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Doing Science: Chairing sessions

Chairing sessions is not about smartly stealing thunder; it is about making the speakers, the attendees and the co-chairs look smart.

Effective chairing includes the practicalities of introducing your co-chairs, the speakers/presenters and yourself, keeping time, and facilitating discussion. The actual challenge is to: engage the audience's interest; create a sense of coherence throughout the diversity of presentations and speakers; ease the speakers' job of establishing their credibility with the audience; create a constructive, respectful and professional atmosphere for discussion; and wrap up in a way that leaves everyone feeling good about the session. Successful chairing leaves the presenters and audience feeling that the session was worth the time they invested in it.

With all these aims in mind, herein, we address the challenge of chairing a session (thematic poster session, oral presentation and poster discussion) [1], and provide practical tips to overcome difficult situations and even turn them into advantages.

Chairing any session

Make sure you read all abstracts of the session beforehand and familiarise yourself with the areas of research involved. Try to prepare at least one question for each abstract, in case no questions come from the audience. In addition, think about the

overarching topic of the session and how you could introduce it. Try to think how you could introduce each speaker. Preferably, discuss the session with your co-chair in advance by e-mail or telephone. If this does not work (like you, they are busy people and may be hard to reach), you could meet before the beginning of a session, although this is less ideal.

Once at the conference, know exactly where the session will take place and when it will start, and be at the right place ahead of time. Very importantly, know how to operate the technical equipment and who to contact in an emergency.

During a session, adhere to your timing as if you were a drill instructor. Time management is essential at a conference. Write down the start time of a session and give a discrete sign to the speaker when they approach the end of their allocated time slot. Interrupting a speaker or presenter is not pleasant but, if absolutely necessary, it should be done in a polite yet firm and professional manner. It is always wise to discuss this with the speakers before the start of the meeting, emphasising the need for good time keeping and explaining what will happen if they overrun.

Chairing thematic poster sessions

Decide how much time you want to assign to poster viewing and when to start a poster walk

Statement of Interest
None declared.

Table 1. Chairing sessions: pitfalls and advice

Problem	Most appropriate solution	First alternative option	Lifesaving alternative	Never
You are considerably less experienced in chairing than as your co-chair	Before the session, introduce yourself; be polite but self-confident. Remember that you have prepared yourself and the presented abstracts in detail.	Before the session introduce yourself and explain that your experience is moderate. Discuss the session plan with your co-chair.	Before the session introduce yourself and explain that you are stressed; it is the first time you chair. Discuss the session plan with your co-chair.	Panic and find an excuse not to chair.
Uncontrolled stress before chairing the session	Avoid improvisation; prepare yourself well for the task. Keep smiling and show enthusiasm if possible.	Have a fair amount of sleep on the night before the session to avoid tiredness.	Take a deep breath and get the job done. Stress often does not show.	Drink alcohol before the session.
The session starts later than expected	Explain the situation and allow the speakers and audience to decide whether the session should last as planned with a shorter break or shorten the session time if this is acceptable to the speakers.	Nicely ask all speakers before starting to adhere to time and explain to the audience that there will be less time for questions.	Make a new time plan. Give speakers and audience new instructions and time limits. Cut any breaks.	Be late. Make overly long comments. Cancel all time for discussion.
Diverse presentations/incoherent session	Find connecting points to ensure the audience that the session was well planned. At the end, wrap the session up in an interesting coherent way.	Tell a short, interesting anecdote explaining why the session was planned in that particular way.	Make no comments. Avoid seeing the problem.	Make impolite comments or suggestions that the session was planned in a wrong way.
A telephone rings during the session	Before the session, ask all participants to turn off their mobiles phones.	React politely to the incident (without interrupting the speaker), look discretely towards the sound and try to make eye contact, maintaining a firm attitude.	Ignore it.	Answer your own telephone when you chair a session.
The session lasts longer than expected	Plan the session in advance, keep track of time regularly and include: presentations; questions; answers; and time you need to introduce speakers, open and wrap up the session.	Identify the reason. Presentation is too long: remind the speaker in a gentle but firm way to finish; interrupt if needed. Discussion is too long: encourage gently but firmly to continue further discussion at the break time.	React whenever you have discovered that you are not adhering to the time schedule.	Make unexpected long comments that are responsible for prolonging the session; do nothing to improve the time schedule.

with a joint discussion [2]. You may want to divide the posters between you and your co-chair, deciding those in which you will lead the discussion. Walk by the posters and introduce yourself and your co-chair to the presenting authors. Let the presenting authors know what time the discussion round will start and explain what is expected from them as presenters [3].

