In recent years, LSA members and their linguistic colleagues have become more active in efforts to engage the public in learning about linguistics and its broader value to society. Linguists are organizing and participating in public outreach activities at science festivals, museums, libraries, and through public-facing digital communications outlets.

This guide offers a compendium of best practices, sample materials, and links to external resources to assist linguists who are interested in getting more involved in public outreach activities. The LSA invites linguists to contribute additional content to enrich the resources included in this guide.
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The Benefits of Public Outreach

The academic discipline of linguistics is sometimes referred to in higher education circles as a “discovery major”. Most students arrive at college with little or no exposure to the basic concepts of linguistics, and many undergraduates discover linguistics by accident when taking a required course or elective, after which becoming fascinated by the important questions the field seeks to answer.

When linguists reach out to the broader public (who are not currently enrolled at a college or university), it opens a window through which people can share in the fascination experienced by linguistics students and scholars. This has the potential of generating broader public interest and support for linguistic research that can result in more students pursuing linguistics degrees and increased financial and institutional support for linguistics departments and programs. It can also lead to enhanced public support for government- and privately-funded linguistic research. It may also lead those in the private sector to gain a greater understanding of how linguistics research can be applied for practical purposes to everyday problems and challenges.

Linguists who are visibly engaged in public-facing activities have found that it enhances their professional standing by drawing positive attention to the institution or organization they represent. Linguists who collaborate with colleagues that specialize in related fields, or as part of an institution-wide outreach initiative, also report enhanced appreciation and understanding about the value of linguistics research to the broader areas of scientific and humanistic inquiry.

Finally, the individuals who participate in these activities, or who consume public-facing materials prepared by linguists, benefit by gaining greater insight into a central aspect of their lives. Programs designed to reach younger audiences (K-12) may also have direct educational and mentoring benefits for those served.

“Doing outreach has helped many of our students build their presentation skills and explain their research to a general audience that does not share their own assumptions. If you can explain what you do to a seventh grader and can make a high schooler get excited about it, you can probably do the same with your colleague from a different department.”

[excerpted from Language Science for Everyone, University of Maryland]

Public Outreach in Context
Linguistics is a field that bridges many other academic disciplines in higher education. As a discipline that draws on both the natural and social sciences, as well as humanities research, linguistics is uniquely positioned.

As the economics of higher education have changed over time, there has been an increasing emphasis on the burden of student debt and the importance of lucrative career outcomes. Questions from students, parents and policy-makers about the practical value of a liberal arts education have become ever-more frequent. A presumption has developed in the U.S. that careers in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and math) will contribute to the nation’s economic competitiveness in a way that careers in other fields may not. In this context, linguistics and the social sciences more broadly are frequently excluded or marginalized. For many parents and students, the value of a linguistics degree is not always obvious.

The same can be said for academic administrators and elected officials who make decisions about funding for research and higher education more broadly. Recent years have seen reductions in state and federal support for higher education, and targeted attacks on certain fields of research and study deemed to be of lesser value to society. In addition to these trends affecting higher education and scholarly research, there has been growing concern about the challenges facing the primary and secondary education sectors. Standards for K-12 STEM education have mostly ignored the social sciences, and standards for language have not been informed by linguistic research.

As a result of these interconnected trends, many advocates for the humanities and social sciences have developed proactive public outreach programs. The LSA recommends these three general resource guides for placing linguistics in a broader context when conducting public outreach:

- University Engagement in Festivals: Top tips and case studies (NCCPE)
- Surrounded by Science: Learning science in informal environments (National Academies Press)
- Center for the Advancement of Informal Science Education (CAISE)

When considering your public outreach activities, please be mindful of available resources at your home institution/organization and from allied groups. For example, if you have a public affairs office, it may be able to provide advice and assistance in promoting your event. For those based at colleges and universities, students in your school’s art or film programs may be interested in creating video, designing exhibit displays, etc.

Public Outreach Strategies
Participation in Fairs, Festivals and Broad-based Events
For first-time organizers, it's often easiest to take part in an event that's being organized by a larger group, which removes many of the logistical issues you would face by creating your own event, and guarantees a much larger audience without the need to do huge amounts of promotion.

Prospective types of such events include:

- Science festivals (visit the Science Festival Alliance webpage for a list of US festivals)
- "Science Days" and "Family Science Days" held by local museums
- Outreach events held by educational and academic organizations (such as AAAS and the USA SEF and State Humanities Councils)

Partnering with Public Institutions: Museums, Libraries, Schools
A number of linguistics departments and programs have formed partnerships with museums, libraries, and schools in their surrounding communities. These institutions have a built-in audience for your outreach efforts, but will likely require that you make a persuasive case for how a linguistics program relates to its mission.

