

Society for Applied Anthropology Annual Meeting Session Chair Guide

The Session Chair fills an important role in the professional conference. The chair is at once a “housekeeper” who enforces the clock and monitors routine tasks, as well as the person most responsible for developing and managing a creative dialogue around the session theme. We have grouped below the general, conventional “housekeeping” tasks as well as what might be called the more substantive “dialogue assurance activities”.

The responsibilities begin with the formation of the session (if the session is organized) or when the session chair is selected (if the session is ‘volunteered’). These responsibilities continue during the months leading up to the meeting, and end at the conclusion of the session (unless the session participants and audience wish to continue the dialogue).

The following outline of tasks/responsibilities applies equally to chairs of “organized” sessions as well as “volunteered” sessions. They apply as well to individuals who chair “panels” and “round tables”.

I. Housekeeping

The session chair should establish contact with the members of the session (both papers and discussants) as soon as possible after the Preliminary Program has become available (usually in late December and on the web page). The Chair should assure that all session participants are aware of:

- A. The date and time of the session
- B. The other session participants and their topics
- C. The time allotted for the session as well as for each paper
- D. The general conduct of the session
- E. Any information specific to that session or session topic

The session chair also has particular responsibilities to the Program Chair and the SfAA Office. The chair should know and inform the SfAA Office when session participants withdraw or are unable to attend and present. The chair should also coordinate any unique requests for facilities or equipment that originate with session participants (see below).

Session Length and Time

Session Chairs are responsible for convening the session at the appointed time. A delay of up to five minutes is possible without disrupting the schedule. These five minutes are built in to allow the Session Chair to use his/her judgment to decide upon the appropriate beginning for each session. If people are still being seated, the Session Chair may choose to wait an extra two minutes before beginning the proceedings. Beyond five minutes after the appointed start time, delays will reduce the time available for each speaker.

Once the session is underway, Chairs will need to monitor the time each speaker presents and remind them as their allotted time approaches its end. Each session is allotted 105 minutes. The session chair should allocate equal time for each participant, allowing a period of time at the end for questions from the audience. The Chair will make certain this time remains by asking each speaker to keep to the time limitations. The Chair will also assure that all reasonable questions are considered and addressed.

If the number of papers is limited, presenters may be permitted extra time. The session chair is responsible for enforcing the requisite time periods on each participant.

Session Format

The Session Chair may want to exceed the role of timekeeper and monitor, although they are not required to do so. In the past, Chairs have fostered discussion by offering an analysis of the implications of work that has been presented. They have used interactions between the audience and panelists as jumping off points for further clarification or for assessing future directions. Chairs are welcome to be creative in ways they feel will enrich the session.

The traditional format of a session at a professional meeting is clear and uncomplicated. Papers are read and at the conclusion questions are asked.

There are other ways to organize a session, some of which enhance the interest and participation of the audience. The session chair is encouraged to explore and implement changes that will have a positive impact on the audience. However, format revisions should be discussed carefully among the session participants and there must be general agreement.

Contact Point

The session chair will serve as the link between the session participants on the one hand and the Program Chair/SfAA Office on the other. General information on the program will flow from the Program Committee through the session chairs and thence, to the session participants.

The session chairs are also responsible for transmitted information from the session participants to the Program Committee/SfAA Office. If the Office or the session chair learns of a withdrawal, that information should be exchanged.

Equipment

The Society will provide LCD projectors and screens for each meeting room at no charge. If anyone in your session is using PowerPoint, at least one participant will need to bring a laptop. *It is important that you assume the responsibility to condense all the PowerPoint presentations on one CD or memory stick.* This will save time changing disks between papers.

On request, the Society can contract with a commercial vendor to rent other audio-visual equipment, such as an overhead projector, 35 mm projector, VCR/Monitor, etc.

The cost of rental will be borne by the presenter. The Society will make every effort to explore multiple uses that could result in shared costs.

II. Dialogue Assurance

Introductions

The Session Chair's responsibilities include but are not limited to introducing each participant in the session and keeping track of the time requirements and limitations for each participant. You are welcome to obtain additional information you feel would be appropriate to include in an introduction. If you would like, you may email the participants and collaborate with them regarding their introduction. You may wish to integrate the interests of each speaker or address how each presentation addresses the theme of the session. You may prefer to offer some other information about each speaker you feel is relevant to the audience. Introductions should be as informative and interesting as possible.

The real challenge for the session chair is (a) to explore and guide the internal integration of the presentations and (b) to articulate for the session participants a linkage between the session and the Program Theme.

The session chair may also guide effectively the discussion period by coordinating the responses to questions from the audience. The session chair could also serve as the point of organization should the participants wish to explore a continuation of the dialogue, either for a future meeting, or in the conversion of the session to print format. Finally, the session chair may be presented with a unique opportunity to guide the development of younger professionals should they be included in the session.

Papers that are accepted for presentation at a meeting are customarily developed independently and with little connection to the other papers in the session. The challenge for a serious session chair is to explore ways to guide the separate papers into a linked whole - whether through general agreement or rational and structured contrasts. Obviously, this is a task that must be approached with care. Past experience suggests that it can be done most effectively if the session chair has a clear grasp of the Program Theme and the way that the substance and direction of the session fits into the Theme.

The session chair manages the discussion or question/answer portion of the session. Viewed from the most rudimentary perspective, this simply means the recognition of audience members who pose questions to the presenters. Yet, this responsibility may be viewed from a much more creative and constructive viewpoint. Questions that are imprecisely phrased or which lack logical coherence may be re-stated in a form more understandable to the presenter. The creative session chair may also parse questions and comments among the presenters in a fashion that highlights significant themes or sets up contrasting points of view.

In sum, the careful session chair equipped with an understanding of the theme of the session should be able to use the discussion period to skillfully bring to the audience a grasp of the theme and the way that the discussion expanded that dialogue.