Best Practices for Moderators

Discussion and debate are hallmarks of social and public policy—and they can generate good ideas for research and policy. These discussions often take the form of a panel, where people debate the merits of a policy, finding, or research approach. Most times, these panels are led by a moderator, who may (or may not) be an expert in the topic of discussion.

We created a *Best Practices for Moderators* guide as a tip sheet for people who are going to facilitate a panel discussion. Panel discussions can present an array of challenges for moderators. Panelists may have very different viewpoints, presentation styles, or preparation levels. Their presentations may run over time or be marred by technical difficulties. Audience members may be slow coming up with things to ask during the question-and-answer period, or they may want to express their own views instead of asking questions.

We at Urban began developing this guide by having a small, internal meeting and sketching out a basic list of ideas moderators should consider. We then posted that list in a Google document for anyone to contribute to and advertised it on Twitter. A little over a week later, we had larger internal meetings and discussions to curate the list to a workable framework that others can use.

The Best Practices guide takes a broad view of the type of event and kinds of panelists. Certain panels will have a more formal feel, with each panelist speaking before moving onto the discussion portion. Others will go right into the panel discussion with the moderator taking a central role managing that discussion. Some discussions may get heated while in others, panelists might largely agree with one another. In either case, the moderator has an important duty to keep the event on time, speakers on point, and generate interesting discussion and debate.

We have structured the document to take a moderator from the planning stages through the end of a panel discussion. The document begins with *Overall Preparation*, in which we urge moderators to be aware of the audience, who they are, what they already know, and what they are trying to get out of the event. In *Conversation with the Event Organizer*, we outline certain technical and logistical issues moderators should be aware of. This isn't to say moderators will be responsible for ordering catering or managing the audio-visual system, but they should know about the agenda, the timing, and the handouts or other information the audience will have.

In the third section, we provide details about a *Prep Call Strategy*. We encourage moderators (and program organizers) to have a prep call with panelists about a week before the event. This call can help set everyone's expectations and further lay out the goals of the event and perhaps what overarching point(s) each panelist hopes to convey. The fourth section, *Panel Moderation*, offers moderators specific strategies for managing the discussion and keeping the audience attentive and energized. Finally, we share some ideas about managing the *Question and Answer Period*, in which the audience will have an opportunity to ask the panelists specific questions.

We are also providing this guide as a Word document so you can remove the list items you don't need or add items relevant to your event. We view this guide as a "living document" that will be edited and updated with comments and suggestions. If you have thoughts about the document, or have used it for your own events, please reach out to us directly at jschwabish@urban.org.

Best Practices for Moderators

A Guide for Moderating Panel Discussions

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Overall Preparation

Understanding the audience

- Who are they?
- What do they already know?
- What do they know about you?
- What do they value?
- How many people are expected?

Understanding the context

- Is it a single-theme conference or concurrent panels?
- What three or four takeaways do you want the audience to leave with?

Understanding the setting

- Think about the time of day: a late afternoon event will have a different energy level than a morning gathering.
- Be familiar with the panelists: know their names (and how they're pronounced), backgrounds, expertise, and affiliation(s).
- Consider the staging: A podium and a big screen for slide presentations feel more formal; chairs arranged in a semicircle feel more conversational. The more casual the staging, the more casually panelists will talk. When using a more casual setup, think of the moderator's job as "facilitating a dinner conversation."

Conversation with the Event Organizer

Before preparing the panelists, confirm the following logistics with the organizer and request a point of contact should panelists have follow-up questions or concerns.

Technical issues

- What kind of microphones will panelists use (lapel, handheld, podium, etc.)?
  - » *Lapel microphones can be difficult to place on clothing other than suit jackets and ties: knowing in advance can influence panelists' wardrobe choices.*

- Will panelists make slide presentations? If so, here are some slide considerations:
- » *Should panelists use a similar title slide or style?*
- » *What are the slide dimensions (4:3 or 16:9)?*
- » *Will there be a central computer and slide clicker?*
- » *Does the computer have the correct adapters and hookups?*

  Who will keep the panel on schedule? How is this facilitated: cards, lights or countdown clocks that show presenters how much time they have remaining (e.g., 5 minutes, 1 minute, DONE)? Will someone be available to control or signal the speakers? If so, who?

Logistical issues

- What is the dress code?
- » *Wearing a skirt that ends at or above the knees while sitting on a raised stage in a casual setup (i.e., not behind a table with a tablecloth) can create awkward sightlines for the audience. Be sure to mention this possibility (or ask a female colleague to mention it) to any panelist who might wear a business-suit skirt.*

- Is there an agenda for the panel and/or the conference?

- Will the audience receive a handout? Will it consist of bios or other materials? Will panelists be able to share their own materials (handouts or electronic supplements) with the audience?

- How is the stage set up? In what order will people sit or speak?

- Will there be water or other refreshments on the stage?

- Are there location/travel specifics?

