

How to Choose the Right Room Layout

For meetings and conferences

Room set-up drives everything else

The seating layout you choose shapes delegate energy, sight lines to the speaker, catering flow and even whether people talk to each other in the breaks. A well-set room does half the engagement work for you. A badly-set one — even with a great speaker and a beautiful venue — feels flat. This guide covers the six formats that make up the vast majority of business events, when each one is right, and the small physical details that make a big difference on the day.

A quick note before layouts: the "capacity" number your venue quotes for a room is the maximum in that layout, not the comfortable number. Comfortable usually sits at 80–85% of maximum. Ask for both figures when you're comparing rooms.

The six layouts you'll actually use

Theatre

Rows of chairs facing the stage. Highest capacity for a given room size, best for presentations and keynote-heavy content. Delegates can't take notes on a table, so it's poor for training or workshops. Delegate energy stays reasonably high for 60–90 minutes, then dips — plan breaks accordingly.

Use it for: AGMs, product launches, keynote sessions, awards ceremonies with speeches.

Classroom

Rows of tables and chairs facing the stage. Same directionality as theatre but with notes and materials on the table. Roughly 60% of theatre capacity in the same room. Delegates can spread out — laptops, workbooks, handouts — and stay attentive longer.

Use it for: Training days, workshops with individual exercises, multi-hour learning content.

Cabaret

Round tables of 8–10, all facing the stage but with delegates sitting around three sides so no one has their back to the speaker. Best of both worlds — presentation friendly plus table-based group work. Roughly 40–50% of theatre capacity.

Use it for: Sales kick-offs, all-hands meetings, mixed presentation-and-discussion agendas, conferences with mid-session table exercises.

Boardroom

One rectangular or oval table, chairs on both sides. Everyone can see everyone, but the room has a "front" and a "back" — the head of the table is a status signal. Small capacity (12–20) but very high engagement.

Use it for: Executive meetings, board sessions, small strategy discussions, high-stakes negotiations.

U-shape

Tables arranged in a U with delegates on the outside facing in, and the presenter working the open end. Encourages discussion — everyone can make eye contact. Capacity is similar to boardroom (12–25) but the

format tolerates a facilitator moving around more naturally than a boardroom does.

Use it for: Interactive training, workshops with heavy discussion, strategy sessions with a facilitator, senior team offsites.

Reception (standing)

No seating, or scattered high-tables and a few soft-seating clusters. Highest headcount capacity in a given room by a wide margin — usually 2x theatre. Encourages mingling. Requires a bar or catering station to give people somewhere to move to.

Use it for: Drinks receptions, networking events, product showcases, private views, launches with press.

Match the layout to the outcome

The clearest way to choose is to start from what you want delegates to *do*, not what you want them to *see*:

- **Absorb (listen, watch, take in).** Theatre or classroom.
- **Think (write, work through a problem individually).** Classroom.
- **Discuss with the group at their table.** Cabaret.
- **Discuss with the whole room.** Boardroom or U-shape.
- **Meet people they don't already know.** Reception.

Most conferences mix modes across the day. A common shape: theatre for the morning plenary, cabaret for a mid-afternoon workshop session, reception for the drinks at the end. That means booking one room that can be re-set at lunch, or booking two rooms — the former is cheaper, the latter is smoother.

The physical details that make or break a set

Sight lines

The person in row 6 needs to see the presenter, not the back of row 5's head. Chairs offset a half-seat between rows in theatre style; a small stage riser (30–45cm) for the speaker in any room over 60 delegates. Ceiling height matters — a 3m-ceiling room feels cramped over 100 delegates however you set it.

Screen and camera position

The screen needs to be legible from the back row. Rule of thumb: distance from screen to furthest delegate should be no more than 6x screen height. So a 2m-tall screen supports a room up to 12m deep. If you're going deeper, either specify a larger screen, use dual screens, or add repeater monitors on the side walls.

For hybrid delivery, the camera position matters as much as the screen: it wants to be on the centre line, at delegate eye height, not the standard AV-cart height of 1.4m. A camera pointing up at the speaker looks amateur on the remote feed.

Table dressing

Water carafes per table (not per delegate — cheaper and looks better), one notepad and pen per seat, name cards for boardroom and U-shape but rarely for anything larger. Skip the sweets — they crackle during presentations.

Aisles

Wide enough that a delegate can leave for the loo without disturbing the row. Standard: 900mm between rows, 1.2m at the edges of the room. Skimp on this and you'll see people leaving through the back door because they can't face the shuffle.

Catering integration

Break refreshments in a different room to the main session keep energy sharp and give delegates somewhere to move to. Refreshments in the same room save floor space but tend to encourage people to stay in their seats — worse networking, worse attention when the next session starts. If space is tight, aim for a foyer or corridor set-up.

Lunch that is a served meal at cabaret tables adds 30–40 minutes to the schedule versus a self-service buffet. Choose accordingly — served lunches suit high-status audiences; buffets suit tight agendas and larger groups.

Common set-up mistakes

Setting for maximum capacity when the audience is smaller. An 80-delegate audience in a 120-person theatre set looks half-empty and feels flat. Ask the venue to close off the back rows and shift the whole set forward.

Boardroom set for a discussion where the group won't fit. Above 20 delegates, U-shape works better than a stretched boardroom table — sight lines improve dramatically.

Cabaret with the front table too close to the stage. Delegates at the front table have to twist to see the speaker. Leave at least 3m between the stage and the first table.

Reception with no seating anywhere. 90 minutes of pure standing tires older delegates and thins the room fast. Add a few soft-seating clusters at the edges — most people won't sit but knowing they can is enough.

Frequently asked questions

How many delegates does a "theatre-style room for 100" actually seat comfortably?

Around 80. Venue-quoted capacities are typically at fire-code maximum, not the comfortable working number.

Can a single room be re-set between sessions on the same day?

Yes, and most venues do it in the lunch break — 45 minutes is usually enough to switch theatre to cabaret or classroom. Confirm the switch time on the running order at the planning stage.

What layout is best for a hybrid event?

Cabaret works well because remote joiners can see the table-based discussions on camera, and delegates in the room stay engaged with speakers on the screen. Straight theatre in a hybrid setting can feel one-directional and lose remote audience quickly.

Do you need a stage riser for a room of 50?

For seated audiences, above 60 delegates a riser helps. Under 50, a floor-level presenter usually works.

What's the ideal room shape for a workshop-heavy day?

Cabaret allows table exercises without moving the room. Classroom is good for individual work but discourages group discussion. If your workshop involves both, cabaret is the safer choice.