

What Makes a Successful Panel and Moderator

Thank you for your interest in moderating a panel and learning more about what it means to be an effective moderator. Your role as a moderator is to actively listen, prepare and ask thoughtful questions, and to facilitate an interesting conversation based on your domain knowledge and panelist expertise. Follow these tips to lead an engaging panel discussion:

- Do a little background research on the broad topic and the expertise of the panelists. This research will inform questions you ask and boost your confidence in leading a discussion where you may not be aware the nuances of the topics discussed. Think also about what the interests and backgrounds of the attendees may be.
- Prepare many questions, even more than you think you need. Questions should be tailored to the specific expertise of each panelist. Be sure to prepare questions which may be challenging or elicit disagreement and thoughtful responses. You may only get to a few questions, but you should be prepared to redirect conversation as needed and fill unexpected or prolonged silences.
- Make sure that, although you have prepared many questions, you are not scripted and that you can adjust the order of questions depending on the flow of conversation.
- Remember that it is okay if not all panelists answer the same question, especially considering different expertise. Also invite panelists to ask each other questions and directly respond to points made by one another.
- Arrive to the panel session early, especially so you can adjust furniture or troubleshoot technology.
- Consider how you will engage audience questions. At what times should the audience participate? At the end of the session? Throughout the session? Consider requesting questions from potential attendees before the panel session. This maximizes audience engagement and ensures that the audience is invested in the session. Questions from the audience also supplements the list of questions you will create as a moderator.
- Be thoughtful about how panelists convey information and set clear expectations prior to the panel discussion. Do you want a panelist to provide short, scripted remarks? Do you want them to use PowerPoints? Make sure remarks are short and allow for you to facilitate conversation and encourage slides to be visually engaging instead of text heavy.
- Redirect panelist and audience responses as needed, especially to avoid one panelist or attendee monopolizing the entire session. It is within your role to interrupt and ask for clarification.
- Stay on time. Attendees, and maybe even panelists, will have other sessions to go to after yours. Make sure you respect the time of everyone in the room. Provide cues to the audience about how much time is left in the session and summarize the discussion. Invite any concluding questions from audience members.
- Create rapport with panelists and session attendees. Consider contacting panelists prior to the session and, at the session, be sure to introduce yourself and the broad topic or objective of the panel, facilitate introductions of the panelists, and feel free to insert humor, playfulness, and friendliness into the session.