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Conference Rules, Part 1

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FIRST PERSON

Academics share their personal experiences

Most academic conferences are preceded by some effort to make the sessions different from the usual format, but the usual format overwhelmingly prevails.

That is: Each panel discussion runs no longer than two hours, during which two, three, or four specialists stand at a lectern and talk. Sometimes they will read a prepared paper; sometimes they will improvise; sometimes the final speaker will be charged with offering a critique of what has been said. At the end, questions from the audience will be invited. The enterprise will have a chair, who will introduce the speakers, call on people from the audience who wish to comment, and, when appropriate, end the session.

The basic assignment of the chair is so simple that it is almost impossible to fail. Conference organizers usually give you the CV's of the people you are introducing; you need only announce some salient facts about each one and get out of the way.

But chairing a session *can* be an art form. A good host can establish a friendly atmosphere in the room, make the speakers feel authentically welcome, and go a long way toward ensuring that interesting questions are asked and a solid discussion ensues. (That last is not guaranteed, but there are ways of increasing the possibility it will happen.) Here are some of the steps a chair can take to encourage an effective session:

Making Introductions

Audiences don't need a great deal of formal information about a speaker, but they do need some clues about what that person has done that is interesting or noteworthy. (The audience's unspoken question: Why do I need to hear from her? On what grounds is he an authority?)

It is perhaps less obvious but true that speakers also need to hear themselves welcomed, preferably for the substance of their professional accomplishments. That way they know they are among colleagues, rather than among strangers.

As chair, you can do a little homework. Gather the CV's of the speakers whom you will introduce. Look each vita over carefully, noting the elements you find substantively interesting. If you are already familiar with a speaker's work, it will be easy to frame a sentence or two about why the person is worthy of the audience's attention. If you are not, or if you want to know more, look up one or two of the speaker's most important books or articles and read enough to inform yourself about some aspect that you can convey to the audience. Include two or three, but no more than four, important items from a speaker's CV.

You might say something like this:

"I first encountered Professor X's work when I was in graduate school; I remember his classic essay about Y which made the unusual argument about Z. That approach to problems has characterized other work he has done, especially in the prize-winning book 'Give the Title' that was published in 2000 and on which we all rely. For his work in Good Cause of Your Choice, he won the Important Award in 2002. For the last few years, he has been a professor of history at the University of XYZ. Today he will speak about 'Title of the Talk.' I'm delighted to welcome Professor X."

Notice that you are *not* reading off everything on the CV, or even half of what's there. You have, rather, made your own informed selection from the vita, emphasizing those aspects that connect most directly with the subject of the panel and the theme of the conference. It's particularly good if you have at least tasted the substance of the speakers' work and can convey, in your own words, why you find them interesting. Enthusiasm is catching.

Your introductions should be brief; the longer you talk, the less time there is for the speakers.

Your introduction should immediately precede a speaker. If you introduce everyone at once, it's too easy for audiences to forget who is known for what. Moreover, sequential introductions play the role of a sip of water or a sorbet between courses in the meal; they clear the palate, give the first speaker time to sit down, and the new speaker time to step up and take a deep breath.

The individual introduction is, in effect, a way of welcoming a speaker to your room; take advantage of it.

Before the session begins, go to the room where it will be held. If there is a microphone, adjust it to your height so that you don't have to fiddle with it when you are trying to welcome people to the meeting. That step is particularly important for very short or very tall people. If you are quite short and can't see over the lectern, for goodness sake, get a box to stand on or a floor mike positioned next to the lectern.

Running the Clock

It's a crummy role, but someone has to do it. Someone has to keep speakers within a certain time limit so they all get a chance to talk. I attend conferences in history and in law and have found that legal folks are easier to keep in line than other sorts of academics, because most lawyers have studied or actually conducted an oral argument before an appellate court and they understand the nightmare of seeing a red light before they've made a particularly delicious argument.

Still, it's wise to gather your panel, at least for a few moments, before the session starts, and review the ground rules: Explain that you will introduce them right before their prepared talk. They will each have a certain amount of time to speak; five minutes before the end of their allotted time, you will place a note marked "5 minutes left" on the lectern; then a note that says "2 minutes left," and, finally, if they haven't stopped, one that says, in large red letters, "END."

To do all of that means you must situate yourself next to the lectern.

It may feel awkward to place those warning notes before a speaker, especially if the speaker is eloquent or much older than you are. It will be easier if you remember that your role as timekeeper is an honorable one; the eloquent speakers who warm to their topic and go on and on leave less time for the subsequent speakers and are, consciously or not, being selfish.

Experienced speakers should welcome the reminders; if they are in control of their paper, they will know how to use their remaining time. If they were just rambling on, you might as well stop them now rather

than after they've used up the next speaker's time.

Conducting the Discussion

After the last speaker, it is your role as chair to welcome questions. If you are lucky, someone will ask an interesting question. But a flat silence is more likely. It will go on, sometimes at embarrassing length. We all have nightmares in which no one ever asks a question, though usually someone finally does. Everyone breathes a sigh of relief.

But the dull silence can happen later in a question period, too. Or the questions can seem nit-picky or superficial, and the session can drift in a direction you think frustrating.

You can avoid the unfortunate dull anxious silence or the series of narrowly framed questions by taking two preparatory steps:

- While you are listening to the papers, formulate a question of your own. Think of a question for each paper; then choose the best ones to ask. You have the advantage of having a table and a piece of paper in front of you.
- Enlist a confederate. A colleague can serve as a "plant" -- someone who is already glad to come to the panel because the subject is interesting. Ask your confederate to prepare a question or two as the speakers talk. Your ally might offer it at the beginning (you are then assured that the first question will be a serious one) or at any time. (At other sessions, you can return the favor and play the role of confederate yourself. Your colleagues will be grateful.)

As chair, you will have to call on people in the audience who have their hands raised. Often the questions are evenly directed among the panelists. But sometimes it happens that one panelist gets no questions. If you see that developing, it's wise to take advantage of a question from the floor that might go to the underutilized panelist and use the authority of the chair to direct the question there: "I think that question belongs to Professor X." Or use your authority to insert a question of your own. The idea is to ensure that all the panelists participate in the Q&A period.

Sometimes you may try to limit a speaker who is taking up too much time but find that the speaker ignores you. You may feel uncomfortable pressing the issue. Remember that you are a host; follow your own good instincts and don't get into a major struggle that will distract from the goals of the session. It's important for people to see that you have tried to keep the session on track. But having made a reasonable attempt, you're not at fault if someone violates the ground rules. Stay cheerful and hospitable; usually the speaker will wind down soon, and maybe what he or she has to say will have been worth it.

When the end of the session nears, it's often wise to observe, "We have time for one last question." Be alert to the substance of a response to a good question. Sometimes a good response can serve as a summation of a major theme in the panel. If that occurs within a few minutes of the end, you might want to say, "That seems to be a wonderful/wise/constructive note on which to bring this panel to an end. We thank you all for coming, and we thank our speakers," and then lead a round of applause. Always better to end a little early than a little late.

Linda K. Kerber is a professor of history and a lecturer in law at the University of Iowa and recently finished a term as president of the American Historical Association. In a sequel to this column, she will look at rules for presenting a paper at a conference.