

If you get asked to be a Session Chair, your only reaction should be to say “Yes!”

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Abstract

The function of a session chair is to lead the session—you will introduce the session and the presenters, keep the session moving according to a prearranged schedule, and you must do this in a courteous and professional manner. This paper will help you to be the best session chairperson. Use these guidelines, but bear in mind that each conference is different and that it may be useful to observe how other session chairs do it too. This paper discusses the activities you should perform, problems you may encounter, and possible solutions.

Pre-Session Preparation

There are very few things that are more annoying to the presenter and the audience than audiovisual (AV) equipment that doesn't work or that the presenter doesn't know how to use. Make sure you get there early, learn how to use the AV equipment, have the presenters load the presentations early, test the microphone, laser pointer, and try a sample presentation.

USB Drive. Most people will bring their presentations to the conference on a USB drive. Load your presentation on the laptop before the session and test it.

Projector. Conferences will usually have a laptop computer and a projector for the presentations. They will often have a remote control for advancing the slides, and this may contain a built-in laser pointer.

Laser Pointer. It would be good to bring one, in case the conference does not supply one or if the light is inadequate due to overused batteries.

Microphone. Larger venues will have a wireless lapel microphone. Make sure the presenter has it at the right level (close to her mouth).

Introduction of Presenters

Show up early. Meet the presenters and put them at ease (they may be nervous). Have them load their presentations onto the laptop computer. Tell them how much time they have and how you will notify them that their presentation time is almost done. Have a copy of the conference program with you, and make sure you have pronounced all the names, out loud, *before* the session. If you have difficulty with any of the names, find the presenter and ask her how she would like her name pronounced. The author of this paper once had a conference presenter whose first name was Sunddip. I pronounced it *Sun-Dip* and was corrected; it was *Sun-Deep*.

Caution. The first name on the list of authors is usually the presenter, but not always. Things change between the time the conference program is printed and the day of the conference. Be sure to check with the authors and verify who is presenting.

Session Introduction. Stand at the front of the room at the start time. Be prompt. You may need to tap a glass, the microphone, or something similar to get everyone's attention. Then say, "Welcome to session (*name or number*) of the (*name*) conference. I am (*your name*) and will be your session chair." You should remind people to turn off their cell phones, and you may want to add a sentence (but keep it short) about how the papers in your session tie together.

One of the rules of presenting is to never leave the podium empty. The session chair should stay at the front of the room until the presenter has arrived and is ready to present. It is nice to shake hands, but it is not necessary. Likewise, at the end, meet the departing presenter before he leaves and stay at the front until the next presenter has been introduced and is ready.

Presenter Introduction. Tell the audience the names of authors, their affiliation, the name of the presenter, and the title of the paper. It is best if you read the names and titles directly from the program. If there are more than three authors, then you should probably just introduce the presenter by saying:

- Paper number 12 is by John Smith and several co-authors from the University of Akron.

John Smith will be presenting (*the paper title*).

Or, if the authors are from several different institutions:

- Paper number 12 is by John Smith from the University of Akron and several co-authors.

John Smith will be presenting (*the paper title*).

If a presenter is struggling with loading last-minute updates of his presentation, you may need to ad lib (more on this below). If the presenter has handouts for the audience, you should take them from the presenter and distribute them yourself or with the help of others you ask to volunteer. Most people are willing to help distribute handouts—it gives them a chance to get up and stretch.

Titles. People can be sensitive about titles. The author doesn't have a universal answer for this. Generally, technical conferences are informal, but professional, meetings of peers—some have doctorates and some do not, and conferees generally do not distinguish between them, since they are all professionals. Presenters are often nervous, and addressing people by their first names should help them acclimate.

However, there are many people who need to be properly addressed when being introduced (presidents, deans, judges, members of parliament or congress, ambassadors, etc.). You probably will not be put into the position of introducing these people if you don't know the

proper etiquette, so don't worry about it. Generally, a session chair will be safe if she reads the presenter's name and title exactly as written in the program.