- Is there a social media engagement strategy before, during, and after the event?
- » *Should the moderator announce URLs, Twitter handles, and so on at the beginning of the panel?*

Prep Call Strategy

Setting up the call

- Schedule the prep call about a week before the event, but no more than three weeks before.

- Be as concise and efficient as possible; bad prep calls are painful and common.
- » *Most prep calls should take 30 minutes or less.*

- Ask for panelists' prepared materials ahead of time (or even a brief written statement of their main points) and prepare some bullet points/questions that react to themes across panelists (and perhaps also respond to points raised by specific panelists).
- » *In some settings, panelists may prepare formal responses to other presentations or your questions; in others, panelists may respond more conversationally.*

- After the prep call, send an e-mail summarizing the goals, specific issues, and technical or logistical information discussed.

Setting the context

- Help the panelists focus.
- » *What is the main point of the panel?*
- » *What is the intended outcome of the panel? Is it to debate, share information, set context, or inspire action?*

- Understand the particular issues or topics each panelist wants to raise.

- Tease out the different perspectives for different questions, and identify key areas of agreement and disagreement.

Preparing the conversation

- Clarify if the panelists will make brief formal statements or presentations at the beginning or if you will ask a "softball" opening question to give them a chance to weave in their initial statements.

- To the extent possible, let panelists know the questions you will ask (or topics you will raise) so they aren't caught off guard.

- Clarify if the conversation will flow freely or if panelists will be expected to keep a certain schedule; if the latter, let panelists know how they will be notified about the remaining time (e.g., a "5 minutes" card).

- Identify potential overlap and seek panelists' agreement to not be duplicative.

- Decide what you want the tone of the panel to be: should everyone agree, or should some views conflict?

  » *A little conflict between panelists is ideal; no conflict is boring, and too much conflict is uncomfortable to watch.*

Panel Moderation

Opening and general best practices

- Set the tone, agenda, and focus from the beginning. Explain the panel's purpose and goal. This helps ensure that key points from panelists and questions from the audience focus on the topic at hand.

- Do not read long prepared bios of the panelists. Either (a) briefly introduce all panelists or (b) invite panelists to introduce themselves.

  » *Keep the introductions short; 1–2 sentences each.*

- Try to convey excitement, energy, and an eagerness to learn. Such a mood is infectious and will keep the audience more engaged than a more laid-back attitude.

- Recognize the balance of evidence and data versus opinion.

- Understand whether and how you will fact-check in real time.

  » *Be prepared to synthesize the information or the debate.*

- Start on time (even if all the panelists are not there), and end on time (even if some audience members' questions are not answered).

Managing the discussion

- Guide the conversation or debate based on what was agreed on in the prep call.

- Avoid the "march down the road"—asking each panelist a question in turn. Instead, ask one panelist a question and then ask the other panelists to respond and react.

- Ask leading, short questions that focus on the "why" and "how."

- Keep a clock in your head: 2–3 minutes per answer is probably sufficient.

  » *Don't be afraid to cut off someone who is rambling.*

- Manage disagreements between panelists.

  » *Highlight the diversity of perspectives and encourage thoughtful engagement of different viewpoints, but push participants to ground their positions in facts and evidence whenever possible.*

  » *If all panelists are likely to say the same thing, start with a broad question, let one person answer it, then ask a more targeted follow-up to the other panelists.*

  » *Know when to listen versus when to interrupt.*

- Ask leading, short questions that focus on the "why" and "how."

  » *Don't be afraid to cut off someone who is rambling.*

- Balance the amount of air time for each panelist.

  » *Draw out quieter panelists.*

  » *If panelists have different backgrounds and one hasn't spoken much, it's helpful to ask open-ended questions inviting that panelist to raise whatever ideas he or she wants.*

  » *Use follow-up questions: "Hey, Bill, you also worked on this topic. What was your experience?"*

  » *Watch for body language of someone who may want to weigh in: nodding the head, gesturing with the hands, or making eye contact, for example.*

  » *Balance open questions for all panelists with questions directed to specific panelists.*

- Monitor the flow and timing of the event; know when to turn to the audience discussion.
  - » *If one speaker goes long, it's unfair to take the time from the other presenters. Plan ahead about where it is safest to cut (reduce the question and answer period, trim a topic of full-panel discussion, etc.)*

Wrapping up

- Use the final moments to summarize and reflect to the main points.
- Let the audience know as you near the end of the panel so people are prepared for the discussion to end.
- Thank panelists for their time and input.

Question and Answer Period

- Make sure you prepare questions in case the audience does not have any.
  - » *Share your questions with panelists so they can prepare.*
- Written questions from the audience (physical or online) may allow you to edit or reframe the question.
- Feel free to move back and forth between audience questions and moderator questions.
- Ask audience members to identify themselves and ask a question, not make a (rambling) statement; feel free to cut them off if they are making a statement or their question takes too long.
- If you can, know which audience members to avoid.