Trivia Night @ Your Library

How to facilitate a trivia event in your community

Why sponsor/organize this program?

Trivia Night @ your library is a program in which teams compete against each other in answering questions from various topics to win prizes. This family event is formatted so that all ages will enjoy participating and will actually assist their older or younger team members with their unique knowledge of all things trivial. Community members choose their own teams of 5 to 8 people, who can range from family members to coworkers to singles groups. From working together on tough questions to joking with other teams, team members bond with each other and other teams to create a fun, stimulating environment filled with friendly competition. Everyone has fun at Trivia Night!

Origins of our program

Trivia Nights are very popular in the St. Louis area, and I was visiting family there and was invited to participate on their team. That trivia night was held in the basement of a church to raise money for a young woman's medical bills. My family wanted a young librarian to help fill in some gaps in their mainly retired-professionals team demographics. Each member of our team paid a $10 cover charge at the door, and brought a snack to share with our table. We laughed, ate, and talked between rounds. Great fun was had by all, even though our team didn't come close to winning, and everyone encouraged me to try to organize a trivia night at the library where I work in Topeka, Kansas. I knew that some of the aspects of trivia night would transfer to a library program better than others, so we adapted a few things and tried it, with great success.

Adapting things for your organization

Sample forms and question files can be sent to you electronically so that you can more easily adjust them to suit your own needs. We include our instructions below so that you can better understand the way that we facilitate Trivia Night. Use these instructions to guide your own Trivia Night event, and improve and adapt them as you gain experience.

Advertising

What is an event without anyone attending it? Not much fun. Part of the challenge of offering a Trivia Night will be explaining what it is to the community in advance, so that interested participants can have enough time to organize a team. Once you have some teams coming, the advertising through word-of-mouth about a successful program will do most of the work for you. We sent flyers to local churches and community centers, as well as advertised within the library. We revised our flyer many times so that it concisely conveyed the essence of the event in an eye-catching format. We tried to include the basic Frequently Asked Questions about Trivia Night on the wording of the original advertisement.

Our current advertising states:

Trivia Night @ Your Library

Enter as a team of 5-8 friends, coworkers or family members working together to answer 100 questions from 10 categories. Prizes will be awarded to the top trivia teams! Doors open at 6 pm. The Millennium Café will be open for snacks and drinks until 6:30 pm. Registration required, begins March 1.

Preparing for the Big Night

First, event facilitators set up the room for the evening. This involves distributing all the necessary materials to each team table, and organizing the grader's table.

For each team table, you will need:

- Something to clearly number each team's table
- 1 half-sheet copy of the Round 1 score sheet (with Estimated Total Score)
- 9 half-sheet copies of the score sheet per team (you might want to keep these at the grader's table and hand them out a clean answer sheet after each round)
- At least 1 copy of the Rules of Trivia Night
- List of the categories for the evening (optional)
- Team Score Sheets (optional)
- Publicity advertising next Trivia Night event (optional)
- Pencils and scratch paper (really appreciated)

For the grader's table, you will need:

- Grader's Score Sheet, which is a big chart useful for recording and tracking the scores, and handy for posting scores between rounds. You can also use a laptop with a simple excel spreadsheet to calculate the totals for you. Some trivia nights also display the scores from the laptop on a screen for all to see.
- Pencils/pens and calculators for adding scores

Signs

We also make very simple signs to label areas in the room (e.g. on walls or front of the tables).

- Scoring Table
- "All decisions of the judges are final."
- Team Check-In
- Donations for the Library Friends Booktique
- Prizes donated by the Library and Local Merchants

As the event begins, one or two staff members welcome teams to the program. At this time, people can donate used books, cans of food, or pay their cover charges. Teams then choose a table for the evening. Many teams don't arrive as a group, and everyone on the team may not know each other, so some coordinating is necessary and useful to help people find their teams.

At the scheduled time, the emcee starts the evening. After a general welcome and introduction of all the facilitators of the evening, the emcee reads aloud or summarizes the Rules of Trivia Night.

