

Dear moderators:

You may find with the traditional question-and-answer panel format that both your panelists' energy and your audience's attention will start to flag before your 75-minutes are used up. Therefore, I have volunteered to share with you some teacher's tricks for keeping your panel energized.

1. Rather than follow the question-and-answer format for the entire 75-minutes, plan a panel which will regularly switch gears. For instance, you might start with one of the panelists giving a presentation, then have the other panelists respond and ask questions, then take audience questions, and then go back to another presentation.
2. Contact the other panelists in advance and give them a simple "assignment" to prepare and present. Ideally, this assignment would give each panelist an opportunity to hold the floor for several minutes, and to perform as much or as little as she finds comfortable. For example, last year, I asked the members of the "can writing be without gender" panel to select a non-gender-specific passage from a book and read it out loud. I asked the members of the "revisioning writing" panel to come in prepared to tell a story of a time when the experience of writing was nothing like what one might expect.
3. Give the panelists and the audience something concrete to discuss—a common "text." The panel topic will necessarily be abstract; you can counteract this abstractness by actually reading portions of text out loud and then discussing your topic as it relates to that specific piece. The same thing can be done visually—if it's impractical to show slides or video clips, then assign panelists to describe scenes in vivid detail instead. Or orchestrate a low-key performance which then can become the concrete focus of the discussion.
4. Orchestrate audience involvement beyond the asking of questions. Last year in the "can writing be without gender" panel, I polled the audience after each reading to see whether they thought the character was male or female, and why. In the course of the presentation, we concocted a pretty interesting list of reasons why people assume a character is one gender rather than the other. For the "revisioning writing" panel, at the beginning of the presentation I asked everyone to devise a metaphor for their writing experience. Audience members shared their metaphors, explained them, and then the panelists made comparisons to their own experience. It was memorably relaxed, intimate, and hilarious.

I hope these suggestions help you to start thinking in some new directions, but if you're drawing a blank on what to do for your particular panel, I'd be happy to help out.

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MINICON MODERATORS TIP SHEET

by The Minicon 25 Programming Committee, Sharon Kahn, Co-Chair

Disclaimer: These guidelines and suggestions are the distillation of a series of brainstorming sessions. In other words, this document was originated by committee. So if it waffles, backpedals and blatantly contradicts itself, that's just the way it goes. The project was started and organized by 1990 Minicon Programming Co-Chair Sharon Kahn, and involved many people's input. Dave Romm volunteered to take the mass of data, add his further input, organize and format it for the Mac, and give it to Sharon for final revision. What you see here is Dave's file, adapted to html, not Sharon's final, though changes were slight. E-mail me for the original 6pp file in MS Word 3.1 (Mac). Copyright 1990, 1995 by the Minnesota Science Fiction Society, Inc.

Presumably, you are looking at this document because you are planning to originate a programming item, moderate it, or both. If you are entering this process sometime after Section 1, it is strongly suggested that you find out what the originator of the panel had in mind, and what, if anything, has been communicated to the panelists so far.

Section 1: DEFINING THE PANEL*

TOPIC: Exactly what is the point? Be specific. Come up with a 1-3 sentence description that will leave no doubt in the mind of all the panel participants what they will be talking about. This description will also appear in the program book.*

PURPOSE: Why are you doing this? To inform? Entertain? Showcase a GOH? Spark a group discussion? Stir up a controversy? It has been suggested that there are only two possible purposes for a panel: to inform or to entertain (with the best panels, of course, accomplishing both.) *

TITLE: There seem to be 3 general approaches to titles:

- (1) Explicit: "Collaborations: How It's Done, Why We Shouldn't Do It, and Why We Keep Doing it Anyway"
- (2) Clever: "Worldcon Envy: Does Size Matter?"
- (3) Hybrid: "Lime Jello, Myth or Reality: The Origins of Fannish Legends"

The entire topic is surprisingly controversial, actually. But everybody agrees that titles should not be overly generic, for instance "Women in SF" or "Fantasy or Science Fiction?" The more specific the better.*

SIZE: Experts suggest an ideal panel size of 5 including the moderator, rarely fewer than 4 or more than 6. Remember, 60 minutes divided by 5 panelists means 12 minutes for each person, assuming the audience doesn't participate (ha!).*

FORMAT: Now you know what you are doing and why, let's talk about format.

Panel, Discussion Group, Debate, Free-for-all? This should be decided on far enough in advance to put in the program book.

