

A Learning-Centered Conference: The Panel Moderator

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Almost all conferences have time designated for panel presentations. Selecting a diverse and interesting panel is key. However, a skillful moderator is essential for ensuring learning. Here are some tips for doing this:

1. **Know the topic.** The more you know the better you will be able to open and close the session, as well as moderate the panel. Ask for resources from the conference organizers and the panelist; read the panelists' most current publications; talk to the panelists and other experts in advance; do a Google search on the panels and the topics. Although you are not the one presenting you have to know enough of what everyone may talk about to be able to weave the information together in a meaningful way, ask informed questions, offer helpful summaries, and nudge panelist where and when needed.
2. **Be prepared.** The most important place to start is to make sure you have the correct names and titles of everyone on the panel, and know how to pronounce them. Meeting each panelist in advance is the best way to ensure this.

Besides needing to do your homework so you know the topic, themes and panelists, you also need a plan for how you will moderate the panel. This means that you should prepare a list of [powerful open questions](#) that will encourage helpful observations and lively debate from the panelists. You may not use all the questions or outline you created, but having a plan is wise.

It is also important that you have an overview of the program with topics, names, and timing. This is your “cheat sheet” and something you refer to from time-to-time to check where you are – it may be helpful to print this in an extra-large font size for easy referencing.

In addition, it is recommended that you create a few pages with pithy quotes from the panelists' publications, key statistics (with their sources), and/or excerpts of commentary on research by the panelists. Having these on-hand affords you the opportunity to use them at helpful times.

Lastly, having copies of the panelists' publications on stage with you (or on the table in front of you) allows you to pick them up and show the audience during the introduction, closing, or during the presentation (if you need to read a quote directly from the source).

3. **Connect with the panelists in advance.** It is critical to ensure that the panelists feel informed and connected. They need to know that they can contact you (and the events

coordinator) at any time about any concern or question. Two to three points of contact before the event are important. Touching base with each panelist the day of the panel is also necessary: show them the room, explain the stage set up and process, share the way you will engage the audience after the panel, answer any last-minute questions, ask questions you still have (checking assumptions is wise) and introduce panelists to each other (if possible). You want to minimize surprises and maximize safety.

4. **Prepare the panelists.** Once a panelist has signed on, it is a good idea to send a confirmation email thanking them for agreeing to be part of your event. In this message include the date, time, and location of the event and the panel they are part of. The host can then also ask for a bio for the conference program, what dates they need a hotel reservation for, and any special needs or concerns they have that you should know about i.e. dietary, physical.

The second communication should be from you (the moderator) and/or the event coordinator and should be two to three weeks before the event. At this time, you should tell them more about the topic and theme(s) of the panel, who you and other panelists are, who the audience is, and what you hope to achieve. At this time, it is important to also explain your role, style of moderating and expectation about time, tone, and process.

5. **Keep it short and clear.** Longer questions often require longer answers. Keep your questions short and to the point. Encourage people to share provocative cutting-edge thinking and research. The audience is there to learn and be challenged in their thinking.
6. **Stay fully present and engaged at all times.** There is nothing worse than a moderator who is caught off guard by “dead air” because he is talking to someone off to the side or getting a coffee! You have a single focus: the panel. Show interest and genuine curiosity at all times, and ensure the dialogue continues in meaningful ways.
7. **Watch the clock.** You are responsible for ensuring each panelist has the time promised them and that there is time at the end to engage the audience with the information and ideas shared (to maximize learning). To do this the clock needs to be in clear sight for you and everyone involved. It is disrespectful for the first panelist to eat into half of the time of the second panelist (plus, you don’t want a panelist walking off the stage to catch a flight, because you are now 20 minutes over!). Each person has been carefully and intentionally selected to be on the panel and needs equal time. To help with this, in advance of the event and on the day of the event, clearly tell the panelists how much time they have and how you will ensure this is respected. Some ways to communicate timing include:
 - Have colored lights or flags: green = all is good; yellow = time is running out; red = stop, your time is over.
 - Digital count-down clock at the edge of the stage for all panelist to see

- Someone at the back of the room holding signs in LARGE LETTERS: 10 minutes – 5 minutes – 1 minute – STOP.

In most situations, someone other than the moderator is offering the visual cues about time.

8. **Make everyone else look smart.** It is not your job to make yourself look smart or grab all the attention. You have the important job to facilitate a focused, interesting, helpful, and provocative session, but the panelists are the experts. A few ways to do this are: 1) start with a few “softball questions” that get the panelists talking and then move to more provocative ones to push people’s thinking and points of view; 2) weave, rephrase, or summarize what panelists are saying to help clarify information being offered; and, 3) add to what a panelist is saying by offering a quote from her own writing, “In your book, you give a great example of the model you are talking about...” Remember: you help produce the show, but are not the star.

To be clear, this does not mean there are not times when you have to cut off a speaker or break into a debate. You need to also advocate for the audience and ensure the discussion stays focused, energy remains up, and everyone has an equal voice.

9. **Weave.** In general, it is helpful and interesting when the panelists response, debate and interact with each other. Sometimes this does not come naturally, and you need to help. One way to do this is to weave multiple ideas together and ask the panel for their thoughts on the connections you just made. It can also be helpful to weave past research, statistics or publications into what is being said in the panel and invite them to respond to a question about it.

It is also true that a panel needs to feel like they are in *one* learning session, *not four*. This does not mean that each of the panelists needs to agree with the others or that a single viewpoint should be offered – on the contrary, this would be boring and unhelpful. However, the focus and themes should be clear. As moderator, weaving people’s ideas and resource around the theme can be helpful.

10. **Start and end well.** Explain why this group of individuals was invited to be on the panel: who are they as individuals and who are they as a group? Although some may have a recognizable name for many in the room, it is important not to assume too much. Conferences usually attract long-time community members and people in the field as well as “newbies” and those who came just because they are curious. It is respectful to speak so that all individuals feel welcome and included. This does not mean a formal introduction of each panel member is needed. However, you can weave information about a panelist into the first open question you pose, a practice that can be both respectful and helpful.



To end panel time, a final question can be asked: “In a few sentences, what do you predict will be our new challenge in five years?” or “In a sentence, how do you feel about the future knowing this is the trend?” Avoid offering time for summary statement – most panelists will just repeat what they have already said, and time is precious. Keep it fresh.