



## How to be an Effective Conference Session Moderator

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If you are a new researcher embarking on your career, one of the best and quickest ways for you to develop your professional network is to act as a session moderator at a conference in your field. Not only does this associate your name with a topic or area, but you will also have the opportunity to connect with your peers and to meet top senior researchers in your field. However, this is also a very public role that you may feel hesitant at first to embrace. Here are a few tips to get you started.

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*This paper grew out of a conversation by the authors following the Botany 2015 meeting. Observing that there were several examples of excellent moderators as well as a few cases in which further improvement would be helpful, the authors developed these suggestions based on their own experience*

If you are a new researcher embarking on your career, one of the best and quickest ways for you to develop your professional network is to act as a session moderator at a conference in your field. Not only does this associate your name with a topic or area, but you will also have the opportunity to connect with your peers and to meet top senior researchers in your field. However, this is also a very public role that you may feel hesitant at first to embrace. Here are a few tips to get you started.

**1. Thinking About Moderating?** One of the key traits of effective session moderators is that they are there to facilitate the session, not to dominate it. As a moderator, you have multiple responsibilities: director, timekeeper, and enforcer. Ultimately, your job is to make sure the expectations are clear and participants are held accountable. Some of the top experts in a field can be some of the worst session moderators, whereas junior academics (graduate students, post-docs, or assistant professors) can be the most effective moderators. So feel free to give it a try and don't be intimidated by seniority.

**2. Set the Stage for Success.** To make sure that your session flows well throughout its assigned time, it is important to make adequate preparations beforehand:

- If you will be co-moderating the session with a second person, make sure that you discuss beforehand how to divide up the responsibilities. Most often one moderator will cover the first half of a session (if there is a break in the middle) and the second moderator will cover the second portion. If at all possible, it is a good idea to make sure that a moderator is not responsible for the part of the session in which he or she will be presenting (it can be very difficult to be one's own timekeeper!).
- Confirm beforehand whether you will have an AV assistant to load each talk or whether that will be your responsibility.
- Make sure all presentation files are available beforehand on the computer with easily recognizable names and placed in order.
- Have a way to keep track of time, whether a separate timer or a stopwatch on your phone. The phone option can also be effective if it includes an audible alarm (but see below).
- Just as you would practice your own presentation for a conference, it is also important to practice all titles and names of presenters (assuming such information is available beforehand). On the day of the session, show up early to greet presenters and make sure that your pronunciation of their names and presentation titles is correct (ask if in doubt; they will thank you for it later).

**3. Let the Force Be With You.** As the moderator, your job is to make sure that the session is successful; this means that not only do all talks remain on schedule, but ideally your actions create an environment where researchers can form



valuable contacts that may lead to future advances in their field. To make sure that the session stays on track, try the following:

- Begin on time. This is essential to demonstrate that you hold yourself accountable to the same expectations you have of the participants.
- At the beginning of the session, welcome attendees and participants. Be sure to mention the session name in case someone is in the wrong room. Finally, introduce yourself as the moderator of the session, providing your name and affiliation.
- Outline the ground rules at the very beginning of the session. Explain when you will indicate how much time has passed (usually 12-14 minutes for a 15-minute time slot), and how you will indicate this (standing up, raising a hand, etc.). Most presenters greatly appreciate getting some indication of how much time they have left in their allotted time period.
- Ask presenters politely to please respect their time intervals so all talks can remain on track, but also clearly indicate the consequences for talking too long—injecting a little humor is often very effective (depending on your own personal style). For example, some moderators use an audible alarm that can be heard at the end of the presenter's time; this makes it quite obvious to everyone in the room that the time period has been reached. However, make sure that the alarm is not too distracting. Other moderators slowly walk forward at the end of the time interval (and who wants someone slowly walking toward them as they try to finish up their presentation?). This is usually quite effective in persuading authors to stick to their allotted time. And better yet, follow up. The crowd may laugh the first time the moderator starts to walk toward a presenter, but you can bet that all other presenters will be keeping track of their time!
- At the beginning of each talk, introduce the presenter, making sure to state the title clearly. If it has changed from what is printed, be sure to read it from the title slide. Some moderators prefer to instead mention some interesting facts about the presenter (their institution, status as a graduate or undergraduate student, and the name of their research advisor).
- If the session will be stopping for a coffee break, be sure to announce the time when the session will resume (and stick to it!). When the session begins again after the break, welcome all the attendees once again, announcing the name of the session, in case some attendees may be in the incorrect room. Immediately introduce the next speaker and off you go!

**4. Houston, We Have a Problem.** As a junior researcher, you may have avoided serving as a moderator up to this point because of a deep-seated fear of having your session spiral out of your control. What if a particularly long-winded speaker goes on relentlessly or a series of presenters run past their allotted time, and the session falls hopelessly out of sync with all other sessions? Worse yet, what if that overly verbose, superfluous speaker is none other than the top researcher in your field, perhaps someone who may review your next paper or grant proposal? What if the computer malfunctions, the fire alarm goes off, or someone has a medical emergency? How do you recover and get things back on track?

- Although these problems are exceedingly rare, it may be helpful to think about some solutions, if at least to relieve any undue anxiety. In other sessions you have attended, how have any of these issues been handled? What worked? What did not? Learn from other moderators' successes and mistakes and incorporate that into your own personal style.
- For the overly verbose presenter, make sure to follow through on the rules that you have outlined at the beginning of the session and enforce the time signals. If a speaker is going over their allotted time and has ignored all signals, it will be necessary to interrupt them to ask if they are nearly done. This can feel awkward but it will be much appreciated by the audience. In the worst-case scenario, you can turn flash off the lights (if they are still on or dimmed) as a major hint—but use this only as a last resort!
- If one speaker talks too long, remember that all subsequent presenters should still receive their full-allotted time. To get back to the normal session schedule, you should ask that the audience hold their questions for the break.

**5. What NOT To Do.** Never, ever, move talks from their allotted time period, even in the very rare occasion a previous talk has been canceled. This is critical as attendees may be moving between sessions and are relying on the talk being given at its published time period. If there is a cancellation that is known ahead of time, be sure to mention it at the beginning of the session and at any session breaks. Your attendees will be grateful for the information.

**6. To Infinity and Beyond.** Just as you have spent time carefully introducing the session and setting it up for success, you also need to bring it to its final conclusion. There is nothing more disheartening after a series of exciting talks than awkward silence or just a casual "Thanks for coming."

- Move to the front of the room and signal the end of the session, such as, "And that concludes the session on [topic here]". Thank all participants (especially if they all stayed on time!) as well as your audience for their attention. This is especially important for those sessions that occur at the end of the day or on the last day of the conference when attendance is usually light.
- If appropriate, you can also suggest that any interested attendees gather afterwards to exchange information or join one another for an impromptu meal.

Overall, the most helpful way to learn how to effectively moderate a scientific conference session is to watch how others



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perform the task. You will need to figure out which tactics are most effective and which you would feel comfortable implementing. What have you seen that works? What would you do differently? In addition to being a much-appreciated service to your society or organization, moderating a session is an ideal opportunity to expand your network, meet new researchers, and ultimately benefit your own research program. Both of these authors have benefited immensely from the experience. Give it a try and you may just realize how exciting it can be!

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