



# HOW TO MODERATE A PANEL DISCUSSION

Tips for facilitating a riveting exchange of ideas.

BY KRISTIN ARNOLD

Your friend Sally knows about your speaking skills and asked you to moderate a panel at a forthcoming conference. Thrilled to be considered, you quickly answer, “Sure I will!” After all, how hard can it be to lead a discussion and conduct a question-and-answer session?

A few days later, after the initial excitement has passed, you find yourself wondering, *What was I thinking? I know how to give a speech, but I don't know how to moderate a panel discussion.*

Here's the good news: The speaking skills we learn in Toastmasters serve us well when moderating a panel. Just like in a speech, it's good to start strong and show the audience they are in good hands. As moderator, you'll introduce the topic within the first few minutes. Start with a short, interesting hook to grab everyone's attention, then share something about yourself and explain how you will introduce the panelists and facilitate the session.

But first you'll need to prepare for the session. Research the topic, the panelists and the audience beforehand, and consult the meeting chair and planner to learn more about the event format,



what assumptions have been made for you, and how much latitude you have to be creative.

The preparation work a moderator does is similar to the preparation done by a speaker, although being a good speaker does not necessarily mean you will be a good moderator. Rory Vaden, second-place winner of the 2007 Toastmasters World Championship of Public Speaking, compares the two roles: “When you are the speaker, the spotlight is on you. When you are the moderator, you become the spotlight operator. It’s your job to make the panelists look good and you should fade away into the background.”

Some speakers find it difficult to shine the light elsewhere. They like being the “sage on the stage” and controlling a time slot. However, as moderator, once you get the conversation rolling

you become more of a “guide on the side”—ready to interject a question to keep speakers’ energy levels high and get the audience involved, or to intervene to get the conversation back on track.

For some, moderating a panel is terrifying. “You have no control over what people are going to say,” Vaden says. “You have to spontaneously navigate an infinite number of dynamics that are perpetually changing at any given moment. It’s difficult to weave together points, create value for the audience and shine an uplifting spotlight on panelists, all while keeping it entertaining!”

For others, the challenge of moderating in the moment is electrifying. As a professional meeting facilitator and panel moderator, I thoroughly enjoy enhancing the spontaneity of the conversation while making sure it provides meaningful takeaways for the audience.

Darren LaCroix, the 2001 Toastmasters World Champion of Public Speaking, says, “A great panel moderator needs to be able to listen, know when to cut people off and ask deeper questions. This is exactly why we do Table Topics in Toastmasters, where you have to think and be in the moment. You have to get comfortable with the impromptu style.”

Follow these tips to moderate a lively and informative panel discussion:

**Select, invite and confirm interesting panelists.** If panelists have not yet been selected, round up “DEEP” people who can sufficiently address the topic:

**Diverse.** Make sure the panel represents the demographic of the audience while ensuring a diversity of opinion and thoughts. A group that is in complete agreement can make a discussion boring.

**Expertise.** Invite a recognized authority or thought leader in the industry who possesses strong credentials. That person must establish credibility with the audience quickly via a biography or a 30-second introduction.

**Eloquent.** Panelists should be good conversationalists. Do they speak well on the phone? Did your interview with them produce a monologue or a discussion? Review video footage of your potential panelists to make sure they can keep the audience engaged and interested.

**Prepared.** Panelists must be willing to make a few key points and tell stories that illustrate those points.

Preparation makes the difference between a mediocre panel and an amazing one. Remember these important tips:

**Research.** It is your job to facilitate the conversation so the audience draws value from the panel’s expertise and perspectives. To do this effectively, you must be familiar with the panelists, the topic and the expectations of the audience.

**Create a panel format.** You don’t have to settle for the typical long, draped table. Why not spice it up using a popular television-talk-show format? At a recent sales meeting, we did a spoof on

## PRESENTATION SKILLS



*As moderator, take the time to consider the physical setup of the panelists' space and microphone placement to ensure the audience can hear the conversation.*

the American TV talk show *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, and had the moderator come out in a tie, vest and sneakers, as host Ellen DeGeneres does herself.

