

Career profile: Sara Beadle, programme manager

By [Ellie Stevenson](#) Arts Hub

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Sara Beadle is Programme Manager for the [Birmingham Book Festival](#), which runs each October, offering over 40 events in less than two weeks. Sara has a BA (Hons.) in Theatre Production, an MPhil in Playwriting Studies and is currently completing a PhD at the University of Birmingham. In the past, Sara has worked for an agency for dramatic writers, as a researcher for the University of Birmingham and for the playwright Sarah Woods. She also gives seminars in Dramatic Medium for the University of Birmingham, part-time.

What do you do all day?

It's different every day. In the planning stages of the Festival, usually January to June, I brainstorm new ideas and seek out interesting writers to headhunt for events. I spend a lot of time researching ideas, which can involve being at my computer, or being on the streets of Birmingham visiting venues. I recently spent a day in the car planning a route for a workshop. I then negotiate with publishers, often competing with other writers' festivals (we're not the only one in October!). During the latter stages, in June to September, I'm involved in vast amounts of admin, arranging venues and travel and finding people to act as introducers, as well as overseeing the design, print and distribution of all the Festival's promotional material and writing the copy for it. During October, I attend all the Festival events, managing a team of volunteers and meeting the writers and publicists, making sure everything runs to plan.

What are you doing today?

Liaising with publicists over travel arrangements and requirements for events, as well as actively selling and promoting a couple of events in particular. I'm also processing bookings for Festival workshops, which we like to deal with personally rather than routing them through the box office.

What's the best thing about your job?

Being given books, which are my passion, and having an excuse to read them. Also, being able to exercise my imagination. The Artistic Director and I dream up all manner of weird and wonderful ideas for the Festival and usually a few of them make it into the programme. Last year we had an all night writing workshop on the top floor of a hotel overlooking the city, in the Presidential Suite. Twelve people stayed awake all night, writing, talking and thinking. It was an amazing experience. This year we're doing the same thing in a minibus driving around the Midlands! It's also rewarding to see people genuinely loving words in all their forms.

And the worst thing?

There is some carrying of boxes, books and things like that. I stuff envelopes, too, and stack chairs. I wouldn't call them bad things.

How did you get into it?

I was working for another arts organisation in the same building, and an email came round asking for temporary staff to help with a mail-out. I was completing a thesis, so it was ideal. I met the Artistic Director, and was soon working as an assistant on the Festival. When it was over, I was asked to put in some ideas for the following year, and gradually my involvement grew as I fell in love with the Festival. I'm now the Programme Manager, which at the moment operates as a part-time post, partly due to funding, partly due to my studies.

How are guests chosen for the Festival?

Two ways. Either we are ardent admirers of their work, and hunt them down, pursuing them relentlessly, or they are recommended to us by publishers, or sometimes other writers. In this case we'll ask to see their book, read it, and make a decision. We try to read the books of everyone that appears at the Festival. We choose writers who show a genuine talent and appreciation for literature, whatever their profile. We try to choose a balance of writers who reflect our varied tastes and the audience we cater for in the Midlands. Birmingham is such a diverse city, and our Festival is relatively small, so we can't compete with the big hitters like Hay or Cheltenham, so we don't really try. Instead we focus on being something unique to Birmingham, and on providing interesting opportunities you can't find elsewhere.

Do you get much opportunity to talk to the authors and performers?

Usually, yes. Last year we welcomed Julie Walters, and I was able to chat with her a little. We sometimes meet them from the station or take them out for dinner or coffee – there's usually the chance to say a few words. It is an honour to meet writers whose books I admire – this year Alice Sebold is coming to the Festival, which I'm very excited about.

Has an author you're working with ever cancelled at the last minute?

No, they haven't (touch wood). I did have a situation recently where a writer arrived for an event three months early, though. There were crossed wires, and he had for some reason been told July, even though our Festival is in October! He called us from the venue, he'd come all the way from London. We sorted it out in the end, and he's still coming on the actual date!

What do you think makes you good at your job?

That I'm passionate about books, and having a background in theatre production which gives me strong administrative/organisational ability. Also, the fact that I have personal aspirations as a writer certainly helps. I also have a vision for the future of the Festival and an overwhelming desire to connect people with words in new ways, something I think which is fundamental to us all. I see the Festival doing this more and more in the future, and that's what drives me to keep doing it, and to make it better.

What's been your biggest achievement in your career so far?

Every time an event goes well, it feels like a big achievement. I think this year, planning the Festival, which is the first year I've had this prominent a role in it, has been an achievement. Being asked to join the Festival's Board of Directors, too.

Any advice for someone trying to get into event management?

Learn about what you are planning and build relationships. I would have far less chance of booking writers and selling events if I had no knowledge of, or interest in them. It makes a writer feel that they are in the right place when the Festival staff know the names of the characters in their novel. Also, get involved at all levels. Don't try and instruct others on anything you haven't done yourself – no matter how menial it might seem.

If you could have a complete career change and do something else, what would you go for?

In an ideal world, I'd be a full time novelist. But a complete change? I'd be a Detective or a Forensic Scientist.

