

HOW TO [BE A BETTER] CHAIR [OF] AN ACADEMIC PANEL

You didn't choose the timing, the format or the speakers. You aren't the organizer. But you're the Chair.

WHAT NOW?

WHAT IF ACADEMICS COULD HAVE INTELLECTUAL EXCHANGE THAT WAS MORE INCLUSIVE?

We want to start a conversation.

Our experiences of academic panels vary, but some so clearly reveal how such events mirror and train us for **toxic academic hierarchies**.

Chairing is a critical way of regulating academic space and **access** to it. But still, we've been dissatisfied with our own ability, when Chairing, to prevent the same-old expressions of **power and privilege** from emerging.

Maybe a more explicit approach to equity in panel chairing could support better training and a better atmosphere for thinking and learning?

This is a limited project. It exists in the context of a whole host of other academic practices, barriers, spaces and systems. And we're focused on academic speakers. We've been reminded that inviting non-academics to academic events may create other obligations for listening rather than limiting. Within these boundaries, here's our starter toolkit.

WE KNOW THERE IS MORE TO DO

LET EVERYONE KNOW

Before you start:

- Tell the panelists about your plans for the format.
- If they have AV or printed materials, ask them to read out text/describe other media, for accessibility purposes. This can sometimes be avoided by distribution of the material in an accessible format beforehand.
- Have panelists review the biographies you will use to introduce them, and check pronunciation of names.

At the opening of the panel, set out for the Audience how you will use the power you have. Let the room know you are taking on the responsibility of distributing time to talk, and expect to be held accountable. The language of responsibility and accountability might be useful in speaking to the panelists and the audience.

We do not think that a Chair can or should try to control what is said.

KEEP PANELLISTS TO TIME

Inform panelists that in order to preserve a fair amount of time for others, you will give them fair warnings as their time draws to a close, and a final request to stop once their time is up.

- We've got **signs** for you, download [here](#).
- If you have a larger tablet, set it up facing your panelist with a **countdown clock** showing.
- Set a **gentle alarm** on your phone or computer to go off when time is up.

And if the panelist **STILL** won't stop, **just start talking**. It's awkward, but you can remind the audience of your responsibility to share out the time.

NAMES Indicating at the beginning of the Q&A that you would like everyone to introduce themselves by name when they ask a question is a way of inviting everyone to become a part of the group. Prompt them if they forget. Naming some people while others are recognized by the colour of their sweater or hair heightens the insider/outsider feel of many academic spaces.

AN ENDLESS QUESTION Especially if you have already indicated your responsibility for sharing time, breaking in to reiterate that concern, and move to the next questioner becomes easier.

INVITE QUESTIONS FROM ALL

Give the audience some **time to think**. Invite them to "practice" by telling the person next to them the question they'd most like to ask, or something they really enjoyed about the talk(s). This study suggests that **calling on a woman to ask the first question** will increase the number of women who ask questions: Carter, Croft, Lukas & Sandstrom, Women's visibility in academic seminars: women ask fewer questions than men. Available at <http://bit.ly/2JQfhiw> Keep a **speakers list**, and watch the room for

indications that people want to be added to the list. Ensure that you're looking at actively at everyone, and for subtle signs that someone might, with some gesture of encouragement from you, add themselves to the list. And you don't have to call on people in order, nor do you have to let the first person with their hand up ask the first question.

Q&A

WHAT IF THE QUESTIONS ARE ALL FOR THE SAME PERSON?

One option is to divide the time so questions are immediately after each speaker. This also has the advantage of ensuring that speakers who speak past the time limit only eat into their own question time.

Or, try being explicit: tell the room you'll give the next question to anyone who has a question for another member of the panel. Or, insert yourself into the questioner list to ask a question of a different panelist.

Agree?
Disagree?
Additions
Revisions

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