Prospective types of partnerships include:

- A linguistics exhibit, display, or interactive element at a museum
- Participation in NACLO - The North American Computational Linguistics Olympiad (NACLO) is a contest in which high school students solve linguistic puzzles. In solving these puzzles, students learn about the diversity and consistency of language while exercising logic skills. No prior knowledge of linguistics or second languages is necessary. Professionals in linguistics, computational linguistics, and language technologies use dozens of languages to create engaging problems that represent cutting-edge issues in their fields. The competition has attracted top students to study and work in those same fields. It is truly an opportunity for young people to experience a taste of natural-language processing in the 21st century.
- Mentoring programs with local high schools - Linguists at various institutions have hosted class visits to their research labs, partnered with student-led linguistics clubs, or offered research internships to students.
- A lecture series or discussion group at a library
- Hosting endangered language communities to provide support and training

University Hosted Activities

Organizing a linguistics summer camp
The University of Arizona and Ohio State University both organize summer camp programs for local youth. U of A offers a one-week program for students from grades K-12. OSU offers two one-week sessions for high school students.

Hosting a booth at a festival or fair for the local community
Many universities host open houses, festivals and other events to which members of the local community are invited. Consider using the similar approaches to those described elsewhere in this guide.
Digital Communications

Linguists are making increasing use of digital media to communicate with all kinds of people. Activities range from publishing blogs, holding Wikipedia “editathons”, producing podcasts, giving TED talks, and participating in documentaries to generating YouTube videos, and establishing active followings on social media. These strategies have the power to reach a broader public well beyond the surrounding communities where you live and work.

- “Lingwiki” Wikipedia editathons (Gretchen McCulloch)
- TED: “What Makes a Word ‘Real’?” (Anne Curzan)
- Schwa Fire, publishing long-form linguistic journalism online
- LSA Media Guide for working with journalists and other media (forthcoming)

Planning Considerations for Various Strategies

Building on Your Strengths
You and your colleagues have a mix of talents that no other combination of people has. The flexibility of outreach means that you can put those talents to good use. Outreach works best when it involves utilizing your strengths; making use of the things that make your program or research unique, rather than assuming that what other people emphasize will work everywhere.

Larger universities may have a wide range of tools for doing laboratory-based linguistics, including eye-trackers, developmental labs, and brain-research tools like EEG, MEG, and fMRI. Those kinds of gadgets are great for getting students interested in the varieties of data gathering that drive language science.

In designing an outreach program, it is important to think about what makes your community special. For example, you might be strong in the documentation of rare or endangered languages, or in studies of dialect variation, both of which could be fertile areas for discussion and demonstrations. Or, you might have access to speakers from a wide range of language communities, which could contribute to activities surrounding linguistic diversity.

It may also help to think of your community as broadly as possible. Faculty members can provide gravitas in doing outreach, but enthusiastic undergraduates and graduate students can also play a key role in developing a unique and effective outreach program. Also consider including representatives from different departments or PhD programs. The critical idea is to think about your talents and interests and how to use them to creative activities that others will find as exciting as you do.

Tailoring Efforts for Specific Audiences
It can sometimes be challenging when, in linguistics, we’re called to talk to people in a different department, different institution, or different field. They may come prepared with a wholly foreign skill set and an unfamiliar background that can make it challenging to find common ground. These difficulties are made even more apparent when doing outreach. That’s why it’s so important to tailor your efforts for specific audiences; to learn how to explain insights in a way that is sensible and intriguing to outsiders and that resonates with what they already know.

Some of this tailoring is physical: leave your familiar surroundings and go into the community. Just as in your professional life, an in-person meeting with community members who may be interested in hosting an activity or bringing a group to your institution can often be more insight-provoking than just an email or a phone call. And it can’t hurt to increase your or your institution’s visibility in the world around you.

Tailoring your efforts means understanding the background knowledge of your intended audience. There are very few people outside of linguistics who are familiar with the language sciences. Yet people are more familiar than they think with some of the things that are interesting about it. We are fortunate to have a field that can take a lot from everyday conversation and insights. For example:

- They might know people who are bilingual, or wonder why learning a second language is so hard, but haven’t heard about bilingual advantages or age of acquisition effects on second language learning.
- They know how to form a question, but they don’t realize what that can tell us about the structure of English.
- They might have realized that there is no particularly straightforward reason why the word island should have an s, but they might not have heard about the influence of Latin-speaking monks on English orthographic development, and so on.

Tailoring your message is also a matter of finding cool tricks that people outside the field might find intriguing. If you have taught an introductory level course in a language science field, you might have some of these on hand that you use to liven class up a little bit. Expletive infixation in English isn’t just fun as a joke, but also as a pathway to talking about lexical stress, morphology, the Stroop task, or the semantics of curse words. Including interactive activities can help, too!