Time Management

This is the most important function of a session chair. The session has a known number of papers for presentation and a finite number of minutes before the next session, break, or lunch. The time should be evenly divided between the presenters, allowing enough time for questions and answers. For example, if you have three presenters in a one-hour session, then you might break it up as follows:

- 1 minute to load computer with presentation, for people to take their seats, and for you to introduce of the session
- 57 minutes for presentations; or 19 minutes per presenter
- 2 minutes to spare

From this top-level session breakdown, you might break up the 19 minutes of each presenter's time as follows:

- 45 seconds for you to read the list of authors, their affiliations, introduce the presenter, and read the title of the paper, while the presenter comes up to the front
- 14 minutes until you give the presenter a 2-minute warning
- 2 minutes for the presenter to finish
- 15 seconds for applause and for you to ask the audience for Q&A.
- 2 minutes for Q&A and a last applause

Make sure your presenters know the method you will use to notify them that their time is running out. End-of-time may be done with lights (green, yellow, red), timer-ding, pointing at your watch, flash cards, waving your arms, holding up two fingers, or softly saying, "Two

minutes.” The author recommends that you have an index card with the number 2 written on one side and *Time’s Up* on the other side. Do not hold this card at your chest level because the presenter will certainly not see it. Hold the card above your head and make sure the presenter has seen the card and acknowledged seeing it—this is usually a brief pause as she focuses on the card. If you don’t have cards, hold up two fingers (the peace sign) above your head and softly say, “two minutes” when the presenter looks at you. There is a section below on how to handle long-winded presenters (and other problems you might encounter). When the presenter has finished, start the applause and move immediately into the Q&A session.

Question and Answer (Q&A)

You have to decide (or you will be told) that the Q&A period will be immediately after each individual presentation or at end of session. The author strongly recommends doing it at the end of each presentation. People lose their train of thought after listening to three or four presentations and may not remember their question.

As a session chair, you should always have one question ready for the presenter if the audience does not. Give the audience a chance to ask questions and, if there is silence, then say: *I have a question* (and then ask it). Your question can be simple, and it may prime the audience or break the ice for asking questions. Knowing that you may need to ask a question forces you to listen to the presenter (it is easy to become engrossed with your timer) and will make the presenter feel good—they like simple questions. If you have time before the start of the session, you may want to ask the presenter for a suggested question.

The session chair should walk to the front of the room near the end of the Q&A session, meet the presenter before they leave, start the final applause, introduce the next presenter, and stay at the front until the next presenter is ready.

Applause

The session chair is the leader of the session but will almost certainly have to take the lead to start the applause. There is no applause when the presenter is introduced, but there are three times that you should lead the applause.

End of Talk. Often the presenter will end by saying *thank you*, but at other times she may just mumble a few closing words and then stare at the audience. It is up to you to decide when the presenter has ended and start the applause. People in the audience will take the hint.

End of Q&A. When the questions stop, or the time is up for the Q&A session, it is appropriate to say *thank you* to the presenter and start a short round of applause. This should prompt him to stop taking questions, gather his materials and step down.

End of Session. Once the entire program is over you should take a moment to thank everyone for coming and say: *Let's all give all the presenters another round of applause.*

You are done. You did a great job, and everyone thinks you are a seasoned session chair. The only thing left to do is add this to your résumé.

Problem Resolution

There are many issues that can occur during a conference session, and there are no universal solutions—that's life. As the session chair, the presenters and the audience will look to you to resolve the issues. This section is written from experience and contains some suggestions for mitigating some problems that have occurred.

Long-Winded Presenter. Your primary job is to keep the session moving, and you are within your rights to interrupt a presenter if she is over her time limit. You can start with a friendly wave of a hand and a softly spoken, "*Time's up.*" This can be followed by standing and a not-so-softly spoken, "*Time's up.*" Then you should move to the side or center of the presenter's

presentation and suggest she complete the discussion later by saying, “Unfortunately, we have run out of time, and we must conclude so the next presenter can begin. We have enjoyed your presentation, and questions can be addressed following the end of the entire session or outside the conference room.” Once you have done these things and the presenter still continues to talk, there is no easy solution. Let the presenter drone on; the audience will know you did everything you could to keep the session on time. Do not touch the presenter. Stand aside, start the applause when the presenter is done, do not allow Q&A, and move immediately to the next presentation. Keep it professional.

No Show. Presenters should be there at the beginning of the session. Sometimes they are not. When it is time for their presentation, stand at the front and ask if they have arrived. If they have, then you can proceed as normal. If they have not arrived, there are two paths you can take.

