39 Steps to introducing a speaker and chairing a scientific session

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1 Chairing scientific presentations may seem so easy that you don’t really have to worry too much about it, but think again...

2 ... making sure your speaker gets noticed for all the right reasons is something which requires a little effort...

3 ... and making sure you don’t get yourself noticed for all the wrong reasons is also more difficult than you imagine.

4 The session chair will never be the star of the show...

5 ...or if they are the star of the show then they have made a bad job of being a session chair.

6 As session chair, you are not there to steal the speaker’s thunder; you are there to look after the speaker and make sure their presentation is a success.

7 Your speaker may look like a sensible grown-up (even if they are a scientist), but don’t let that fool you – there is only a narrow age-band between ‘helpless child’ and ‘senile fruitcake’ and even if your speaker lies within that zone they will still need to be looked after.

8 First of all, you need to take responsibility in time- tabling presentations in the first place – speakers and venues will not time-table themselves so be proactive and persistent in setting up the programme, booking rooms, and making sure that the requirements are all fulfilled.

9 These organizational skills will be useful to you throughout your life regardless of how you choose to develop your career, so take it seriously and let everyone see that you are good at the job.

10 Set up the scheduling reasonably well in advance. If speakers can’t yet commit then allocate provisional dates. These can always be revised but at least they mean there is some structure in place.

11 Look after the publicity – audiences will not show up spontaneously unless you tell them.

12 Look after the publicity – audiences will not show up at all if you can’t convince them that this is a properly organized event.

13 Look after the publicity well in advance – audiences will not show up if you only tell them at the last minute.

14 Look after the publicity – audiences will not show up if you can’t convince them this will be an interesting and exciting event, worth attending. An attractively designed poster with an interesting abstract and a profile of the speaker will be well received.
15 Look after the publicity – if you want your grandparents to turn up and you don’t mind destroying trees then use lots of paper to publicise the event...

16 ...but this is the 21st Century so use modern electronic media: e-mail, web-site, Learning Support Centre, electronic calendar appointments. Electronic calendar appointments are good because they can go straight into the calendar and remind people when it is time. If you mount an e-poster on the web, then put the web-link in the e-mail or calendar appointment you send round.

17 Keep in touch with your speaker in the run-up to the presentation – just make sure they are there, on track, well-prepared, haven’t forgotten, haven’t suffered a major tragedy, haven’t been struck down by the plague, aren’t in the midst of a personal crisis. Make sure they are thinking through the preparations and let them see that you can help and advise them.

18 Make sure you yourself are well-prepared. The success of the presentation will largely depend on the speaker, but your role is important too - a potentially good talk can easily be ruined by a bad chairperson; a potentially weak talk can often be rescued by a good chairperson.

19 Let the speaker, the audience, and everyone else see that you are fully in control of the organizational aspects. You have taken on the responsibility of running things so make sure you carry it through reliably.

20 If you are organizing things jointly with your co-chairs then be clear about who is doing what and remember it is still your responsibility to make sure that things get done; whether by you or by your team-mates.

21 Before the event, take time to find out about the speaker and the presentation. Do you know their name? Do you know what they are working on? Do you know how long they have been working on it? Do you know who they are working with? Do you know in what role/capacity they are working? Do you know the title of the talk? Do you know where they are from? Do you know how long they have been here? Do you know them as a person?

22 Before the seminar, work together with the speaker to make sure that everything is set up – the slides, the computer, the projector, the screen, the pointer, a glass of water. You have given seminars here before so give your speaker tips on the practicalities; how to make sure you are heard, how to make sure your slides can be seen, how to not stand in front of the slides, how to get the lights on and off, etc.

23 Before the presentation, think about what you are going to say. You are not there as the prima donna but you are there to run the show, look after and introduce your speaker, and generally ensure the presentation goes as well as it can.

24 Start by welcoming everyone and making both the audience and the speaker feel at ease. You are the chairperson so take charge of the situation and be both confident and relaxed. Smiling and telling a joke or a funny story is a good way to break the ice.
24 If there are announcements to be made, for example about forthcoming seminars or about social events after the show, these can be made at the very beginning or at the very end. Be clear about what you have to say, and make the announcements clearly and concisely.

25 Introduce the speaker. Don’t just say ‘Our speaker today is Joe Bloggs and he’s going to talk about plants’. Look after the speaker; show that you care about who they are and what they are speaking about. They are the star of the show, so make them feel like it. Say a little about them and their work, (but at the same time don’t talk for too long and don’t become the focus of attention yourself). In any case, let them see that you are on their side and there to help them.

26 When you speak, speak confidently and clearly. Speak so that you can be heard at the back of the room. Too loud is always better than too quiet. You are the chair, not the speaker, but the things you say do are still important so be clear and effective and well-prepared.

27 Once you hand the floor over to the speaker, stay alert. If despite all the help you gave them beforehand they still can’t work out how to use the laser pointer or the computer or the projector then help them discreetly. Make sure the lights are on or off as required. Make sure the microphone is working if they need one. Just monitor the situation and be helpful.

28 Take an interest throughout the talk – this is your speaker who you are looking after so you cannot glaze over, fall asleep, or be disinterested.

29 There is more flexibility on the duration of departmental seminars than conference presentations, but keep an eye on time and just make sure things run reasonably to schedule. (If you chair a conference session, then keeping to time is very important so talk to the speakers before the session and be clear that over-running is not allowed. In a conference session, tell people when they have 5 minutes left, 2 minutes left, etc., and be prepared to stand up, intervene and thank them if they overrun right beyond even the time allocated for questions.)

30 At the end of the talk, thank the speaker. Show them that you have been interested, so in thanking them make some brief comment about something which they said which was interesting. Again, you shouldn’t say very much, but the things you do say should be loud, clear and confident.

31 You are in any case now back in control of the floor, and it is your job to chair the question & discussion session effectively.

32 You have been listening throughout the talk, and you will have thought of at least one question, or preferably two, but don’t ask them just yet. Open up the floor to questions. If nobody has a question you may need to break the ice a little. “When you talked about X, I thought that Tom, Dick or Harry would probably raise a question because they have been working on Y and Z”. If you then look at Tom, Dick and Harry then there is a reasonable chance one of them will ask something.

33 If the audience still doesn’t respond, then ask the first question yourself.

34 If the audience doesn’t warm up after that, then ask your second question.
35 Once the questions come, listen carefully to them. Make sure they are audible, clearly formulated and easily understood. If they are not, then paraphrase the question and ask the questioner if you got it right. Once it is clear, pass it on to the speaker. Protect your speaker from questions which are unclear.

36 Listen carefully to the questions and just make sure they are polite and constructive. They usually will be, but if occasionally you think you hear one that is not, then try to lighten the situation and paraphrase the question in a way which contributes helpfully. Stay polite and constructive yourself, and use your sense of humour. You are like a referee here and you can protect your speaker by just maintaining fair play all round.

37 Keep an eye on the clock, and be sensitive to both your audience and your speaker. If time is up, or if the audience or the speaker become tired or restless then draw the discussion to a close.

38 End by thanking the speaker with some kind remarks and applause. Make any announcements which still need to be made and then end the meeting. Continue to be loud, clear and confident – the meeting should closed; it shouldn’t just sort of fade out.

39 Well done – if you took the trouble to observe all these tips then you probably did a good job of chairing the meeting. You can relax now, and so can your speaker. Just continue to look after them as they close everything down. See that the practicalities are all sorted out, and talk to them about their presentation. It was a big day for them, so give them some positive feedback and encouragement.