

# Chairing Scientific Symposia

by Roger Fenwick  
and Leiv K. Sydnes

**T**he chairperson constitutes an essential component of any major scientific symposium. It is important that those selected for such a task understand that the role of the chairperson is to facilitate the execution of the symposium and function as a connection between the speaker and the audience. Surprisingly, this role is frequently misunderstood. In fact, most scientists can testify that they have attended scientific sessions that were adversely affected by a chair belonging to one of the following groups:

- The *Oscar Winner*, who has spoken at conferences and chaired sessions for decades; speakers have to fit in with his/her performance, and *it is* a performance, developed and honed over many years.
- The *Know it All*, who is always ready to impose his/her stamp on any presentation and demonstrate brilliance by hogging question time.
- The *Unconstrained*, who is oblivious to the clock and is frequently ready to stimulate irrelevant discussion, which frustrates speakers—especially the next one—and audiences alike.
- The *Nervous*, who starts twitching five minutes into the lecture, shifts papers to be ready for the next presentation, and is capable of putting anyone off.
- The *Technophile*, who is looking forward to any breakdown in the presentation technology so that he/she can leap up to assist.
- The *Busy Professional*, who arrives a minute before the session starts, is completely unaware of the session order as well as the gender and the presence of speakers.

A collection of such experiences acquired over many years has inspired us to write this piece. Its purpose is to encourage chairs and conference organizers to strive to achieve fluent and effective programming by identifying the key features of effective chairing. In addition, we offer practical suggestions for organizers and prospective chairs; although targeted especially at new chairs, it will—hopefully—also be of interest to more experienced colleagues.



## Tips for Organizers

It is a fact that *not all* experts make good lecturers; it is also true that good lecturers and brilliant scientists *do not necessarily* make good chairs. One reason is that some presenters may feel inhibited by a chair who has the personality and verbal display to carry a lecture, but when directing a section of a conference can end up hogging the spotlight.

Very often, members of a conference's scientific committee are selected as session chairs. This may be appropriate, but *not* if there are linguistic or other limitations. This is especially true of opening sessions, where the audience's interest needs to be ensured. In order to reduce the probability that sessions turn out poorly, organizing committees should:

- *Identify session chairs early*—Their role is as important as the role of speakers.
- *Provide clear guidance about what level of activity is required by the chair*—For example, will the chair be required to give a brief introduction to the session or provide a short summary of the presentations at the end.
- *Provide the chair with complete details of the sessions*—Conference programs may change at the last minute, since speakers drop out or are replaced, but do not wait until the last moment to inform the chair of this (usually *via* a scribbled and often illegible note). Confusion in statements from the chair can readily undo months of planning.
- *Ensure that water/soft drinks are available*. Do not forget bottle openers, if necessary; 90 minutes gazing at an unopened bottle can be torture in an airless room.

## Tips for Chairs

The chairs are in control, but the best chairs exercise the velvet glove rather than the iron fist. Pomposity and bluster are not qualities to display before an international audience, and certainly should not be passed on to younger colleagues. The activities of a successful chair may be divided into five sections.

### Before the session

Ensure that the organizers have provided correct details of the session: its timing, the program, and the speakers. Check that audio-visual aids and microphones are available and working. If a plenary or keynote lecture is included, make sure that brief biographical details of the speaker are provided, or seek the speaker out before the session to obtain these. If you do not know the speaker, ask one of the organizers to point him/her out. This can save hours of squinting at name badges of people that you imagine look like the speaker.

### At the beginning of the session

Greet the speakers and seek last minute information. Inform them about the importance of keeping to the schedule and make it abundantly clear how you will inform them that time is coming to an end and how you are going to terminate the presentation before the next speaker is introduced. Calm any last minute nerves and try not to pass on yours to them, especially when

less-experienced speakers are involved. Furthermore, make it clear that problems with the audiovisual equipment and the microphones are the responsibility of the organizers, not the speaker.