1. If your conference has parallel sessions, you are expected to stay on schedule since attendees may be going from one session to another. You can continue the Q&A from the previous paper(s), or you may have to call an intermission until it is time for the next presenter.
2. If your conference does not have parallel sessions, then it is best to continue to the next presenter. This will give you more time for Q&A or allow the session to end early.

Audiovisual Problems. These can be very frustrating. The author’s recommendations are 1) to try to be somewhat familiar with the equipment, laptop, microphone, and the software (like how to go into slide show mode), and 2) know where to go for help.

Cell Phones. You respectfully informed attendees to turn off their cell phones at the beginning of the session. Most people will put it on vibrate and will still take calls during your session, but they usually step out. If they do not, it is your responsibility to go to them and ask

them to step out (tap them on the shoulder and point to the door). You can open and quietly close the door for them.

Multiple Presenters. This is not a real problem unless the co-presenters both think that they have 75 percent of the time. Introduce both of the presenters and watch their time. You may want to whisper, “You have seven minutes left” when the second presenter steps up to talk.

Bad Presenter. Other than AV issues, this is probably your worst fear. A presenter at a recent conference had three issues: (1) The presenter sat behind the laptop and read her notes. As an isolated incident, this may not be a problem. If it is a problem, you can ask the presenter to stand. (2) The presenter was soft-spoken. You can ask him to speak louder, move the microphone closer to his mouth, or if there is no microphone, ask him to step closer or even into the audience. (3) The presenter is difficult to understand, and English may not be her first language. Be respectful and professional; the presenter is doing a better job in English than you might do in her language. Give presenters support and provide encouragement.

Nervous Presenter. You can do a few things to help a nervous presenter before the session by meeting with him and addressing him by his name. (This doesn’t work with everyone.) During the session, you can make eye contact, smile, and nod your head in agreement with what he is saying—offering visual encouragement to the presenter. You may also consider pouring a glass of water and bringing it to him unobtrusively. If the presenter loses concentration, you may have to suggest where she left off. You may have to say something such as, “You were saying that leaders are not always power hungry?” and let the presenter move back into the flow of her presentation.

Bad Graphics. This can lose an audience, and there is not much that can be done in real-time. You may want to ask the presenter “What idea do you want us to take away from this graphic?” or “Could you explain what the audience should be learning from this large table?”

Dead Time. While a presenter is struggling with loading his presentation, you may need to ad lib. Talk about the subject of the paper, why the subject is important to the audience, how it ties in to the other papers in the session, say something about the presenter, or have everyone in the room introduce themselves, if it is a very small group.

Noise from Audience. Short side discussions are normal, but loud conversations should not be tolerated. Get up, go to the conversationalists, and ask them (politely) to continue their conversation outside the room. They will usually terminate the conversation and listen to the presenter.

Rude Audience. Look back at the audience. Stare, shush, do a cutting motion across your throat, or in extreme situations, stand up, interrupt the presenter, and address the audience. You might say something like, “*Many of us are here to hear these results. If you are not interested, could you please step outside.*”

Noise from Outside the Room. Conferences are often held in hotels, and employee accessways are adjacent to the conference rooms. (That’s how all the chairs, tables, and food get moved in and out.) They often need to move things in to set up for lunch in another room. The noise should be temporary. You may want to step in and mention they are being disruptive, if it is excessively long. If the noise is coming from the hallway, you may want to step out and see if the noise can be mitigated.

Finally, one of the most important things about being a session chair is: “Go to the bathroom first. You’re the only one who can’t leave during the session.” (Personal Communication, Victor Reinhardt, 2006)

These are some of the issues that might arise when you are a session chair; and some ideas that can help you anticipate how to react if you do have some problems.. Relax. Most sessions go very smoothly, and you will have no problems.

Summary

Arrive early, start the session on time, introduce the presenters, watch the time to keep presenters on schedule, applaud at the right times, and handle the question and answer sessions promptly. Then go home and update your résumé. This article was used as the basis for Chapter 15 of the book: *Writing for Conferences*.

References

Malette, L. & Berger, C., “*Writing for Conferences: A Manual for Graduate Students and Faculty*” Greenwood Press, Santa Barbara, California, 2011, 229.