Question Policy: Audience questions can be encouraged throughout or only taken during designated question period(s). Be sure to make the policy clear to all panelists (and then to the audience during the panel). **Facilities:** Do you need a large room, a small room or an intimate space? Will you be seated behind a long table, around a round table or just chairs facing an audience? How many microphones will you need? Do you need special equipment like a slide projector or overhead?*

CONSIDER MODERATOR STYLE: There is no single "best" way to moderate a panel. The style you use depends not only on your personality, but the topic and purpose of the panel, the personalities of the panelists, and what happens when the bullets start flying. In Section 3, you will find a list moderator styles that have been observed in action at conventions that are now history. We had fun identifying these and we hope they provide food for thought. **Section 2: PRE-PANEL PREPARATION***

MAKE YOURSELF A CRIB SHEET FOR USE DURING THE PANEL. Including but not limited to: Panel title, 1-3 sentence description. At least 3 questions that can be asked during the course of the panel. A starter question or two and then keep several emergency questions handy. Panelist names and pertinent info about each (names of books, etc.).*

READ SOMETHING BY EACH PANELIST, if possible. If not, at least know their latest book or a recent accomplishment.*

TALK WITH THE PANELISTS BEFORE THE CON, if possible. Let them know if you will be gathering in the Green Room before the panel.*

MEET WITH THE PANELISTS AT THE CON, either one by one or in a group. The Green Room is available for this purpose. If you can't meet in the Green Room, at least spend a few seconds before you convene to introduce yourselves.*

IN THE GREEN ROOM

Review panel description, purpose and format with the participants. If you haven't already, introduce yourself and each other. Check with the participants: Anything you've thought of since we last talked? Anything in particular I should ask? Anything to avoid? Get preferences and suggestions. If panelists seem to need warming up, try out one of your Questions on them. If they're shy, feed them several questions so they can think about their answers for a while. There are refreshments in the Green Room which participants can take to the panel. Relax.*

GETTING STARTED

Arrive on time. A few minutes early is OK. If you're arriving from the Green Room, arrive all at once; it really impresses the audience. Sit down. If possible, arrange the tent cards yourself so the panelists are where you want them. Feel free to move people if they've beaten you to the seating arrangements. You may choose to sit at the end of the row of panelists instead of in the middle. It will make it easier to keep an eye on everybody. Start the panel by establishing rapport with the audience. The traditional opening is "Hello? Hello? Is this mike on?" If it is, smile and continue. If it isn't, turn it on (or otherwise make arrangements to be heard). Identify yourself and briefly describe the panel. Introduce panelists, referring to your notes as needed. Give the ground rules ("If this goes according to plan..."). Be sure to address Question Protocol (questions taken any time, or only during specified question period) Throw out the first question. Think carefully about who to address it to! The first questioner will set the tone for the panel. Some possibilities: The most senior GoH, the person with the most experience, the quietest person on the panel, the person who originally proposed the idea for the panel, the person most likely to set the tone you are striving for. Play out the question, giving everybody a chance at it. *

FINISHING UP

Finish on time! Give a 5 or 10 minute warning that time is running out. Issue a summing-up question. If you have to interrupt the last person, do so. "I'm afraid we're out of time. Thank you all for coming." Thank the panelists for participating. If a discussion is still raging, suggest that the discussion can continue in the spontaneous programming room [or any open site, including the consuite or the bar]. Announce the next panel.

Section 3: MODERATOR STYLES

We present these as examples for your consideration. Most moderators combine elements of more than one style. The style used for any panel depends on the personality of the moderator and the interaction of the participants. Some of the building blocks for a style can be found in the Section 4.

EVEN-HANDED: Keeps things moving, involves everyone, facilitates discussion without taking sides or expressing opinions. A good even-handed moderator can moderate a panel on a topic he knows nothing about and isn't even interested in.

NURTURING: Much like even-handed, but even more so. Especially attentive to quiet panelists who need to be drawn out and encouraged to enter the discussion.

PARTICIPATING: Joins in the discussion and expresses opinions, but without taking over or dominating the

panel. At times, panel may appear to be a round-table discussion with no one moderating. However, the moderator is in fact leading the discussion, raising questions, encouraging participation by everyone and dealing with interruptions. This style is difficult to pull off. You must be able to split yourself into 2 people—the moderator and the participant. Do not call on yourself more often than any other participant.

TIGHTLY REINED: A moderator who naturally tends toward Participating Moderator trying very hard to function as an Even-Handed. Produces tremendous dramatic tension as audience waits for moderator to crack.

