

# Convention Panel Moderator's Guide and Tip Sheet

**Note:** This document used to be the WisCon Moderator's Guide and Tip Sheet. However, it disappeared from the WisCon site some time ago. The below version was converted to HTML by Jed Hartman; since this version is not an official WisCon publication, nor is it on the WisCon website, I removed specific references to WisCon and WisCon email addresses. If the guide appears on the WisCon site again at some time in the future, I'll take this version down and redirect this URL to the WisCon one.

*Disclaimer:* These guidelines and suggestions are the distillation of a series of brainstorming sessions. In other words, this document was developed by committee. So if it waffles, backpedals, and blatantly contradicts itself, well, that's the way it goes.

So you've volunteered to or been shanghaied into moderating a panel at a convention. Thank you! We appreciate your efforts and hope this guide will help you make a good and fun job of it.

The preliminary stage to everything below is Defining the Panel—the point and purpose of the discussion—but we'll assume that's already been done. (If the description of a panel you're moderating doesn't provide that information, please send a note to the convention's programming committee.)

## Pre-con preparation suggestions

### **Make yourself a crib sheet for use during the panel.**

Including but not limited to:

- Panel title, 1-3 sentence description.
- At least 3 questions that can be asked during the course of the panel. A starter question or two and then keep several emergency questions handy.
- Panelist names and pertinent info about each (names of books, etc).

### **Read something by each panelist, if possible.**

If not, at least know their latest book or a recent accomplishment.

### **Talk with the panelists before the con.**

We strongly encourage moderators to email or phone their panelists in advance, to review the panel topic and general lines of discussion. Please also remind everyone to meet in the Green Room 15 minutes before the panel.

# At the con

## In the Green Room

- If you haven't already done so, introduce yourself and each other.
- Pick up your name cards and check with Green Room staff for any special information.
- Review panel description, purpose and format with the participants.
- Check with the participants: Anything you've thought of since we last talked? Anything in particular I should ask? Anything to avoid? Get preferences and suggestions.
- If panelists seem to need warming up, try out one of your Questions on them. If they're shy, feed them several questions so they can think about their answers for a while.
- There are refreshments in the Green Room that participants can take to the panel.
- Relax.

## Getting started

- Arrive on time. A few minutes early is fine. If you're arriving from the Green Room, arrive all at once; it impresses the audience.
- Sit down. If possible, arrange the tent cards yourself so the panelists are where you want them. Feel free to move people if they've beaten you to the seating arrangements. You may choose to sit at the end of the row of panelists instead of in the middle—it will make it easier to keep an eye on everybody.
- Start the panel by establishing rapport with the audience. The traditional opening is "Hello? Hello? Is this mike on?" If it is, smile and continue. If it isn't, turn it on (or otherwise make arrangements to be heard).
- Identify yourself and briefly describe the panel.
- Introduce panelists, referring to your notes as needed.
- Give the ground rules ("If this goes according to plan..."). Be sure to address Question Protocol (questions taken any time, or only during specified question period).
- Throw out the first question. Think carefully about whom to address it to! The first questioner will set the tone for the panel. Some possibilities: The most senior GoH, the person with the most experience, the quietest person on the panel, the person who originally proposed the idea for the panel, the person most likely to set the tone you are striving for. Play out the question, giving everybody a chance at it.

## Finishing up

- Finish on time! Know how long panels are at your con.
- Watch for the 5 or 10 minute warning that time is running out. Issue a summing-up question.
- If you have to interrupt the last person, do so. "I'm afraid we're out of time. Thank you all for coming."
- Thank the panelists for participating.
- If a discussion is still raging, suggest that the discussion can continue in an overflow room or any open site, including the Con Suite or the bar.

- Announce the next panel.

## Moderator styles

We present these as examples for your consideration. Most moderators combine elements of more than one style. The style used for any panel depends on the personality of the moderator and the interaction of the participants. Some of the building blocks for a style can be found in the next section.

### Even-Handed

Keeps things moving, involves everyone, facilitates discussion without taking sides or expressing opinions. A good even-handed moderator can moderate a panel on a topic he knows nothing about and isn't even interested in.

### Nurturing

Much like even-handed, but even more so. Especially attentive to quiet panelists who need to be drawn out and encouraged to enter the discussion.

### Participating

Joins in the discussion and expresses opinions, but without taking over or dominating the panel. At times, panel may appear to be a round-table discussion with no one moderating. However, the moderator is in fact leading the discussion, raising questions, encouraging participation by everyone and dealing with interruptions. This style is difficult to pull off. You must be able to split yourself into 2 people--the moderator and the participant. Do not call on yourself more often than any other participant.