**Write the welcome and introductions.** Make them short and snappy—after all, panelist biographies are printed in the program, so you don't have to repeat them. Try projecting one slide showing each panelist's photo (in the same seating order as in the event) along with a headline and Twitter username for each person. Then say something interesting about each one.

**Compile great questions.** Get the conversation started quickly with well-prepared questions. Start with broad questions to raise a conversation about current events. Next, move to stating the reasons the audience should care, and then ask specific questions to spur the panelists to share anecdotes, concrete examples and implementation ideas. Be willing to let go of your planned questions when an interesting discussion emerges.

**Select the Q&A format.** You don't need to save your question-and-answer session for the end. You can take audience questions as you go, or dedicate specific times to take them.

Determine how you will entertain those questions: You can have audience members line up at the microphone and take "live" questions, or you can assign microphone "runners" to go to inquirers who have their hands raised. As moderator, you can also roam the audience to take questions. Another option is to "screen" queries and prioritize them in the moment using question cards or texting or tweeting (I love using [sli.do](#) for this). Another approach is to form small groups from the audience and ask each one to discuss ideas, and have a group representative present the best question.

**Determine room logistics.** As a public speaker, you know how crucial the setup of the room is to the success of your speech. The same thing holds true for a panel discussion. As a general rule for panels, a snug space helps everyone hear the conversation. You'll need to think through the furniture type and placement, screen, seating arrangement and microphones. Ideally, each moderator

and panelist should have his or her own lavalier microphone, and a cordless handheld microphone should be reserved for audience interaction.

**Arrive early.** Meet briefly with each panelist and review the agenda and ground rules. Do a walk-through of the room. Check the microphones and your slideshow.

**Keep the conversation moving.** If you have prepared the panelists appropriately, and you kick off the discussion with a few good questions, the conversation will start to flow on its own. Encourage each panelist to comment on particular parts of other panelists' statements. Be flexible about following the natural conversation path, as long as it is interesting and the audience is engaged. You may, however, need to interject a follow-up question here and there to keep the conversation moving at a brisk pace. Probe deeper, make bridges between ideas, present opposing views, catch contradictions, test the unsaid, shift gears, create transitions and intervene firmly and respectfully to keep everyone on track.

### As a panel moderator, once you get the conversation rolling, you become more of a "guide on the side."

**Be playful. Smile.** Always be uplifting. Bring positive energy to the stage. Compliment the audience and the panelists. Never criticize, even if it's to get a laugh.

**Use callbacks.** Your biggest opportunity for humor is to use "callbacks" by mentioning something that has previously been said. Listen to anything that happens spontaneously in the room that causes a laugh and seek clever ways to reference it again. Callbacks make it fun for the audience, and they make you look witty.

**Put a bow on it.** Let the audience know the program is coming to an end by saying "We're almost out of time. There are a few key things to wrap up." Then, summarize the discussion (or have your panelists do it), and offer opportunities to extend the discussion beyond the session. Share each panelist's contact information and promote their agenda (now is the time for each one to make one short plug for their company, product or service). Make final announcements and conclude with heartfelt words of thanks and a round of applause.

Never lose sight of the fact that you are the champion for the audience. Always keep listeners in mind and make sure their needs are being met throughout the entire session. If you can do that, you'll be glad you said, "Sure I will!" to Sally's invitation. **T**

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**KRISTIN ARNOLD**, a meeting facilitator, moderator, trainer and keynote speaker, is the author of *Powerful Panels: A Step-By-Step Guide to Moderating Lively & Informative Panel Discussions at Meetings, Conferences & Conventions*. For more information about how to moderate a panel discussion, see Kristin's free seven-part video course at [PowerfulPanels.com](#).