QUESTIONING: Intensely interested in the topic, but hasn't made up his mind how he feels about it yet and is hoping to gain insight into the subject (frequently a difficult or controversial one) by questioning the panelists.

PROVOCATIVE: This moderator believes that life is a bit dull without conflict. Specializes in questions like, "I sense that you may have some disagreement with the last speaker," and "You aren't going to let him get away with that, are you?"

Not to be too judgmental or anything, we do hope you avoid elements of the following styles:

IGNORANT: Not only knows nothing about the topic of this panel or the people on it, he didn't even know he was moderating it until about 5 minutes ago. (Best solution is to admit your ignorance ["But I find the topic fascinating!"]) and get the panelists to suggest appropriate questions, perhaps when you have them introduce themselves.)

FAILS TO FACE THE PANEL: Runs dull topics into the ground, interrupts discussions just as they're getting interesting, lets one panelist dominate the time, doesn't prompt reticent speakers, cuts off panelists in mid-sentence but lets audience loudmouths run on forever, etc. **OUT-OF-IT:** Too sleepy (or otherwise underbrained) to pay attention. Calls the panelists by their wrong names, misremembers their books, gets the topic of the panel wrong and/or is still trying to get in the last word from the previous panel.

Section 4: THE ART OF MODERATING

Prepare in advance, but go with the flow. Don't be afraid to alter your original plan radically if it seems like a good idea. But do have a plan. Maybe more than one. Keep the level of energy high. Be aware when a question or topic has run its course and be prepared to change direction. Play devil's advocate if things get dull. Refer to your prepared questions when you need a new topic. Watch the audience. Start taking questions if too many hands are up; pick up the pace if people start to fidget (or leave). Repeat questions from the audience, especially if the room is large. Pay attention to the panelist's answers and ask follow-up questions if appropriate. Pay attention to the people farthest from you: They may be participating less. Seat shy or quiet panelists close to you. Pay attention to body language. Watch for signs of impatience, annoyance or general disagreement with the last speaker (frowns, muscle tension, leaning forward, leaning backward, folding arms across chest). If a light bulb suddenly goes on over someone's head, call on them quick before they forget the idea! Use body language. Lean forward slightly and make eye contact to encourage a shy panelist. To cut someone off politely: lean back, catch their eye. If that doesn't do it, slowly reach toward the mike. Prompt the audience, if necessary. Lead the applause or laughter, but squelch any which goes on too long. Remember: The audience didn't come to see you. Sometimes the moderator's main job is to stay out of the way. This happens more often than you might think. Be firm. Don't lose control of the panel or audience. Have fun. Encourage the panelists to have fun too. If the panelists enjoy themselves, so will the audience.

Moderator Emergency Kit

WHEN THE CONVERSATION GRINDS TO A HALT

"Let's open the panel to questions from the audience."

"What's the greatest challenge for you in your work right now?"

"Is there anything we're leaving out here that needs to be addressed?"

"What's the biggest controversy in this area?"

"What's the greatest misconception people have about...?"

“How did you handle this problem when you were working on... [insert book title or character name from author’s work]?”

“What made you decide to tackle this subject?”

“Speaking as a [person not normally involved in this area] what’s your perspective?”

“What’s the question you are most tired of hearing on this subject, and what would you like to say about it so you never have to answer it again?”

Ask another person on the panel the question.

Ask a follow-up question.

Ask a different person to comment on another panelist’s answer.

SQUELCHING THE PANEL

“Excuse me, but we have wandered far afield...”

“Getting back to the original topic...”

“That would be a good subject for another panel.”

“Excuse me, but we haven’t heard from [reticent panelist] in a while.”

“Let’s take a question from the audience.”

SQUELCHING THE AUDIENCE

“No comments from the peanut gallery.”

“In order to make the best possible use of our panelists, we’re only taking questions from the audience, not statements.”

“We’re only taking statements from the audience, not questions.”

“Oh, let’s not always see the same hands.”

“Thank you for your interesting suggestion. You may be right.”

“You’re making some rather broad generalizations.”

“OK, OK, I think I understand the question. Now, which of our panelists wants to handle it?”

“Would someone in the back please call hotel security.”

MODERATOR MANTRAS

It’s only an hour.

This has never killed anyone yet.

I do not have to go home with this person.

It’s okay to do this — I’m the moderator.

Hey, this is a nice looking tablecloth!-

MODERATOR PREPARATION NOTES (write these notes for yourself before the panel.)

Day and Time

Room

Panelist Intros (including yourself)

Starter Questions

Emergency Questions and notes