Notes on how to chair a session

Thorsten Koch, 20. Oct 2025

The task of the chair is to manage the session, i.e., possibly introduce the speakers, handle any problems that may arise, and, most importantly, manage time.

Note: if the session has 60 min and there are 3 speakers, the 20 min are **not** the speaking time. It is the total time for the setup/switch of speakers, the talk, and the questions. Therefore, the chair should tell the speaker that there are 15 min for the talk not 20. And if asked how much time is left, give it in relation to the 15 min.

You should sit so the speaker can see you easily, and give signals indicating the remaining time, especially at the end – say, at 10, 5, 2, 1 minute left. Possibly, stand up at 1 min to make the speaker aware time is running out. If the speaker does not stop, see below.
How important is keeping time? This depends on the event.

Single-track workshop: **People meet to discuss.** Having no time for questions or cutting them short due to time shows the chair failed to do its job properly. Make sure there is enough time. If questions do not stop – good. However, if the discussion gets too long and involved between just one person and the speaker, stop it and defer to the break, if the discussion is not of general interest. As long as there are interesting questions from different people, continue.

Multi-track conference: Here, keeping time is more important. Make sure there is enough time for quick questions, but it is okay to stop them to keep time strictly. If one speaker finishes early, do not start the next talk before the announced time, because people might switch between the sessions.

In general, if there are no questions, the chair should ask one. (If you have no clue about the topic, ask how to continue from here, what the next steps are, or how this relates to current trends in AI).

When organizing an event. Firstly, it is a bad idea to have a chair who is also a speaker in the session. Secondly, if it happens, then the chair should be the last speaker of the session.

Speaker not showing up

In a single-track conference, move on to the next one. If known early enough, organizers might put in another talk in place. In multi-track, wait for the announced time of the next talk. The chair can meanwhile entertain the audience with bad jokes.

Speaker not stopping

If it is a contributed talk at a multi-track conference, clearly indicate if time is running out; stand up, give one extra minute, and then cut them short. Try to find out how far they are from the end of their talk. If on the last slide, let it go; if it says slide 23 of 34, then interrupt. Be polite, but this is the one situation where there might be no questions, when the speaker does not stop. If the talk was not finished, there is no point in having questions.

The most challenging case is if it is a plenary and/or a famous speaker. Make sure it is noticed that time is running out. Stand up when the time is over, unless the speaker is already on the last slide. Do not forget, people came to hear that person. If there is a break afterwards, be relaxed. If there is another talk, remind the speaker politely – ideally humorously – that time has run out. Try to handle it gracefully. Possibly ask how many more slides or minutes the speaker needs. If the answer is one or two, fine; otherwise, object. Try to stay polite.

For cases between these two extremes, you need to decide. However, do not forget, people meet to hear each other and discuss. It is your job to manage this gracefully.

In general, it is a good idea to remind the speakers of the planned time before their talk.