

## GUIDELINES FOR SEMINAR CHAIRS

**The purpose** of involving students as chairs is to provide experience for this important task. The quality of the seminar program has been enhanced by the student chairs, and through this participation students have become more aware of the support needed for the speakers. The overall responsibility of the chair is to provide a courteous and friendly, yet formal link between the audience and the speaker. The chair is the seminar *conductor*. The following points will serve as helpful hints. (The faculty are pleased to acknowledge that the chairs and speakers have been of high caliber. Points made here are especially for new chairs, and serve as reminders for less new chairs.)

1. **Getting started:** If you are the starting chair, arrive five or ten minutes early and ensure that the speaker has arrived, and has his or her slides and projector(s) in place. Both chairs can help with remembering laser pointer, adjusting furniture, window blinds (if appropriate), microphone, etc. If there are numerous people still collecting coffee and finding seats at the start time you might announce your *intention* to start and give people another minute. Project your voice so that everyone can hear and little conversations will stop quickly. If you have a quiet voice by nature do something attention-getting, such as slapping a pointer on the table, pause briefly to ensure audience attention, then start.

2. **Introducing the speaker:** This should be brief, two minutes at most, and is helped by the inclusion of a personal note. For example, how did the speaker get interested in biophysics, who recruited them, or perhaps they have a scholarly hobby at a high level, etc.? It is customary to provide the title of the seminar just before handing over to the speaker. This may be done from memory, or by reading from notes; whichever method is chosen the words should be given with extra emphasis, clarity, and correct pronunciation.

Talk with the speaker well in advance, to get some background. Make notes ahead of time to prepare for the brief introduction, but don't plan to read it. If the speaker has a major award, like an NSERC Scholarship, an

OGS, or a Heart and Stroke Foundation Fellowship, then please tell us. Sometimes a personal comment about the speaker has value, but avoid deprecating comments. Remember you have the task of supporting the speaker.

3. **Timekeeping:** The chair **must** keep the ceremonies to time, i.e. starting on time, warning the speaker, politely, his time has run out (if necessary), and closing off the discussion period (either when the discussion session has dried up, or time has run out at or near one o'clock), or for handing off to the next chair.

Do not be deceived by ploys such as "For conclusions I wish to draw your attention to the following ...". Normally that would indicate that the seminar is about to end, but not always. Most speakers will hustle to close if you signal time is running out; however, even if they don't seem to hustle the audience will appreciate your effort. Stopping the speaker is *important* and can be done politely. Plan ahead. Tell the speaker the talk is to be 20 minutes, and that you will catch his/her attention at 20 minutes. One minute later you might stand up and move toward the speaker to let him/her know you mean business.

4. **Thank the speaker** for the presentation, saying something pertinent and complimentary (e.g. for a very informative presentation, or delightful and helpful

section of video tape, etc.). Tell the audience that the seminar is now open for discussion.

5. **Have a backup question or two.** At scientific meetings the chair really should have one pertinent scientific question available in case the audience has none (required especially if the speaker is on time). The chair looks pretty ruthless if he or she just says, *"Well, if there are no questions then, thank you Dr. X; the next talk is by Dr. Y"*. Although you will sometimes see at conferences chairs who ask the first question, we suggest it is impolite if there are hands up in the audience. The chair is a facilitator, not a dictator. If the question period is too brief then ask your backup question. (The speaker may have an abstract or published paper closely related to their presentation, that you might have looked at briefly. This again, required advance planning. It will help if you need to ask a question or two to liven up the discussion.) Be sure to ask your question in a way that the audience can hear (since you are probably standing quite near the speaker).

6. **The Discussion:** Get involved if the discussion period needs help. Cut off lengthy debates between speaker and an audience member, and especially between two members of the audience. If two or more indicate a willingness to take part in the discussion then sequence them: *"First Louis Lauzon, Deidre Batchelar, and then Dr. Battista"*. Cut off lengthy discussions by butting in and inviting discussants to continue afterward. Watch for indications of questions **throughout** the room (not just the front). It is sometimes possible to acknowledge questioners so that they can get in the queue without holding up their hands indefinitely.

A speaker who meanders and adds much too much to each answer kills the discussion. We don't know how a chair can

politely tell the speaker to answer briefly. However, you can sometimes encourage that questions be phrased concisely from the audience. For example, a chair can ask that a question be rephrased in a briefer form.

It is more common, and very helpful, if the *speaker* repeats or rewords a question that is unclear or convoluted. However the *chair* could also help in this capacity.

7. **Where to stand:** During the discussion you don't wish to take over from the speaker, but you need a prominent enough position to be easily seen by the audience, and to be able to notice questioners anywhere in the audience. Although you should pay attention to the speaker when he or she gives an answer, also check the audience for new questions. It is impressive to know everyone's name but there may be new people in the department, or visitors from other departments. We want to welcome visitors' questions; it may be necessary to point out a sequence for asking questions. Don't worry if the sequencing is slightly out of order.

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