

How to Moderate

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This is a basic guide for moderating a session of talks at a conference. For years I avoided writing this document because it felt silly. But after reciting this list of rules to countless youngsters, at some point it felt silly to not write it down. So here it is.

Before the Talk

Erase the boards, inform the speaker of the length of the talk, learn how to pronounce the next speaker's name, make sure the projector is working, make sure there are sufficient markers/chalk.

Start of the Talk

Usher the audience into the room a few minutes before the start time.

Stand up in front of the room, and wait for the audience to quiet down before introducing the speaker. If necessary, say "We're ready to get started" until it is quiet. Enunciate. (I've seen it happen that a speaker gets introduced and many people - including sometimes the speaker - do not know the talk has started.)

Give a straightforward introduction: Our next speaker is Carl Gauss from Gottingen and the title of his talk is "Polynomials have roots." Don't shorten the title or say "and he is going to tell us about polynomials." Gauss spent time on his title and saying the full title gives him the respect he deserves. (Also, it's not funny when you don't know the title.)

Keep track of the start time.

During the Talk

The speaker might ask how much time they have left. Be ready for this and be honest.

If the speaker is going over, you should give them a "wrap up" gesture. You may need to stand up if they show no sign of stopping. The exact etiquette here is situation dependent.

Try to think of a good question, in case no one else has any later.

Be ready to deal with administrative issues during the talk, for example closing a door if there is noise in the hallway.

Questions

When the speaker is done, stand up during the applause, move to the side, and face the audience. Ask for questions. And here is the most important point about moderating: *if there are no questions at first, wait much longer than you think you should*. Reliably, an extra 5 seconds will result in a question.

It is technically the moderator's job to call on audience members for questions. Often the speaker will call on audience members, and often audience members will speak up without being called on.

If the audience has no questions, try to ask one of your own. But don't ask something just to ask something. See the next point.

It is okay if there are no questions.

Wrapping Up

When the questions are done, say "Let's thank our speaker again," and lead another round of applause. Actually, I prefer to refer to the speaker by name at this point.

It is okay to cut off the questions if there is only a short break before the next talk. You don't have to ask if there are more questions if it is time to wrap up (or if you have no intention of letting someone ask another question). This might happen if the speaker went over time. Just thank the speaker.

Again, it is okay if there are no questions. But it is up to the moderator to make everyone feel okay about it. Be upbeat and thank the speaker again.

Remind the audience when the next talk starts. At the last talk of a session, an organizer will usually make comments about what is happening later in the day (or the next day).