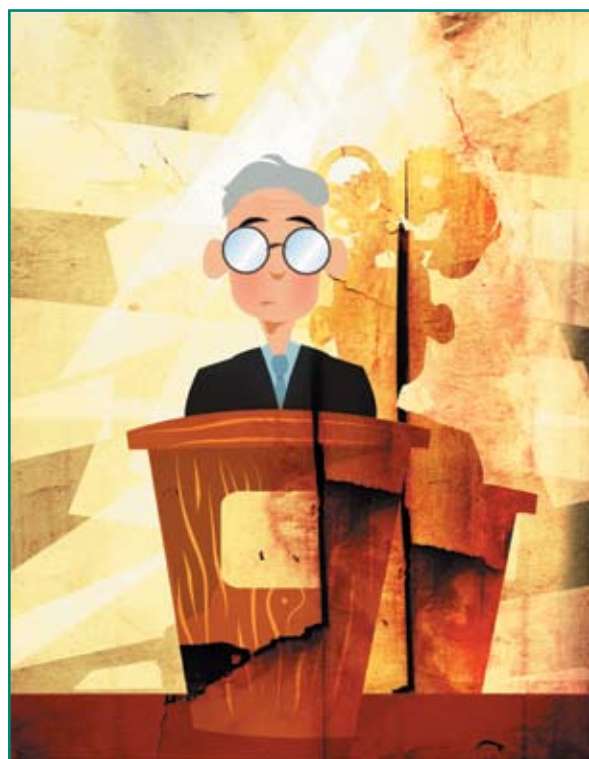
Ask the speakers to pronounce their names and, if necessary, make a note of these phonetically. It is not funny to mispronounce “foreign” names or organizations; it is, quite simply, *rude*. Remember, too, that the chair has precedence over the speaker, even if he or she is your old professor or your present boss.

Ensure that the session begins on time. Five minutes before the stated start, invite people to take their seats. Good organizers will already have been ushering people through the doors (a bell may be a useful accessory here). Check that all speakers are in the room. Do not rely on the fact that you saw the first speaker 15 minutes ago. He/she may have retired to the washroom, or returned to his/her room. Ideally, arrange for all speakers to be in the front row.

Allow yourself 30 seconds to read through the names of the authors and the titles of presentations. Then start by speaking slowly and clearly. Welcome your audience. If you feel it appropriate, welcome the audience in the language of the venue (it is always much appreciated). If you do this, ask a local colleague to repeat the words slowly and write them down phonetically. Briefly introduce yourself (and your co-chair if necessary). Make sure that the name on the table is in agreement! Do not give the audience the option of deciding whether you are Dr. Rimsky or Prof. Korsakov. Remember to remind members of the audience to switch off all mobile telephones (and ensure that yours is switched off).

Introduce the session briefly and move to the first presentation. A typical introduction to a plenary/keynote paper should be no more than one minute, and could include details of graduation, positions held, recent research interests, activities, and awards—all to demonstrate the suitability of the speaker for the presentation to come. Conclude with something like *“It therefore gives me great pleasure to invite Dr. Knoblauch to present this plenary/keynote lecture on [title].”*

For invited oral presentations, check that you have the right author identified and run through the pronunciations of the authors and their affiliations. A typical introduction could be *“The next paper is entitled [title] by Schwarz, Noir, and Black from the Institute of Chemistry of the University of Innsbruck. This will be delivered by Dr. Anni Schwarz.”*



## Chairing Scientific Symposia

### During the presentation

Be aware of any restlessness in the audience. Has the microphone gone dead? Maybe the lighting needs adjusting.

The greatest challenge—and fear—of any chair is the *over-running speaker*. Sometimes he/she is apparent from the beginning (for example, when the introductory slide is still showing after 10 minutes). In other cases the presentation dribbles or gushes on and on. The watchword in such cases is politeness. It is possible to curb such speakers, but strangulation is really not an option. Some large conferences, often running parallel sessions, still adopt a green, orange (two minutes to go), and red (stop) light system, but this is not common, and in any case may be ignored by those claiming to be color blind.

