

The Procrustean Chair:
Helpful Hints for Chairing Academic Sessions

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One of my favorite episodes of “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” was “The Dinner Party,” where Sue Anne Nivens prepares her famous “Veal Prince Orloff” with just enough portions for everyone at the table. Mr. Grant is served first and, not realizing the gravity of the situation, takes a heaping three portions for himself. Mary is forced to call him aside and beg him to put two portions back into the plate, which he does, much to the consternation of the other shocked guests.

I often think of this episode when attending academic conferences, as a similar situation frequently occurs when there are three or more people on a panel. The first speaker goes over the allotted time for his/her presentation, which causes a chain reaction wherein the final speaker is almost certainly not going to have his/her allotted time, and there will most likely be no time at all for questions. The chair of the session should play a vital role as timekeeper. Should he/she fail to do so, unpleasantness can ensue, much as in “The Dinner Party” episode. If Mary had alerted her guests beforehand to the fact that there were just enough portions equally for everyone, no one would have made a fuss. But she wanted to be a nice person and not offend anyone by stating this fact. She just hoped for the best, a policy that unfortunately did not work in this case. At conferences, to be sure, presenters are usually aware of the time they have been given to speak, but it is very easy – as Einstein ably demonstrated – for one to experience time in a subjective way which has little connection with the objective ticking of the clock.

In Greek mythology, Procrustes was an innkeeper who had only one bed. If travelers were too short to fit into it, he’d stretch them out on a rack, and if they were too

tall he'd lop off their feet or legs. A "Procrustean Bed", not surprisingly, is a term that has a negative connotation, and is often used to describe situations where people are forced to adapt themselves in ways they find hurtful. However, when it comes to conferences it might be good to remember the wicked old innkeeper. He was harsh, but fair – no one was left without a place to sleep, albeit a pleasant night's sleep was by no means guaranteed. Chairs of sessions must be followers of Procrustes. If there are three or more speakers on a panel, each should have exactly the same amount of time to speak – no more and no less. Everyone on the panel is in the same boat. No one likes the fact that the time allotted is so short, usually twenty minutes or less. But in today's academic world, in order to get funding from one's department to attend a conference it is usually necessary to be on a panel, either as a chair or as a speaker. This necessarily increases the number of panelists. No one likes it, but that's the way it is.

Chairs should make the following clear to all the presenters, in as concise a way as possible:

1. Each speaker will be given a signal, preferably a rather public one such as the holding up of a sign, when there are five minutes left to speak. When time is up, the chair will make this clear by rising and saying words to the effect of "Thank you very much. That's all the time you have."
2. Be aware that the time allotted to you, which you think is too short, is probably going to be even shorter than you anticipated. Twenty minutes is usually the maximum, not the minimum. Sessions seldom start exactly on time, and they often end early when there are people beating on the door to get in for the next session. You may have practiced your talk over and over again to time it precisely, but in the heat of the moment

you will likely be astonished that there are still several pages to go when you are given the five-minute warning. “Ums” and “Ers”, off-the-cuff remarks and asides take up precious seconds you probably didn’t bargain for. Also, remember that if you want the chair, in introducing you, to mention every academic institution you’ve ever attended, every book and/or article you’ve ever written, and every award you’ve ever been given, that counts against your allotted time as well. A one-sentence description of yourself is usually sufficient for such occasions. Modesty is a virtue.

3. If you are planning on using PowerPoint or some other audiovisual equipment, test it out beforehand. If you can’t do so beforehand, realize that the testing of it on the spot will count as part of your allotted time. If the equipment doesn’t work, as is often the case, you should be prepared for this – have handouts at the ready, use notes, or be able to summarize. If you can’t give the talk without the equipment working, then you must admit defeat and sit down. Feel free to mutter Heideggerian imprecations against technology on the way to your seat.

4. If you have a written paper you wish to deliver, understand that no matter how short you think it is, the odds are against your finishing it. You should have a conclusion you can jump to when you are given the five-minute warning, and that conclusion must be brief. It would often be better if you just summarize the entire paper and have copies of the full paper available or tell attendees that if they want a copy you can send it to them. When you are given the five-minute warning, PLEASE do not take this to mean you must read the rest of the paper at double or triple your normal reading speed. No one in the audience will be able to follow you and you will probably hurt yourself, too.

5. When you are given the five-minute warning, do not take this as an approximation. When you are told your time is up, do not take this to mean you can continue speaking so long as you say “I’m almost done – just a few more points”. “Time’s up” means “time’s up.” If you continue to talk, the chair should start applauding and encourage the audience to do so as well, as a gentle way of shaming you into sitting down. If that doesn’t work, be aware that security might be called in and you will be bodily removed, by any means necessary. The old Vaudeville expression “give ‘em the hook” comes to mind here.

6. If you are not only a participant but also the chair of the session, you should speak last rather than first. This will give you a wonderful incentive to watch the time, and should things somehow get out of whack, you can bring everything to a proper close by practicing what you preach and bringing the session in on time through shortening your own talk.

7. Finally, to the questioners – tell them that they are expected to ask a question, not deliver another lecture. If after a minute or two it is clear that this is not happening, you should interrupt by asking “do you have a question?” If they do not, ask them to please step aside to give a chance to those who do. Also, make it plain that this should not be a multi-part question that would take a good twenty minutes itself to answer, and that if they want an extended exchange with the speakers they can arrange this after the session is over. Questioners should be urged to be charitable to the speakers who, given their time restraints, almost always must omit vital parts of their presentation.

Can chairing be an unpleasant experience? Undoubtedly. But so is the obvious discomfort of the next-to-last speakers, of the audience members who will not have a chance to ask questions, and of the attendees who sense that disorder has taken over. Had

we but world enough and time, each speaker would be able to explicate his/her position at length and questioners would be able to engage in true Socratic dialogue for as long as necessary. But alas, such is not the reality of modern-day conferencing. That's why God invented coffee breaks.

Ideally, it would be nice if there was a professional chair society that conference organizers could utilize, much like the referee system in professional sports: The Procrustean Chair Association, dedicated to impartial timekeeping and equal arbitration. But this is unlikely, which is why most chairs are chosen from the ranks of the academic organization sponsoring the conference. It can be awkward to cut off colleagues in mid-sentence, scold long-winded questioners, and keep one's eye on the clock rather than concentrating on the rich intellectual fare being offered. But nobody said chairing was easy. Perhaps, just as on airplanes where people sitting in emergency rows must agree that they have the wherewithal to operate the doors in case of an emergency, so those chairing should accept the fact that there are real responsibilities involved, and demur if they do not feel up to the challenge. Still, don't look upon chairing as an imposition, but rather as an opportunity to make conference presenting a mutually rewarding opportunity for all. If you are successful in running a tight ship, everyone – speakers, questioners, and audience members - should appreciate your achievement. And, if nothing else, remember – Procrustes would be proud of you.

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