Rules of Trivia Night with Explanations

The Trivia Night Rules should be given out at each table and read by the emcee at the beginning of the event. You may notice that the rules are purposefully an explanation of the expectations and organization of the event. This sets people at ease and lets them enjoy the evening without worrying about what is happening next or how things work.

- *Trivia night will consist of 10 rounds.*
  Each round will have a category or theme.
  Each round will have 10 questions.

    Teams like to have the rounds announced in advance, but not before the actual night of the event. We give each table a list of categories, but with the titles cryptically or humorously written. For example, "It's a Bird, It's a Plane" was our heading for a category on the United States Air Force.

- *On the score sheet for Round 1, each team should estimate their final score (out of 100). If the final scores are tied, the team who estimated their final score most accurately will win.*

    Rather than have a sudden death round to decide a tie, we use this simple trick. In the event of a tie, we examine the estimated scores that the teams submitted in round one. Whichever team estimated their score most closely is declared the winner. We don't care if the estimate was higher or lower, just the difference from the actual score. We have used this estimated score surprisingly often to determine our winners, and people always think this is a fun and fair component for people to predict how their team will fare in the event.

- *The trivia host will read each question aloud twice. Teams should try to write down an answer after each question. After each round of questions, all questions will be repeated again one time to give your team a chance to fill in all answer blanks.*

    I used to let people request certain questions to be repeated at the end, but found it was usually quicker to just quickly read through them all a third time, because people would request the same question more than once, rather than just paying attention the first time.

    Remind people to whisper when consulting with their team members. If you hear people discussing too loudly, you can tease them from the podium a bit about helping other teams, since everyone can overhear. Only break the friendly attitude if you need to deal with disruptive or unruly patrons, in which case you can approach them individually between rounds and try to be as discreet as possible.

- *At the end of each round, one member of your team will bring your answer sheet to the scoring table and pick up an answer sheet for the next round.*

    At some trivia events, school-age volunteers may be employed to be "runners" and go table to table to collect the answer sheets and give out clean sheets for the next round. This is a simple and helpful task if you have younger volunteers, but not necessary, since you can simply ask one member of each team to be the team "runner" and bring the score sheets up to the grader's table.

- *Before beginning the next round, the trivia host will review the answers to the previous round.*

    Teams love this part, because they can then guess whether they were right or wrong. This is a great time for the emcee to ham things up a bit, heighten the suspense, cheer, laugh or groan along with the crowd. Reading the answers in between rounds allows people time to chat and interact with their team. Try not to rush this part if you can help it. Let people enjoy their moment of glory and talk about the answers in their small group.

- *The graders will post the scores for the round on the whiteboard as they become available. You can track your score on your personal score sheet.*

  A white board or chalkboard can be used to post the team scores after each round. We tried to keep all scores from all rounds posted, but as you can imagine, this was a horrible mess, so we now post only the current round's score. We used to post the cumulative scores, but now we just post the current round's score, as that heightens the suspense at the end to see which teams are the big winners. Establish in advance which person at the graders/scoring table will handle questions and disputes from teams who do not agree with the scores. Post a sign and announce at the beginning that decisions of the judges are final.

- *The teams with the highest final scores will be awarded prizes at the conclusion of scoring the final round.*

  We had repeated requests for other prizes, and suggestions like "lowest score overall" and "team that best estimated their actual final score." We tried the "lowest score" prize, but it mainly embarrasses the team who won it, and the benefit of winning the prize probably didn't outweigh the embarrassment. You can have a random attendance prize as well.

  Depending on how many prizes you have, you may want to organize awarding the prizes differently. At our library, we are not able to solicit community donations of prizes, so we have a first place team prize of a $5 gift certificate to our Friends of the Library Booktique for each team member. Each person on the team gets the same prize, and if the team has fewer than 8 people, we save the leftover prizes for the next trivia night. If you had prizes donated from local merchants, like gift certificates and buy-one, get-one offers, you could arrange them on a table and allow team members to each choose a prize. This would mean that not everyone on the winning team would get the same prize or get prizes of the same value. The second place team could then choose from the prizes that were left.