The chair must have a watch or stopwatch and should note the exact time of commencement. Prior to the session, the chair should have decided where to sit during the presentations since this can effect his/her actions. Make it clear what signal you will send to the speaker (for example, moving from front row to dais when five minutes remain). Alternatively, a hand signal may be used. Some presenters have, like some waiters, been known to lose their sight at such vital times, and so the signal should be significant. If a further indication is needed, then a firm *“Two minutes, please”* through the microphone is very effective.

Incidentally, do remember to switch off the microphone between comments, since you are not likely to gain the speakers friendship if a comment such as *“Isn't this ghastly...Where did they find this cretin?”* passes through the hall. If all else fails, then a walk to the podium and a stance next to the speaker will provide a final signal. *Again, be polite*. Indicate that it is indeed an interesting topic, but there is a tight schedule, other speakers are waiting and further discussion and exchange of views can take place later/during the coffee break.

It is the unlikely prospect of the latter scenario that causes the most stress amongst chairpersons simply because one is not totally in control. However, the audience is on your side. The only thing to remember is to work through the signals in turn and stick to the conviction that the *conference is greater than the individual speaker*.

It is good to remember the names of speakers that do not comply with the time allotted; after all you will probably organize conferences yourself at some time

and so you can avoid these people. In any case you certainly do not want to experience a re-run the next time you take the chair.

### After each lecture

Questions should only be allowed if the program is running according to or ahead of schedule. On the other hand, questions are an essential part of the scientific process and all lecturers, therefore, deserve at least one question. Thus, during the lecture it is an important task for the chair is to generate a couple of questions that can be asked if nobody else has one. (If the topic is not in your area of expertise, a question can sometimes be prepared from the available abstract). This is especially important at the beginning of a conference when potential questioners may be rather shy or doubt their ability in English. Questions from the chair, therefore, provide a little more time for the audience and give the speaker a chance to move into less formal “answer mode.” If no further questions are forthcoming, thank the speaker and perhaps comment that further discussion will be possible after the session/over lunch.

Usually there are questions, sometimes too many. Ensure that the speakers have access to a traveling microphone, or ask them to speak up so that the whole audience can understand. Often questions addressed to the speaker are inaudible to those sitting behind the questioner so, if necessary, repeat the question (this also gives the speaker a few more seconds to prepare an answer).

Show that you have seen potential questioners so that they do not wave furiously. If there are a number of questioners, politely discourage the person who has *“three questions and a comment”* by inviting him to ask one question to give others a chance. Do not be tempted to let questions continue to the detriment of the overall timing; it is far better to cut a discussion short and invite its continuation at coffee or during lunch.

Remember that every speaker deserves his/her allotted time. If the session is running over, do not put pressure on later speakers to speed up their presentations. It is not their fault. If necessary, ensure that a message is sent to the caterers alerting them that teas/coffees or lunches will be 10 or so minutes late. Remember that they are working to a schedule too. One memorable conference session managed to “lose” 90 minutes over a three-hour period.

## At the end of the session

If there is a link to the next session refer to it briefly, such as *"In this session we have heard about the methods developed to measure vitamin deficiency. After coffee/lunch we will see how these have been used in a clinical situation."* Thank all the speakers, the translators (if appropriate), and the lecture theatre staff, and ask the audience to express this *"in the usual way."* Announce the time at which the next session will begin.

Make a special point to informally thank the speakers in your session after the session has come to an end, especially those at the beginning of their careers. If you have constructive criticism to put forward, make it after some positive comments. A few words of support and encouragement at such a time will do wonders for their confidence.

Before leaving, look over the facilities and make sure you leave them as you would wish to find them. Hand the meeting over to your successor efficiently and on time, and make sure that your name plate has been removed.

