

How to Preside at a Conference Session

You are responsible for making sure the session runs smoothly, on time, and that your audience is engaged.

Basic Principles

1. You need to be there at least a half of an hour before the session starts.

- a. You need to help the authors load their presentations
- b. Have a quick chat and make them feel welcome
- c. Make sure the A/V is okay

2. Kick-off the session by saying a few remarks at the beginning of the session.

- a. Introduce yourself, your affiliation
- b. Theme of the session
- c. Introduce speakers and simple information about their talks

3. Keep the session on time.

- a. Sessions need to run on time and you will be able to warn the speaker in advance
- b. Inform the speaker when time is running out

4. Facilitate the discussion.

- a. Solicit questions from the audience
- b. Have questions prepared in case the audience doesn't have any
- c. Speaker should repeat the audience member's question so everyone can hear it
- d. At the end of the session, wrap up the session and thank the speakers

Remember these points:

- Speak clearly and loudly
- Keep to the schedule
- Engage the audience
- Wrap up succinctly and on time

Further suggestions:

1. The session chair is responsible for controlling the environment. That means the lights, heat, and any technology needed, ranging from overheads and slides to computer presentations. It is a good idea to check the room well in advance to make sure that the expected facilities are available. If not, find out where the local audiovisual support center is located, and check to make sure that everything will be in place by the time of your session.

2. If the presenters are going to be using technology, it is often helpful to arrange a trial session in the room some time prior to the scheduled presentation. If most of the

presenters are going to be using technology, the current wisdom is that you need two people to chair the session, so that there is always someone available to go for help.

3. If possible, try to meet as many as possible of your presenters before the session. If you have a question about pronouncing their names, the title of the talk, or the name of their institutional affiliation, ask early. It can be quite embarrassing to for both you and the speaker if you pronounce something wrong. Another way to sometimes get this information is to check with other presenters who are there early.

4. Please follow the schedule closely. Many conference attendees try to move between sessions, and they become very angry when a talk is not held at the scheduled time. Cutting off a longwinded speaker can be very touchy, but try to be as firm as possible. Warn all the speakers that you will stand in place five minutes before time has expired; you will verbally remind them when two minutes remains; and you will not hesitate to cut them off when time has run out. Try to allow time for questions, but be warned that some speakers will intentionally use up the discussion time to prevent this. Some experienced presidors choose to use a timer with an obvious chime or tone to enforce the schedule.

5. For each paper, announce the speaker's name, affiliation, and the title of the talk. If you have not made contact with a speaker in advance, and if no one responds to your announcement, repeat this information at least three times before you decide that the speaker is not present. If a speaker is absent, either allow a continuation of the discussion of the previous paper or announce an intermission until the next scheduled paper. Remember that the rules of most conferences do not allow the presentation of any paper unless it is listed in the program.

6. Once you have announced a speaker, your responsibility is not over until the speaker is firmly under way. You may need to attach a microphone to the speaker's lapel, start the slide projector, remove an overhead that is blocking the slide screen, and any other housekeeping chores that are appropriate. If a pointer is available, offer to show the speaker how to use it. If the speaker cannot be heard at the back of the room, politely suggest that he/she speak louder. Do whatever you can to make the talk successful.

7. At the end of the presentation, stand and lead applause. The audience will look to you to determine when to applaud! If there is time for questions, announce that this paper is open for discussion. Be prepared to ask the first question, if necessary. Keep track of the time, and don't be afraid to cut off the questions when time runs out. When you finish the question period, lead another round of applause for the completed talk, and then announce the next speaker. It is NOT normally necessary to applaud when a speaker is introduced.

8. At the end of the presentations, express thanks to the participants and the audience and lead a round of applause for the presenters.