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## Conference Rules, Part 3

### Everything you need to know about your role as a commentator or a member of the audience

By LINDA K. KERBER

The typical conference panel for the presentation of new work includes one or two people who have been designated as commentators or respondents and charged with reading the papers in advance and offering a critique. Normally what follows is a brief period for questions or comments from the audience.

In Part 1 of this series, I offered advice on how to run a conference panel (*The Chronicle*, March 14), and in Part 2, I covered the rules for presenting a paper (*The Chronicle*, March 21). Here I take on the role of the other two parties in the room — the commentators and the audience.

The typical approach featuring panelists and respondents, I should note, is not the only one. In a "roundtable" discussion, all speakers are equal, and the formal respondent is dispensed with in the interests of providing more time for audience comments and questions. In some disciplines, papers are available in advance on password-protected Internet sites, a practice that is increasing (even in disciplines as traditional as history). When papers can be read in advance, time for discussion expands, and so do the roles of the respondents and listeners.

#### **The Respondent's Responsibility.**

In a traditional conference session, your role as commentator may seem obvious: Read the paper carefully and say something interesting about it. But there is quicksand here.

Commentators have little time to make their case — 15 minutes is standard — and are speaking to an audience that has just heard the papers. At least some listeners will already have identified the strong and weak points of the papers and so are vulnerable to boredom. Some may have formulated questions of their own and are likely to feel impatient for the opportunity to ask them.

Decades ago, conference program committees would identify commentators for each panel (at least at the history meetings with which I am familiar). But nowadays, program committees planning large meetings are apt to ask, or require, that those proposing a panel also name the commentators, a practice that increases the likelihood that the selected critic will share the perspective of the paper-givers. Such a panel may have a cozy, overdetermined feel to it — a situation that should be guarded against.

As the official respondent, you have several options in the type of remarks you can make, and you can use those options alternatively, sequentially, or simultaneously, as the papers merit.

There is, of course, the direct criticism: some aspect of the paper that you understand to be a misstatement of fact or a problematic interpretation. There is the direct compliment: some point you recognize as an intellectual breakthrough, a fresh interpretation, or a useful shift of perspective.

But often, the most useful way for you to spend your allotted time is to devote relatively little of it to complaints or compliments about individual papers. Instead, try to embed such remarks in more wide-ranging reflections: Talk

about how the strongest elements of the papers, or the relationship between them, add up to something greater than the sum of the parts. Perhaps the papers point to a new direction in research or suggest new issues demanding study.

Minimize the time you devote to what might be thought of as copy-editing comments and maximize the amount you spend on aspects of the papers about which people may be unaware. At best, you will surprise the authors and the audience, helping them understand the work in a somewhat different context.

By taking the high ground, and thinking of criticism as pedagogy, you resist the temptation to humiliate the author of even the weakest paper. Keep in mind: All conference papers are presented prepublication; they are, by definition, works in progress. In Part 2 of this series, about presenting a paper, I described how offering a work in progress is the intellectual equivalent of joining the cast of *Hair* and running naked down the aisle of a crowded theater. Treat the author as you yourself would want to be treated when you are equally vulnerable. Your goal as commentator is less to display your own erudition — although it is on display, for sure — than to encourage the author to take useful criticism to heart and to push at the margins of what is already understood.

On rare occasions — and one hopes it will not occur more than once or twice in your professional life — a panelist may make explicit and intentional racist, sexist, or otherwise insulting remarks. In such a situation, it is indeed necessary to set aside niceties, name what you have heard, and undermine it.

### **The Role of the Audience.**

For most of the conference session, those of us in the audience appear to be passive, sitting quietly, listening to the presentations of authors and critics. But if we are truly passive — failing to engage the topic or share our thoughts — we undermine the spirit of the session and its potential for a meaningful experience. Members of the audience are, in their own ways, respondents, and can make the difference between an electric session and a boring one.

As an audience member, you can help make that difference from the time you enter the room. How often have you gone to a session uncertain about whether you wanted to stay for the whole enterprise, and settled into a seat in the back of the room? How often, as a speaker, have you found yourself at a podium, squinting to see the members of the audience over a moat that stretches across three or four empty rows?

So, where to sit? If it is a crowded session, then the only question is whether you can find a seat. But more commonly there are far more seats than auditors, or, if you get there early, it is unclear how full the room will be. At that point, a collaborative, helpful audience member will choose a seat toward the front; on an aisle if you think you may need to leave. (The reciprocal of that courtesy is that when you are offering a paper, you should not take it personally if an auditor leaves before you begin. That person's closest colleague or favorite student may be giving a paper in another session.)

After the papers are presented and the official commentators have finished, the panel chair will turn to the audience and ask for questions. If the chair is on top of things, he or she will have already formulated the first question so as to avoid the loud and extended silence that often follows a request for questions.

It is good mental aerobics, in any case, for you as a member of the audience to formulate good questions as you listen to each paper. And it is a valuable contribution to any panel when the first — or any — question is a substantive one. Whether you speak up first or later on, the important point is to contribute. Obviously you should not ask a question or make an observation simply to hear yourself speak. We have all suffered through long-winded or frivolous questions. Some of us hesitate to approach the microphone out of shyness. But there are real rewards for those who overcome that shyness and ask substantive questions.

First, your curiosity is answered; if you learn something from the answer, it's likely that others in the room will, too. Second, your question is likely to prompt an author to expand in an interesting way on the subject; for authors who come into the room knowing what they are going to say, the questions that could not have been anticipated are a real gift. Such a question may be followed up by an informal conversation after the panel, by engaged correspondence, and by the discovery of new colleagues — whether that turns out to be the author of the paper or someone else in the audience who continues the conversation with you after the session.

You can also be a good audience member by bearing in mind the general rule that questions ought to be distributed to the panelists evenly. Address yours to a panelist who has been ignored.

The need for an engaged audience increases exponentially when members of the panel are unable to appear, a situation that occurs in every large conference as planes are delayed, illnesses strike, and family crises arise. In that case, the chair has a heavier-than-usual responsibility to meld the room into a truly collaborative enterprise and encourage everyone to be a participant. Sometimes what seems a disaster can be turned into a triumph.

I have warm memories of a conference session some 20 years ago on the work on Charles Beard when one of the two panelists in the session was absent; in the time left free, John Higham offered memories of his freshman year at the Johns Hopkins University when Beard was a visiting professor there, and others in the audience rose to share their own memories of Beard.

Only a few weeks ago, I found myself at a Sunday morning conference session from which two of the four panelists were unavoidably absent. The chair genially welcomed the audience, drew us into a community, and gave the two remaining panelists a bit more time to expand their thoughts. When the time came for comment, she offered a few wise reflections. Then the small audience rose to the challenge, and although one would have predicted a shortened session, we had an interesting and invigorating two hours, which stretched my mind and lifted my spirits. Disappointment at the absence of two speakers was counterbalanced by pleasure that we had been able to savor the complexities of the ideas we had heard and not been rushed for time.

We all emerged with new colleagues and fresh ideas. And, really, what more can you ask for from a conference panel?