**Choosing Activities and Topics**

Decisions about activities and topics will depend largely on the format your public outreach takes and the intended audience. For public-facing events such as festivals and fairs, interactive activities are preferable to flyers and other handouts, especially for younger audiences. (Having material that attendees can take home with them can still be helpful, though.) The level of content you share will depend on your target audience (kids, high school students, adults, etc.).

Some topics and curricula which linguists have found to be successful and engaging include:

- Dialect variation--guessing where a speaker is from based on their dialect, mapping dialect diversity
- Places of articulation
- Basic syntax trees
- Writing your name in different alphabets (especially for younger audiences)
- The McGurk Effect (videos are available on YouTube)
- **Dictation and Online Translators**: Participants dictate speech and then compare the computer interpretation with what they said.
- **Stroop Task**: Time participants as they complete the Stroop task and keep track of fastest times. Everyone loves a healthy competition!
- Vocoder
- **IPA name tags**: An outreach volunteer ventures out into the crowd and makes nametags for people in IPA. This activity only requires a clipboard with an IPA chart, pens, and nametag stickers!
- Syntax board: Use syntactic ambiguity to show people that sentences have underlying structure. Use a posterboard to present two different trees for one sentence, and ask visitors to match pictures corresponding to the two interpretations to the appropriate structure. (Requires a large board and time/materials to development. May not be easily portable for all outreach events.)
- **Spectrogram activities**: Ask visitors to record their name in PRAAT, and then guide them through the details of their spectrogram and print out their personal waveform. (Note: this activity requires a laptop with PRAAT and a printer, so may not always be the most portable.)

**Logistics**

It may be helpful to develop a planning checklist for your event. Though tasks will vary based on the nature of your event and its goals, a sample checklist may include:

- Securing the venue and scheduling the event
- Recruiting a planning group to help with developing the content
- Preliminary marketing, such as "save the date" notices
- Recruiting volunteers to staff the event
- Production of any display materials, including quantities of hand-outs
- Arrangements for transport to and from the event
- Marketing to potential attendees
- Creating a photographic/video record of the event
- Thanking volunteers and conducting a post-event debriefing

*Some of these tasks are addressed in more detail below.*

**Expenses**

The cost of organizing a public outreach activity can vary greatly, but may involve expenses for display materials, audio-visual equipment, shipping, transportation, and registration/booth rental fees. Digital communications projects are typically less expensive, but may require a more significant investment of your time.

**Recruiting Volunteers**

Recruiting linguistic colleagues to help with planning and staffing a public outreach activity is essential. Some types of activities, such as hosting a booth at a festival/fair, may require up to 10 volunteers for supporting a day-long event. Students, particularly undergraduates, are excellent
volunteer candidates; if your department/program (or, if you're outside of academia, your local university's department) has a club for undergraduate linguistics students, their participation can be incredibly helpful. It's still important, though, to cast a wide net and reach out to faculty, post-docs, and those outside of academia.

Marketing and Promotion

The most important part of any public outreach activity is to ensure that your prospective audience is made aware of it. If you're taking part in a larger event such as a science festival, the organization running the event will often do the bulk of the promotion. If not, you’ll want to start by using your existing communications tools, which may include:

- Your department/organization's website
- Email: departmental/alumni listservs, announcements in university-wide newsletters
- Social media: both accounts run by the department and your own personal networks
- Public/community affairs offices at your institution/organization that can assist with marketing to the news media and community-based organizations, such as libraries, museums, schools, etc.

Make sure to send out multiple announcements: at least one a few weeks or more in advance, to notify your audience, and one a few days or closer to the activity to remind them.

Supporting Materials and Equipment

The materials and equipment needed for your public outreach activity will vary depending on the format. For festivals and fairs, you'll likely want 1-2 computers with internet connections and large display screen. A free give-away like a button, sticker, key chain or other trinket can also help draw you younger participants to your booth. Have small quantities of printed literature available for those who want to read more. These should include URLs for any web-based resources you want people to review.

The materials required for digital communications will also vary depending on the type of communications you wish to pursue. For chiefly online outreach (i.e. blogging, social media, etc.) a good computer and Internet connection will be your main requirements, but projects like podcasting might require microphones and other additional materials.

Video Resources

Videos can be very fun and useful to when teaching others about language science. We've listed below a number of video resources that are can be used in the classroom or at other outreach activities. Note that these require an internet connection, so think about where you will use them!

- Vocal cords of four singers
- MRI scan of a beatboxer
- MRI scan of an opera singer
- Xhosa tongue twister
- Thunk on language
- The McGurk Effect
- The Ling Space (various linguistic topics)

Laura’s List

Compiled in 2012 by Laura Wagner at The Ohio State University, here is a comprehensive list of videos ranging in topic and length that can be used to supplement classroom material or present a new idea. Please note that this list has not been updated since it was first created in 2012.