  Whatever you decide, thank the donors of the prizes from the podium and make the ending of your event into a brief awards ceremony for the winning teams. Highlight the accomplishments more than the prizes, and give advice for non-winning teams of how to improve their chances next time (wider range of people with different knowledge backgrounds, maximum number of people on the team, etc.). Do not encourage anyone to study or memorize answers before the next trivia night because that is so totally not the point. You could encourage people to play Trivial Pursuit or other group games, because that is also a fun way to use your trivial knowledge.

Other Considerations

Partial Credit

After a horrific experience with scoring partial credit questions (5 1/2 + 8 2/3 = 13.1667), we determined that all questions would be worth one whole point and no partial credit would be awarded. Participants enjoy partial credit questions though, because they can get some credit for knowing part of the answer. If you decide to use partial credit, our advice is to use it sparingly and only use ½ points.

Staff and Volunteers

We have run Trivia Night with a barebones staff of an emcee, a scoring judge, and one volunteer grader. The emcee and scoring judge were also the people who researched, wrote and prepared the questions. Other trivia night staff will depend on what features you incorporate into your event. We recommend having four to six people help at your first event to make it less stressful on the people organizing it, and after that you can decide for yourself.

Cover Charge

If you have a cover charge for the event, you will need a person to operate the cashbox and team registration table. I've heard that fundraising trivia nights in the St. Louis, Missouri area are typically $10 a person, or even $15 a person, and can raise $500-$1000 per night, because trivia events are popular and well advertised in that metropolitan area. Our library chooses to offer programs that are free and open to the public, so we do not have a cover charge.

Food and Drink

Our current library policy directs customers to purchase any food and drink from the library's Café, which we arrange to stay open later, until the beginning of trivia nights. Some fundraising events allow participants to bring food, and even provide drinks. While visiting Collinsville, Illinois in 2002, I attended a lovely evening with my father's friends. Everyone on the 10-person team brought snacks to share, and the table was crowded with veggie dip, cheese and crackers, grapes and chips. The drinks, 2-Liters of soda pop and cups of ice, were provided by the trivia organizers. Some trivia events also allow people to bring their own alcohol, or have an additional fundraiser selling refreshments to participants. If your venue is open to having people bring food, I recommend that you encourage people to bring snacks to share with their team.

Writing Questions and Answers

Because Trivia Night questions are read aloud, when writing them we find it best to test categories on our coworkers by actually reading aloud the questions to them. This helps us catch misunderstandings, bad wording, and clarity issues.

For each round we usually write 13-15 questions and then narrow it down to 10, based on the testing. This process gives us confidence on the night of the event that our questions are unambiguous and that as judges we are prepared to defend and/or explain the questions and answers.

If you are getting questions from another source (even us), don't necessarily trust them without checking them first. Ask your source if any of the questions were disputed when they used the categories at their event. Read through them to check for ambiguous questions and test them on at least one other person.

When writing questions do not just use unverified questions from random Internet quizzes or trivia quiz books, at least not without checking the information in another reliable source. As librarians, we have a

good idea of how to evaluate information, and know that our questions should come from respected authoritative information sources. Otherwise, if a question is in dispute you (or the emcee) won't have any justification for your answer.

Choosing Categories

People appreciate a wide range of categories, some broad and some very specific. If you are writing a Star Trek category, make sure you test it on a few Star Trek fans. They should be able to get most of the questions, while someone who dislikes Star Trek probably should not be able to get any. Choosing categories is tricky, because many people have areas of expertise that you know little or nothing about. Appeal to these people for help, particularly if they are not attending the event (you want to avoid ethically compromising your event by talking too much about the questions and categories before the event). A staff member with an art degree designed two wonderful categories for us, with images of art that patrons had to identify. A chemistry teacher wrote a science category, and we used trivia about the library as a bonus round.

Balancing the categories for variety doesn't mean one category per school subject or academic discipline. Avoid writing too many academic categories and throw in popular culture when you can. Music, Movies, Musicals, Famous people, and Television are all very popular with teams. The Air Force category got groans, but people did very well, thanks in part to some clever questions and good user testing in advance.