### Tightly Reined

A moderator who naturally tends toward Participating Moderator trying very hard to function as an Even-Handed. Produces tremendous dramatic tension as audience waits for moderator to crack.

### Questioning

Intensely interested in the topic, but hasn't made up his mind how he feels about it yet and is hoping to gain insight into the subject (frequently a difficult or controversial one) by questioning the panelists.

### Provocative

This moderator believes that life is a bit dull without conflict. Specializes in questions like, "I sense that you may have some disagreement with the last speaker," and "You aren't going to let him get away with that, are you?"

## The art of moderating

- Prepare in advance, but go with the flow. Don't be afraid to alter your original plan radically if it seems like a good idea. But do have a plan. Maybe more than one.
- Keep the level of energy high. Be aware when a question or topic has run its course and be prepared to change direction.
- Play devil's advocate if things get dull.
- Refer to your prepared questions when you need a new topic.

- Watch the audience. Start taking questions if too many hands are up; pick up the pace if people start to fidget (or leave).
- Repeat questions from the audience, especially if the room is large.
- Pay attention to the panelist's answers and ask follow-up questions if appropriate.
- Pay attention to the people farthest from you: They may be participating less. Seat shy or quiet panelists close to you.
- Pay attention to body language. Watch for signs of impatience, annoyance or general disagreement with the last speaker (frowns, muscle tension, leaning forward, leaning backward, folding arms across chest). If a light bulb suddenly goes on over someone's head, call on them quick before they forget the idea!
- Use body language. Lean forward slightly and make eye contact to encourage a shy panelist. To cut someone off politely: lean back, catch their eye. If that doesn't do it, slowly reach toward the mike.
- Prompt the audience, if necessary. Lead the applause or laughter, but squelch any that goes on too long.
- Remember: The audience didn't come to see you. Sometimes the moderator's main job is to stay out of the way. This happens more often than you might think.
- Be firm. Don't lose control of the panel or audience.
- Have fun. Encourage the panelists to have fun too. If the panelists enjoy themselves, so will the audience.

## **Moderator emergency kit**

### **When the conversation grinds to a halt**

- "Let's open the panel to questions from the audience."
- "What's the greatest challenge for you in your work right now?"
- "Is there anything we're leaving out here that needs to be addressed?"
- "What's the biggest controversy in this area?"
- "What's the greatest misconception people have about...?"
- "How did you handle this problem when you were working on... [insert book title or character name from author's work]?"
- "What made you decide to tackle this subject?"
- "Speaking as a [person not normally involved in this area] what's your perspective?"
- "What's the question you are most tired of hearing on this subject, and what would you like to say about it so you never have to answer it again?"
- Ask another person on the panel the question.
- Ask a follow-up question.
- Ask a different person to comment on another panelist's answer.

### **Squelching the panel**

- "Excuse me, but we have wandered far afield..."
- "Getting back to the original topic..."
- "That would be a good subject for another panel."
- "Excuse me, but we haven't heard from [reticent panelist] in a while."

- “Let’s take a question from the audience.”

## **Squelching the audience**

- “No comments from the peanut gallery.”
- “In order to make the best possible use of our panelists, we’re only taking questions from the audience, not statements.”
- “We’re only taking statements from the audience, not questions.”
- “Oh, let’s not always see the same hands.”
- “Thank you for your interesting suggestion. You may be right.”
- “You’re making some rather broad generalizations.”
- “Ok, ok, I think I understand the question. Now, which of our panelists wants to handle it?”
- “Would someone in the back please call hotel security.”

## **Moderator mantras**

- This has never killed anyone yet.
- I do not have to go home with this person.
- It’s okay to do this—I’m the moderator.
- Hey, this is a nice looking tablecloth!

## **Credits**

The WisCon moderator's guide was adapted from [The Minicon Moderator Tip Sheet](#), which was started and organized by 1990 Minicon Programming Co-Chair Sharon Kahn, and involved many people’s input. The original is copyright 1990, 1995 by the Minnesota Science Fiction Society, Inc.

The WisCon version was converted to HTML and lightly modified by Jed Hartman in 2006. Specific references to WisCon were removed for this edition of the guide in 2008.

# Moderator Preparation Sheet

Name of Panel

Day / Time / Room

Description

Panelist Intros (including yourself)

Starter Questions

Emergency Questions and Notes