the talk and overseeing every stage of the visit. However for other activities that might come out of the talk (such as mentoring) a check may be required – for more about this visit the [GOV.UK website](#).

SfS commitment to safeguarding

Speakers for Schools acknowledges the duty of care to safeguard and promote the welfare of young people and is committed to ensuring safeguarding practice reflects statutory responsibilities, government guidance, and complies with best practice and Charity Commission requirements.

You can read our Safeguarding Policy Statement [here](#). We ensure everyone at SfS understands their roles and responsibilities in respect of safeguarding and is provided with appropriate learning opportunities to recognise, identify and respond to signs of abuse, neglect and other safeguarding concerns relating to young people. Should you have any safeguarding concerns regarding the school/college please contact our Safeguarding Officer immediately on 07917 116525. Any concerns regarding a pupil at during a school visit or online talk to the lead staff member linked to the event.

What should I do if there's a change to my employment status or a personal situation that could affect my participation?

Please contact the team directly on team@speakersforschools.org to let us know about any changes or updates to titles, biographies etc or if you have had a change in circumstance. Importantly, as we work with schools and children, speakers must notify us as soon as possible if there is any reason to pause participation due to circumstances that might create reputational or safeguarding concerns that need to be addressed. These will be treated confidentially but speakers are responsible for alerting our charity to any such circumstances.

You can find more FAQs [here](#).

