



Organising a panel discussion

Important elements:

Aim of session

- We don't run sessions for the sake of them. With this in mind, it's important to have thought-out aims for the session you're running, so the audience doesn't leave thinking 'what was the point of that'? Three aims is a good rule of thumb. Panel aims could include: for the participants to be more informed on "x" topic, walk away with key information they can pass on, and/or raise awareness of an issue. Having an aim will inform how you design a session. If one of your aims is for participants to get to know each other, a panel probably isn't the right format, for example.

Structure

- The structure speaks to the aim of the session. A session can be composed of a number of sections, and it's important that your participants feel they have contributed or have their own stake in the session. From the Q&A to breakout activities, there are several elements you can incorporate to achieve your aims. For example, if one of your aims is for participants to be well-informed on a specific element of the topic area, consider what the Q&A or discussion segment of your event will look like and whether it's helpful to your aim. What guidance can you give to the chair to help get participants involved? What will speakers say that will inform the discussion later in the session? You can often help guide the conversation in a session, so how can you, as the designer of the session, structure this?

Attendees

- More often than not, you can predict who your demographic is. You have to ask yourself, what does this mean for your session? What would be most useful aims and structure for your participants? How much knowledge will they have on the topic at hand? How can you make the session as accessible as possible in terms of venue accessibility, but also the technicality of the discussion?

Prepared chair

- Chairs are essential to the session. A thoroughly briefed chair will make the session run more smoothly. Chairs and facilitators are used to having to think of their feet, but briefing them mitigates unpredictability of the session (this is something that can never be avoided entirely). You should provide your chair with a brief with timings, speaker biographies and topics, where you want the conversation to go. It's ideal to have a conversation a day or so before the session so you're on the same page. See chair tips and tricks below.



The World Transformed

Speakers

- It's better to think of a panel as a whole rather than speakers as individuals. What is being covered? What gaps do you have in the discussion? Is the panel informed by the aims of the session. It is often desirable to get speakers that to come at the same issue from different perspectives for example on housing - someone that works in policy, an organiser/activist, a politician, and a frontline worker. Consider having panelists that may disagree on an issue to give a full view of perspectives. This is also often achieved by having a gender balance with good representation for people of colour and folks with working class backgrounds.

Quick tips:

- *A panel session isn't a lecture. Often, attendees get more from the discussion segment of the session. Give your speakers 7mins to speak and to maximise discussion time.*
- *Between the last speaker and the Q&A, ask the attendees to speak to the person next to them about what they found most interesting. This stimulates discussion and often brings out better/more interesting questions. It also helps create a community atmosphere for something that may be seen as a more formal setting.*

Chair tips and tricks

Chair Briefing

- Ensure all the speakers are present and have a quick huddle before the panel. This will be to ensure the panelists are clear on speaking order, to reiterate how long they have to speak and quickly talk through the structure. This information will be in the speaker brief and all the panelists would have been sent a copy.
- Give the audience a couple minutes warning before starting the panel.
- Start by welcoming the audience to the session by giving a very brief overview of the issue being discussed. Explain the structure of the session.
- Introduce the first speaker and a very brief summary of what they will be speaking on.
- Reiterate the amount of time stated in the speaker brief.
- When all the panelists have spoken, transition into the Q&A section.
- Ensure you get back to the speakers for closing remarks after the Q&A and before the end of the session.

Chair/facilitator tips and tricks

- When each speaker has finished their talk, say something that stood out for you before introducing the next speaker. This will make the panel flow better and show appreciation to the speakers contribution.



The World Transformed

- When keeping the speakers to time, ensure you let them know how long they have and let them know they will get a 2 minute warning.
- Time them on your phone.
- Write “2 minutes” and “30 seconds” on a piece of paper to show them how much time they have left. This prevents you having to cut them off.
- If a speaker is talking for too long, don't be afraid to speak up in a pause. Speakers are often happy when a chair keeps them to time.
- In the Q&A section, it's always a good format to take 3 questions from the floor and bring it back to the panel. Comments are fine too but make sure you emphasise that they have to be concise so you're able to do as many rounds as possible. As a rule of thumb, it's good to have 3 rounds of 3 questions at least. You can ask the audience to keep their contributions to 90 seconds or less to avoid 'comments over questions'.
- Don't necessarily go to the person that puts their hand up first, the aim is to get questions and comments from a broad range of people in the room. This will make for more interesting and dynamic discussion.