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MEMORANDUM

TO: Session Chairs at AERE conference sessions
FROM: Trudy Ann Cameron
DATE: June 17, 2009
RE: Suggestions for chairs (everything I can think of)

Conference session time is an incredibly scarce and valuable resource, and the role of the session chair is an important one. A "proactive" chair can do a lot to ensure the success and value of a conference session. Of course, each chair will have their own individual style. The guidelines below may need to be adapted to different conference formats and the times adjusted for sessions of different lengths, but you may find some of these suggestions helpful.

Well prior to the conference:

1. Set up an email "nickname" for all session participants (presenters, discussants, and any coauthors of presenters); use this list to communicate with everyone.
2. Inform all session participants of the date by which authors should have their papers to their discussants.
3. Follow up shortly after this date to remind all authors about staying on schedule (or at least negotiating with their discussant concerning the date when delivery of the draft can be expected).
4. Verify the type of equipment that will be available in the room for the session and report to all participants.
5. If PowerPoint/PDF projection equipment is available, ascertain whether a laptop computer will also be provided. If not, arrange to bring your own laptop and/or to have at least one session participant provide this equipment.

In the days prior to the conference:

6. Depending upon the degree of risk aversion among participants, you may wish to ensure some redundancy (e.g. advise everyone to bring overhead transparencies or some minimal number of handouts, just in case).

7. Inform participants that they retain primary responsibility for having a copy of their presentation with them when they arrive at the session, preferably on a USB drive. The chair may attempt to minimize transactions costs during the session by pre-loading all presentations and discussions on his/her laptop, and queuing them in order on his/her computer desktop, or even opening each file so it resides in the Windows taskbar. However, if the chair somehow doesn't make it to the session, or the chair's laptop fails, the show must still go on.
8. Inform participants that it is preferable for the chair to receive email submissions of PowerPoint or PDF files in advance, to be pre-loaded on your laptop and available as direct links from the desktop on the machine that will be used. (There will be inevitable last-minute changes, or late submissions, but if there are four papers in the session, a lot of transactions time can be involved in loading all eight files at the last minute. These minutes are far better spent on the substantive research topics in the session.) It is helpful if the chair can have email access from the conference hotel, making it possible to receive updated slides until the night before the session. Chairs should establish, in advance, people's expectations about how last-minute they can be.
9. Be sure that the presentation laptop has up-to-date copies of PowerPoint, Adobe Acrobat, and MathType (as well as anything else that individual speakers may need). Be sure you know how to toggle to full-screen a .pdf file (Cntl-L) and how to quickly maximize (Alt-d-v) or shrink an open PowerPoint slideshow (Esc). Recall that if people are using unusual fonts, even a PowerPoint presentation might work more safely if it is stored as a .pdf file (provided it has no dynamic features)..
10. You may choose to encourage presenters to share drafts of their slides with their discussant, so the discussant can tune their comments to the high points of the presentation.
11. It should probably be at the discretion of the chair whether to request that discussants reveal the substance of their comments to the authors prior to the presentation. It is not really fair to the discussant if the author has an opportunity to "respond" preemptively to critical comments before the discussant has had an opportunity to offer them. Discussants should remember to try to say something positive about each paper—after all, AERE has a tradition of being a "kinder, gentler field," where colleagues point out ways papers can be improved.
12. While experienced presenters should all be aware about how much stuff can be crammed on one PowerPoint or PDF slide, it is a good idea to preview the presentations provided in advance to make sure it looks like the presenter has a realistic idea of how much can be covered in 15-17 minutes. The "one substantive slide per minute" rule is a common guideline. If it looks like any of your presenters are too far out of line, it is appropriate to suggest that they plan adjustments

At the session itself:

13. If possible, chairs should arrive to the session at least 7-10 minutes in advance of the start of the session to set up (or verify) the projection equipment and to upload

any last-minute revisions to people's presentations. Remember that for your laptop to automatically recognize the projector, the projector may need to be turned on and connected to the laptop before you boot up the laptop.

14. Start promptly at the beginning of the session without waiting for laggards. End promptly at the scheduled conclusion of the session. Avoid encroaching on the set-up time for the next group by failing to enforce time limits on speakers. Inform your participants in advance about the time limits you will impose and announce these again at the beginning of the session, so everyone in the room is clear on property rights to scarce session time. If a pair of authors is "tag-teaming" their presentation, clarify in advance that the second speaker can claim only the residual of the limited time entitlement of the pair.
15. In a typical two-hour session with four papers, it is appropriate to allow 30 minutes, total, per paper, noting that about 30 seconds of transactions time will probably eat into each end of these half-hour blocks and also into transitions between speakers. In this format, the following allocations might be suitable, although some chairs view the presentations as the highest-value uses of time and give them a larger share of the 30 minutes:
    a. Presentation: 15-17 minutes (promptly killed at the expiration of 18 minutes, no matter what).
    b. Discussant: 5-8 minutes (residual of 23 minutes for a. and b. together).
    c. Rebuttal: 2 minutes (i.e. addressing the "top two" points by the discussant)
    d. General discussion: 5 minutes

    Chairs can save themselves some mental arithmetic by working out in advance the exact hours and minutes on the clock when they intend different presentations to begin and end, for their particular time-slot on the program.

    Even with a schedule like this, there will often be some slippage, and only a couple of audience questions will be possible. If there is five minutes left for questions, but the audience is mute, you may invite the speaker and/or discussant to step up with an "encore" point that does not exhaust the total time allotment for that paper.
16. If any 30-minute block finishes early, announce that you will save this time for the end of the session, when it will be thrown open for questions about any of the four papers in the session. This seems most fair.
17. Bring with you a pre-printed set of large-font "time signs" that will be easily readable from several feet away ("5 min.", "2 min," "1 min." and "Stop now" may be sufficient; samples attached to this memo.) Review in advance with all session participants that you will be using these signs and make it clear where they should be looking to you, during the session, to check for time reminders. It is an unnecessary distraction to have presenters needing to ask "How many minutes do I have left?" and for session chairs to do the mental arithmetic. An alternative to the signs, of course, is for the session chair to sit in the front row of the audience, directly in the line of sight of the speaker, and to use discreet hand signals for the number of minutes remaining.
18. Remind presenters, if necessary, that they are not presenting their entire paper. Rather, they are presenting merely a *synopsis* of their work. For a mixed audience, for example, it is rarely a good use of time to go over individual

equations variable by variable. This is only a “big-picture” opportunity. The final slide for each presenter should include information about how to get a copy of the full paper, should the “advertisement” in the session be successful in raising additional interest.

After the conference

19. Follow up with an email note of thanks to the presenters and discussants, along with a request that that if there are no objections, the discussants’ slides (presumably still on your laptop) will be forwarded to the corresponding presenter.
20. Suggest to presenters that their discussant be provided with any subsequent revisions to their paper that may be forthcoming in the future (and one hopes that the efforts of the discussant will thereupon be acknowledged in the usual footnote).

5 min.

2 min.

1 min.

Stop
now