

THE MODERATOR'S MANIFESTO:

HOW TO MODERATE A GREAT PANEL

WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT

Relax. Being a good moderator is easy. All you need to do is use a little common sense and avoid a few common mistakes.

Start by understanding your role. Your job as moderator is to help the panelists entertain and inform the audience. This document will teach you how.

PREPARATION

1. Do Your Homework. You needn't have read all the panelists' books to moderate their panel (although reading the actual books is of course ideal). But if you haven't read their books, you will need to spend some time on their websites, reading reviews, reading sample chapters, and otherwise getting to know their work so you can ask intelligent questions (even if you have read their books, you should visit their websites. You're likely to find additional interesting information there). This preparation should take at least several hours. If you don't want to invest that effort, don't be a moderator.

Prepare a list of scintillating questions for your panelists. Here, "scintillating" means questions that are specifically tied to the panelists work - questions that are varied, insightful, and provocative (hint: "Where do you get your ideas?" without more is not scintillating. Nor is asking the same question of each panelist four times in a row.). Prepare more questions than you think you'll need. This way, if one line of questions isn't working, you can move on to something else.

2. Contact Your Panelists Beforehand. Let your panelists know what to expect from you, and what you expect from them (hint: a lot of those expectations are outlined in this Manifesto). Ask what they would like to talk about (but it's usually best not to tell them what your specific questions will be beforehand because too much panelist preparation spoils spontaneity). For example: which of their books they think you should read or at least read about? What were some of the best and worse experiences they've recently had on panels? What did they like style-wise in the past; what didn't they like? What do they like and not like about the topic assigned?

The panelists' feedback will give you good ideas, and will also communicate to them that you're serious about your role and committed to making them look good.

An unfortunate custom has developed wherein panelists bring their books to panels and stand them up on the table for the audience to see. Most times, this odd gambit fails: the audience can't see the book well anyway, but the book does serve to block the audience's view of the panelist's face. Encourage those panelists who insist on bringing books to leave them lying down on the table and to pick them up and wave them around only once (if they must). If possible, get together before the panel, at least briefly, so everyone can get to know each other a little and the ice gets broken before you're in front of an audience.

3. Go to Panels. You can't be a good moderator if you haven't watched a few good (and bad) ones in action. So go out of your way to attend some conferences in the months before your own gig. See how different people moderate. Learn what works and what doesn't. Improvisation, you'll see, rarely works. Planning and preparation do.

THE ROOM

4. Panel Layout. The layout of the panel is important. Different moderators have different preferences, but be aware of the pros and cons. If you sit in the middle, it gives you equal access to the panelists left and right, but splits the panel in half and makes it harder for the panelists to interact. It also tends to make you the center of attention, which you shouldn't be. Consider sitting on one side of the panel. Some people even like to stand off to the side or wander, talk show host style (there's a reason talk show hosts do it this way). If you can, consider arranging the panelist table into a V shape so the panelists can see each other better than they will if they're arranged in a straight line.

5. Lighting and Temperature. Also pay attention to the room's lighting and temperature. Is the lighting too dim, especially early in the morning or right after lunch? Get those lights turned up. Is the room too warm? Find someone who can turn up the air conditioning (unless it's really frigid, you needn't worry about things being too cold. Cold keeps people alert; heat makes them drowsy).

6. Bonus Points. Make sure your panelists have water. This might mean clearing and replacing the used glasses from the previous panel. Your panelists will appreciate it.

If the room is too big, encourage the audience to sit towards the front, or in the center. People will comply, and the atmosphere will be better because of your efforts. Don't be afraid to do this: audiences like their moderators friendly and confident.

Hint: to take care of these matters, you'll need to arrive at your room early.

SHOWTIME

7. Who Are You? Start by *briefly* introducing yourself. Just tell the audience the minimum it needs for it to know why you're moderating this panel. "Hello everyone, welcome to The Bad Guy as Hero. My name is Jane Smith, and I write a thriller series about a contract killer named Joe Killjoy. Killjoy certainly qualifies as a bad guy hero, and that's why I'm moderating today."