## Parallel Sessions

Concerns about sessions running smoothly and attention to timing are particularly important when there are parallel sessions. Even if time for moving out/settling in seems to have been included in the program, most participants will probably still experience a time crunch when switching from one session to another, particularly if deviations from the lecture schedule are combined with complex logistics. Organizers can assist by briefing all chairs on the importance of timing (it just takes one laggard to cause chaos) and to ensure that the various lecture rooms are in reasonably close proximity.

## Chairing the Last Session

*The last session of the conference was coming to an end; the speaker and chair looked out across an audience of one. The speaker drew to a close and thanked the chairman, who thanked the speaker and congratulated the audience member for his perseverance and willingness to remain to the end. In reply the audience member informed the chair that he was, in fact, the last speaker.*

There is really no denying that the last session is equivalent to the speakers' "graveyard" of the after-

lunch plenary. Some of the audience will have left, some will be leaving during the session, and those who remain will wish to get the earliest taxi or train to the airport. This is not to say that departures should not be quiet—the person who wanders around kissing friends *au revoir* is not doing a service to the speaker, nor is the person sitting in the middle of a row who decides to move. No manner of wit or wisdom will delay those desperately wanting to avoid the traffic jams to the airport. The basic rule, therefore, remains the same: Stick to the timetable and do not prolong the session!



*Often, the last session of a conference can be the speakers' "graveyard."*

## Selecting Young Co-Chairs

In order to support and encourage the next generation of scientists to become involved in conferences, it is a good idea to have younger (this being up to the organizers to define) and more-experienced (a euphemism for "older") colleagues co-chair certain sessions. We believe this will improve conference chairing in the long run and certainly increase the quality and knowledge transfer of conferences. It also gives other young people in the audience the feeling that, in time, they could do the same. However, potential young chairs should be selected with care—not sleeping the night before and facing the audience rigid with fear is not what this experience is all about. In such circumstances, the responsibility is with the senior person to "look after" their more junior colleague. This is not, after all, a Ph.D. viva.

# Chairing Scientific Symposia

## Concluding Remarks

It should be emphasized that it is not our intention to outline *The Only Way* of chairing scientific symposia. On the contrary, each individual chair, like each presenter, should be encouraged to build on his/her own personality and develop his/her own style. However, there is no doubt that the overall quality of scientific

symposia can be improved significantly by good and constructive chairing, characterized by clear leadership and the ability to catalyze scientific discussions during the sessions.

Good chairs will learn from their experiences and should not, knowingly, turn in a poor performance since this will reflect badly on themselves and on the organizers. So before you accept that next invitation to Honolulu or Crete, ask yourselves what you can bring to the conference and prepare yourself.

Good luck! 🍀

### Remember

- The chair is the servant of the meeting and the speaker, not the other way around.
- Read through the program in advance.
- Identify speakers and check names.
- Explain how you will chair (timing, etc.).
- Speak clearly (and, if a native English speaker, do not speak too fast).
- Keep to time.
- Let questions flow.
- Thank everyone (and head for the bar).
- Note the performance of other chairs, draw up a list of personal dos and don'ts.
- Adapt good rules to your personality, don't try to change your personality.
- Above all, enjoy the experience.

Roger Fenwick <roger.fenwick@bbsrc.ac.uk> is international coordinator at the Institute of Food Research (IFR), which is a not-for-profit company with charitable status, sponsored by the Biotechnology & Biological Sciences Research Council in the UK and situated in Norwich, UK. He has been much involved in FECS (Federation of European Chemical Societies) and EuCheMS (European Association for Chemical and Molecular Sciences) activities, and for years he has been an active conference organiser.

Leiv K. Sydnes <leiv.sydnes@kj.uib.no> is a chemistry professor at the University of Bergen, Norway. He was IUPAC president during 2004-2005 and is currently a member of the Union's executive as past president. He has been much involved in FECS and EuCheMS activities as well, and for years he has been active as a conference organizer.

## Make Your List

### Dos

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

### Don'ts

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