We are unfortunately quite serious when we admit that it takes us 1-3 hours to research, write and test each category. But we work in little bursts over the course of 2-3 months before the event, and it's worth it. Also, as librarians, we take our research, and our accuracy, very seriously. It's our job. ☺

Problem Patrons

The Trivia Night problem patrons we have encountered have helped us shape both our rules and our level of preparation. Over-competitive patrons may argue about the scoring of their answers and argue about the validity of questions. Be prepared to defend the authority of your answers. Also be prepared to defuse angry patrons by throwing out a question if the majority of teams disagree with your answer. If you throw out a question, give everyone credit for getting it right. Post a sign and announce at the beginning that decisions of the judges are final. Stress that Trivia Night is meant to be a fun and entertaining family event, therefore healthy competition and good sportsmanship are important. Over the 6 years we have been doing trivia night here in Topeka, I have also developed a strategy of downplaying the winning aspects, teasing people about taking it too seriously, and poking fun of our prizes, which often include things like a letter opener with the library logo or other branded-giveaways.

Location, Equipment and Setup

We hold Trivia Night in our library's large multipurpose room, with tables and chairs for each team. We use banquet tables, with 8 chairs each, arranged perpendicularly to the front so that no one has their back to the emcee. You can use whatever arrangement works in your space. We label each table with a simple table-tent sign with the table number in large bold type. You can make labeling the table as simple as that, or you can get creative and make a more elaborate or decorative table number (i.e. paper sack with decorations, weighted helium balloon, etc.). You can encourage team names, but it is easier to track scores, etc., if you still refer to every team by a unique number. We prefer a podium and microphone for the emcee, so that the questions can be read from the podium at a volume at which all teams can hear. At the front of the room near the emcee, we place one table with 2-3 chairs for the graders and scoring staff. If you can put the emcee and graders on a raised platform, the teams can see them better, but this is not crucial. We also have another table at the front near the emcee for the display of prizes. Patrons enjoy

viewing what they could possibly win! I have heard of other trivia events that also show the questions on a screen using PowerPoint.

Bonus Round

Using a Bonus Round during the final grading and scoring can help keep teams interested while not affecting the outcome of the competition. When we didn't have a Bonus Round, teams had more time to talk amongst themselves while the graders finished, but some teams packed up to leave before the prizes were awarded, because they felt they were not likely to win. With the Bonus Round, teams answered another 10 questions, all on a random category, like Nascar, or gambling, or local history. This fun round highlighted the library and kept people entertained until the judges were ready. We had each team grade their neighbor's paper, and awarded novelty prizes to the winners. Another way to spend the time after Round 10 and before the prize ceremony is to draw for attendance prizes, either by table number if you have lots of little prizes, or drawing from a basket of evaluation forms, if you have asked people for feedback on your event.

Date and Time

We chose to host our Trivia Nights on Friday nights since the library is open until 9pm anyway. We have learned to be VERY efficient in order to start our event at 6:30 pm and have everyone out of the library at 9pm. Plan on your first event lasting about three hours if you use 10 rounds of questions. A St. Louis area library had a Saturday night event and kept the basement of the library open late. Most of the community-sponsored fundraiser Trivia Nights in St. Louis are on Saturday nights and start around 6 or 6:30 pm and run until 9:30 or 10 pm.

Frequency

Because of the continued success of Trivia Night at our library, we are scheduling the event every 2-3 months. Patrons ask for them to be more often, but finding the staff time involved in writing and researching questions is difficult. In addition, we want to keep Trivia Night as a special event for the public to enjoy occasionally. We don't want to saturate the market or over commit our staff.

Best Wishes

We hope that through these guidelines, forms, and advice that you are able to successfully launch Trivia Night @ your library. TSCPL's successful trivia night was been developed by Lissa Staley, Kate Grantham and Michelle Eklund. We are willing to share some of our "used" questions with other organizations to help get you started. We just ask that no one publish our questions on the Internet, so that they can continue to be used by many other groups.

If you have any questions about explanations in these instructions, please contact us. We are happy to share our questions sets with other libraries once we have used them at our local Trivia Night. We are also interested in trading sets of questions or categories if your library or organizations hosts a similar event.

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