

How to Chair or Moderate a Convention Panel

One day you're wading through a swarm of orcs, defending the homeland, and life seems oh so jolly. A few years later you find yourself sitting in front of a room of them on a panel populated with ogres! Worse yet, you're in charge! What do you do?

The worse thing to do is nothing at all. While the well run panel makes the moderator's work nearly transparent to the audience, a poorly run panel has the potential to be both offensive and a waste of time to panelists and audience members. It is the moderator's responsibility to ensure the panel is a positive and informative experience for all concerned.

This article offers a bit of practical advice to the would-be panel chair or convention moderator. This is not the only way to moderate a panel, but it is a tested and successful method. The advice is broken into four segments: preparation, arrival at the panel location, what to do during actual conduct of the panel, and follow-up actions.

Preparation prior to the convention is the most important part of being a successful moderator. Do your research! Find out what the panel's intended topic is and how that fits into the overall schema of the convention. Ascertain who the other panelists are, their backgrounds and any quirks which could impact on the panel (e.g. two of them hate each other). Get a feel for the dress code of the convention; so, you can pack accordingly. (As a moderator, you want to dress comfortably, but on the up scale end of the dress code range.) Determine what type of audio-visual aids you will have access to and prepare appropriate props.

Research your topic and prepare a few notes with some interesting questions, likely to spark discussion. If possible, make your travel arrangements to allow for a good night's rest prior to your panel. Bring along some "just in case" items such as: wide tips markers, a few name tag sized pieces of cardstock, some masking tape, extra pens and pencils, some throat lozenges, a reliable timer or watch, and some Kleenex. If it is possible to see the site of the panel at least 24 hours in advance, do so. Ensure all equipment you need is available and in good condition. Always prepare some type of "take away" item (e.g. handout) for your audience if practical.

Plan on arriving at the site of the panel at least twenty minutes prior to your session. If there are no provided name tags, make your own for the panelists. Make sure there is something for you and the other panelists to drink and glasses; your throats will tend to get dry. Make sure any audio-visual equipment is operational, and you need to personally either understand how it works or ensure that there is a technician on hand to run the equipment. Greet your fellow panelists as they enter. Ensure the panel members are in location when the panel is supposed to start. All these preparations will help the panel to go smoothly when it begins.

Establish your position as the moderator immediately and firmly, but not obnoxiously. Introduce each of your guests and allow them to make opening remarks. The opening remarks should not take more than one-third to one-half of the time for the panel; leave the rest open for question and answer. The opening remarks should be uninterrupted if possible. Do your own opening comments last; this will allow you to keep an eye on the timing and do a smooth transition into the question and answer portion.

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Ask the audience to address specific questions to specific panelists, and the remainder of the panel will jump in after the initial response. Speaking of jumping in, try to ensure panelists allow each other to finish before butting in. Compliment the audience on its questions and find something positive to say about each panelist's remarks (if appropriate). Steer discussion to the topic at hand when it strays too far.

Unless you are a professional comedian, IGNORE hecklers. If it gets physical, call security! NEVER put down an audience member or another panelist. However, if a panelist gets "out of control," don't be afraid to cut him or her off and phrase a question for another panelist. Likewise, don't allow one audience member to dominate the discussion; it is a panel, not a dialogue. Keep track of the questions. If things slow down, use one of your prepared questions to keep the discussion lively.

Allow ten minutes or so at the end for closing remarks. Each of the panelists should be allowed to present their statements without interruption. Thank each of the panelists and lead the audience in a round of applause at the end.

Make sure the room is in some type of order before you depart and address any requests the audience members may have for additional information (e.g. copies of hand outs or papers). Send thank you notes to panelists if you personally invited them.