8. Don't Do Introductions. Or rather, don't do them *as* introductions. Introductions are to moderating what exposition is to novels: necessary information that, if presented straightforwardly, is invariably boring. Instead, weave your introduction into your questions: "Lee Child, you write a series about an ex-military cop named Jack Reacher who's got terrific investigative skills. He uses those skills to solve problems, which sounds like a formula for mystery. And yet your books read more like thrillers. How do you see your books? Are they mysteries, thrillers, or both?" (This was in fact David Montgomery's introductory question on the thriller panel at Bouchercon 2005).

At the outset, look around to ensure the audience can hear. If at any time you have doubts, ask, "Can everyone hear?" Get your panelists to talk closer to the mike if it's necessary. It often is. And it might be necessary for you, too.

9. Depart from Your Script. Realize your script, your prepared questions, is only a guideline. Ideally, your questions will provoke the panelists to riff on each other's responses. When this happens, you won't have time to get to all the questions you prepared. Recognize that this is a good thing. Forget the prepared questions and use the material that emerges during the panel to get the panelists to interact.

Interject if a panelist is faltering. Fade into the background when the panel is humming along without you. *The panel is about the panelists, not about the moderator.* That's why it's called a panel.

Some panelists are Chatty Kathies; others are shrinking violets. Intervene as necessary to ensure the panelists are getting equal airtime.

Pay attention to the audience throughout. Learn to look for glazed eyes, stupefied expressions, nodding heads, fidgety bottoms, and bodies heading for the exits. Adjust your approach if the one you're using isn't working.

If you've been blessed with good comic timing, by all means use it. An audience enjoys nothing more than a laugh. But remember to use your wit in the service of the panel (hint: if your comedy routine is pre-scripted, it will probably bomb. If you're riffing on material that arises spontaneously during the course of the panel, you're probably doing it right). If you forget that, you won't be funny, you'll be foolish.

10. Be Professional. You're going to be up there in front of a room full of people. It won't hurt to dress well and to take care of any necessary grooming. The audience will interpret your squared-away appearance as a sign of respect. The opposite is also true.

Even if you can't stop yourself from using "like" and "you know" in conversation, find a way to not use them when speaking in public. There's no excuse for imprecision when you're moderating, and besides, do you really want to sound like that when you're, you know, in front of, like, 500 people?

11. Questions From The Audience. Remember to leave time for questions from the audience. If you're in a big room, not everyone will hear the questions when they're asked, so remember to repeat them. If an audience member starts to drone on, politely interrupt and ask him or her to state a question. Don't be afraid to restate for brevity and clarity.

If an audience member asks a question that's overly specific to a single panelist or otherwise not particularly relevant to the concerns of the wider audience, don't be afraid to say, "That's an interesting question, and perhaps better addressed in depth by Panelist A after the wider Q&A we're doing now." Warn the audience of these ground rules before you start taking questions and things will go more smoothly.

A small thing: when repeating a question, it's more polite, and sounds more professional, to say, "The question is..." than it is to use a pronoun, such as, "He asked...".

Audience Q&A is important and, when done well, can give the audience a lot of satisfaction. But remember: even during the Q&A, it's still your job to moderate.

FOLLOW-UP

12. One More Round of Emails. When it's over, write your panelists and thank them for doing such a great job. Ask them if there was anything they would have liked you to do differently so you can do a better job next time.

FINAL THOUGHTS

By now, you should understand that you cannot simultaneously be a moderator and a panelist. If you want to be a panelist, don't agree to be a moderator.

If you know you're shy or don't present well or are otherwise not going to do a good job, don't take the gig. It's not fair to the audience, to the panelists, or to you. There's no shame in declining, only in doing a poor job.

But here's the great news: if you do a terrific job as moderator by bringing out the best in the panelists, the audience will appreciate you. They'll remember your name and buy your books. Being a moderator is actually a great sales opportunity - but only if you do it right.

This document grew (and grew and grew) out of a series of sober discussions and drunken rants at Bouchercon 2005. Its authors are Donna Andrews, Robin Burcell, Dana Cameron, Judy Clemens, Reed Coleman, Barry Eisler, Bill Fitzhugh, Jon Jordan, Ruth Jordan, Laura Lippman, David Montgomery, and MJ Rose. Please post it, forward it, and otherwise disseminate it to anyone you think would benefit. Thank you.