



## HOW TO RUN A GREAT PANEL DISCUSSION

*Lightly adapted from Brad Philips, @MrMediaTraining ([website](#))*

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### INTRODUCTION

Panel discussions offer audiences a valuable opportunity to hear from several experts in a short amount of time. When conceived and executed thoughtfully, panels can be fast-moving and dynamic discussions that leave audiences with crucial new information and perspectives.

Unfortunately, most panels don't live up to their potential. They appear simple on the surface—*All we have to do is talk for an hour!*—and, as a result, moderators and panelists too often fail to give them the attention they deserve.

If anything, panels are *more* challenging than the typical presentation. In addition to the usual presenting requirements, moderators are tasked with guiding an on-topic conversation, listening carefully to answers and forming meaningful follow-up questions, contending with long-winded speakers, distributing talk time fairly, and managing interactions with the audience.

No wonder it's challenging to deliver a panel that crackles with energy! The good news is that with proper planning, you can deliver a panel with oomph, one that sidesteps the obstacles that too often bog them down.

If there are just two words that bind together many of the points that will follow, it's these: *embrace unpredictability*. Being unpredictable doesn't necessarily mean saying shocking things or being overly dramatic, but rather keeping your audience slightly off-balance by asking questions to panelists out of sequence, varying your question types, cutting off filibustering panelists, exploring disagreement, and involving the audience at unexpected moments—and in unexpected ways.

### PLANNING YOUR PANEL

Like any other presentation, you should understand who will be in your audience and what value they can glean from your panel. That knowledge will help inform your panel's title and session description, as well as which panelists you should invite to join you.

Great panels are diverse. In this context, diversity can mean many things: age, gender, race, years of experience, viewpoint, personality, job responsibilities, and more. The key is to book panelists who bring different perspectives to the topic. Watching three people who all view the world similarly (and who, in terms of demographics, basically look the same) can quickly bore an audience.

Vet potential panelists by casting a wide net and conducting several “pre-interviews” before officially inviting anyone to join you. It may feel bad to speak to a potential panelist and then decide not to use them—but do it anyway. Just explain upfront that you’re in the exploratory phase and trying to ensure a diversity of views.

Once you’ve booked your panel, schedule a planning conference call, during which you’ll do three primary things:

1. **Share your goals for the panel:** The panelists should understand who will be in the audience, have a chance to review the session title and description, and consider how they might be able to deliver value to audience members.
2. **Discuss the session flow:** Explain how you intend to open and close the session, how you plan to moderate the discussion, whether and how you plan to take audience questions, and whether panelists should engage directly with one another. To ensure a fast-moving panel, mention that shorter answers are generally better than long ones, and that you may jump in if answers go too far past the one-minute mark (when the physiological symptoms of stress begin to manifest themselves, what panelists think is one minute of speaking time is often closer to two or three).
3. **Learn what each panelist would like to discuss:** Review the topics on which you plan to focus, offer panelists an opportunity to add their thoughts about those and other potential topics, and explore where panelists disagree with one another or have unique perspectives. Also, ask each panelist to send you a short (2-4 sentence) bio along with a headshot, which you’ll use for their introductions. At least one sentence of their bio should specifically address their connection to the panel’s topic.

## CREATING PANEL SEGMENTS AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

A great interview is a combination of two things: careful planning in advance and active listening in the moment.

To prepare a list of questions, begin by breaking your topic into several smaller *segments*. Let’s say you’re moderating a panel called “Authoritarian Regimes and (Not So) Free Speech.” Here are a few different ways you might structure the session (you would only select one):

### By Topic

Segment One: Why authoritarians restrict free speech to maintain contro

Segment Two: Where the biggest threats to free speech are today

Segment Three: Are greater restrictions to free speech our future?

### By Geography

Segment One: Threats to speech in the Middle East

Segment Two: Threats to speech in Latin America

Segment Three: Threats to speech in Europe

Segment Four: Threats to speech in the United States

### By Incident

Segment One: First case study of restricted speech

Segment Two: Second case study of restricted speech

Segment Three: Third case study of restricted speech

Segmenting in this manner has several advantages. It ensures that your panel has a clear focus, allows you to provide the audience with a roadmap at the beginning of the panel to help them to keep track of where you're heading, and breaks the patter to retain (or regain) audience attention.

Next, you'll prepare questions for each segment. There are two main types of questions: open-ended and closed-ended, both of which serve different but equally useful purposes and should be interspersed throughout your panel.

**Open-ended questions** tend to lead to longer, more comprehensive answers. The following words and phrases often precede open-ended questions: "Why?" "How?" "What?" "Would you tell me more about..." "Describe your reaction to..."

**Closed-ended questions**, which require people to choose their answers from a limited set of options, often result in crisper answers that force panelists to place their "headlines" at the top of their answers (which, as a result, adds an energy boost to the panel).

Once you've completed your questions, you might be tempted to send the complete list to your panelists. Resist that urge—doing so often leads panelists to over-prepare and come across with a lack of spontaneity on stage. Instead, provide them with the overall themes you plan to cover, along with a key question or two. Your goal is to help your panelists think through the topics *without* becoming too scripted.

## OPENING YOUR PANEL

Below, you'll find a typical format, which contains a major flaw. Can you spot it?

- Moderator sets up topic and introduces panelists (5 minutes)
- Each panelist delivers an opening statement (3 panelists x 5 minutes each = 15 minutes)
- Panelists answer moderator's questions (15 minutes)
- Audience Q&A (15 minutes)

Here's the problem: By the time the questions *finally* begin, the panel is already nearing its halfway point—and any energy that was present at the beginning of the session has likely fizzled away.

There's an easy fix. Shrink the setup and introductions to just a few minutes and eliminate opening statements from each panelist altogether—the audience is there to hear a lively conversation, not three mini-presentations.

Your goal is to set the panel up *just enough* to establish context for the conversation that follows. You can begin with an open that sets up the topic, its relevance, and key trends; cites a key problem that your panel will help solve; and/or identifies your panel's goals.

Then, move on to a mini-introduction of each person. You can read the short bio each panelist provided you in advance—but feel free to add relevant (but brief) detail. And don't forget to introduce yourself, too!

Moderators typically sit with the panel for the open and introductions. For longer openings, a nice alternative is to start the session and introduce the panel from a standing position toward the front of the stage (while the panelists are seated), then ask the audience to welcome the panel and walk to your seat while they applaud.

Whichever option you choose, you're just a few minutes into the session at this point, and have already set the foundation sufficiently. You've also managed to shave at least 15 minutes off the first two parts of the sample agenda above.