An organised walk by all the posters with all presenters, visitors and chairs is an effective way to stimulate discussion. Ask each author to present their findings briefly, and then you can initiate and foster the discussion. The goal of the session is to encourage as much interaction and constructive discussion as possible between the presenters and the attendees. Your role as a chair is not to monopolise the discussion but to involve as many people as possible and guide the discussion to the relevant issues. Knowing a few of the attendees is an advantage, as you can ask them to comment if the discussion stalls prematurely. At the end of each poster, give a short summary of the findings and the discussion, and thank the presenting author for his/her contribution.

Chairing oral presentation sessions

Decide with your co-chair how you would like to run the session and introduce the speakers. Once the audience has filled the room and it is time to start, introduce the session. Explain the theme of the session, and outline the main topics in the field and/or session. In addition, lay down the ground rules for the speakers and audience (format, timing and questions) [4]. If the ground rules are clear from the start, it helps everything run smoothly.

After each presentation, thank the speaker and turn to the audience for questions. You can wait until the audience feels comfortable to ask questions; if this does not happen, always have a question prepared. If the discussion is running too long, do take action and indicate that this is the last question. Furthermore, you can always add in a diplomatic way that the presenter would be delighted to take questions during the break.

Table 2. Summary

Any session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read all abstracts Prepare questions in advance Think of a session outline Have clear rules on time (presentation and questions) and explain them to the presenters before the sessions starts Adhere to time Summarise findings Thank presenters, audience and co-chairs
Thematic poster session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Walk around all posters and introduce yourself An organised walk will stimulate an organised discussion
Oral presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set the rules for the presentations from the start Have clear rules on time (presentation and questions) and explain them to the presenters before the session starts Adhere to time Introduce the session and wrap up efficiently Thank the speaker after each presentation
Poster discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agree on major questions for discussion Separate “viewing” and “discussion” time Viewing time is similar to a thematic poster session Discussion time will discuss the major questions, like a mini-symposium

Chairing poster discussion sessions

Save for the word “poster”, a poster discussion session is very different from a thematic poster session. This may not be entirely clear to less experienced presenters but the preparation of the poster is in fact quite similar [5]. For the chairs, the poster discussion format is more demanding both in terms of preparation and improvisation during the actual session. In return, it offers the audience much more in terms of a broad, general discussion. We recommend that poster discussion chairs have some previous experience with presenting and chairing.

As a poster discussion chair, when reading the abstracts prior to the congress, identify a few major, broad topics for discussion based on the abstracts. Contact the other chairs and, if possible, agree on three to five major topics/questions for discussion. Try to identify researchers with relevant expertise and personally invite them to the session, as this will improve the discussion.

The chairs open with a brief welcome and outline of the session. The first hour (80 min at the ERS International Congress) is the “viewing time”, where presenters stand by their posters similar to a thematic poster session. Discuss with the other chairs which major themes should be discussed based on the poster contents and on what expertise is gathered in the room.

Then, the chairs initialise the “discussion time” by focusing everyone’s attention on the

front of the room. On some occasions, the chairs open by letting the poster presenters summarise their findings in 1–2 min each; however, this depends on how long the discussion time is. The chairs then introduce their first topic, which should be broad and open-ended. Specific questions directed to individual presenters should be avoided but can be necessary later if the discussion stalls. In addition, if you are fortunate enough to have any leading experts in the room, try to engage them in the discussion by directing specific questions to them. Move through your three to five major topics during the next 30 min, summing up each major topic before moving on. Close the session with a brief conclusion. Done correctly, the poster discussion format offers to the audience a much broader forum discussion, more like a mini-symposium than a thematic poster session [5].

Troubleshooting

Chairing a session at a conference is a challenging yet constructive experience, especially in the early stages of a scientific carrier. However, chairing may also put you in some difficult situations. Table 1 presents the most commonly met difficulties and pitfalls as well as advice to overcome these.

Remember that chairing a session is a great chance to improve your skills and visibility in your field. The more prepared you are and the more practical chairing experience you have, the easier it is to avoid pitfalls (table 2). Good luck and have fun!

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