Evaluating Success

It’s important to assess the impact of your activity to determine whether it was the best use of time by those involved in planning and executing it, and how it might be modified for future efforts. For festivals and fairs, one of the easiest ways to measure the impact and success of your event is by surveying attendees, asking both quantitative questions (e.g. rating "This event was very entertaining" on a 5-point Likert scale) and qualitative ones ("What was the most interesting thing you learned"?) At many events, though, following up with attendees can be difficult, making it harder to estimate impact. Still, metrics which track the reach of your event are often available, including:

- Participation metrics (number of attendees, average length of visit, etc.)
- Traditional media (circulation of news stories, audience numbers for TV broadcasts)
- Social media (Likes/shares/retweets/etc. of social posts discussing your activity and its resources)

For other kinds of activities, it may be possible to measure metrics such as visitation, readership, downloads, and donations. Even if you can’t quantify your success perfectly, deciding on metrics in advance and comparing your goals with your actual results can go a long way.

Related LSA Resources

- Media experts listing
- Guide for interactions with the news media (forthcoming)
- Linguistics for everyone symposium slides and materials (LSA 2015 Annual Meeting)
  -- Presentation Slides: Laura Wagner, Ohio State University (PDF)
  -- Presentation Slides: Colin Phillips, University of Maryland (ppt)
  -- Presentation Slides: Barbara Pearson, University of Massachusetts, Amherst (pdf)
  -- Presentation Slides: Cecile McKee, University of Arizona (ppt)
  -- Presentation Slides: Jeff Lidz, University of Maryland (pdf)
- "Popularizing linguistics through online media" symposium materials (LSA 2015 Annual Meeting)
  -- Presentation Slides: Gretchen McCulloch, All Things Linguistic (link)
  -- Presentation Slides: Ben Zimmer, Wall Street Journal and Vocabulary.com (ppt)
  -- Presentation Slides: Neal Whitman, Ohio State University (ppt)
Booth and activity materials from the LSA's participation at the 2016 USA Science & Engineering Festival may be accessed [here](#). Please feel free to use these materials at your own outreach event. Included: Posters, give-away sticker design, Powerpoint presentation, materials and instructions for the “Do you have an accent?” activity.

**External Resources**

The comprehensive resources for linguistic outreach (particularly ideas for activities) below are provided courtesy of [Maryland Language Science Center](#). This section of the guide features a variety of online resources for spreading the word about language science compiled with other language science outreach enthusiasts at UMass (Barbara Pearson), University of Arizona (Cecile McKee), Ohio State University (Laura Wagner), and the National Science Foundation (Joan Maling). Here you’ll find various language maps, dialect resources, and other useful sites that can be used in the classroom or out in the community. We’ve included some literature about science education if you’re interested in finding more tips and advice.

**Maps**

- [Langscape](#): a geographical information system (GIS) which maps the locations of around 6,400 languages worldwide. The interactive map links to detailed information about each language, integrating information from many different data resources. This includes information about demographics, language families, sound systems, bibliographies and expertise, plus sound recordings and texts.
- [Ethnologue: The languages of the world](#)
- [Modern Language Association’s map of languages in the United States](#)

**Education Resources**

- [Omniglot](#): Audio files of common phrases in many languages and examples of different writing scripts
- [Speech Accent Archive](#): contains audio files of different accents of English
- [Interactive IPA chart](#)
• TeachLing: Western Washington University’s repository of lesson plans related to language and linguistics for use in K-12 classrooms

Dialects

• New York Times’ English dialect quiz
• International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA)
• WVU Dialect Project
• Pittsburgh and Speech Society
• North Carolina Language and Life Project

TED Talks

• How Languages Evolve (Alex Gendler)
• What Our Language Habits Reveal (Steven Pinker)
• The Birth of a Word (Deb Roy)
• The Linguistic Genius of Babies (Patricia Kuhl)
• Txtng Is Killing Language, JK!!! (John McWhorter)
• What Makes a Word “Real?” (Anne Curzan)
• Accents: Where and why? (Kathryn Campbell-Kibler)
• More TED Talks on language

Further Links (to linguistic outreach groups and activities):

• Buckeye Language Network - Language Pod (Ohio)
• Buckeye Language Network - Outreach tools (apps and multimedia)
• Canadian Language Museum
• Drongo Festival (Netherlands)
• The Genius of Language (UK)
• North Carolina Language and Life Project
• Online North Carolina dialect quiz
• Paws on Science (Washington)World Voice Day
• Exercises/handouts on introductory linguistic topics

Please contact the organizers through the links provided for more information.

*Thanks for helping to bring linguistics to the public!*