

Suggestions for Organizing Department Seminars

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1. Duration of Presentation

Internal speakers: 40 minutes + 10 minutes for questions

External speakers: 1 hour + 15 minutes for questions

EXPLANATION:

- Most seminars are too long (seminar audiences are not specialized!). Speakers feel obliged to “fill time” with yet extra example etc.
- Better too short (“we’d like more”) than too long (“so boring; again time wasted”).¹
- Important purpose of group-building (weekly seeing /saying-hello-to colleagues) is already fully satisfied with short seminar.
- For audience of 24 people, 5 minutes lost = 2 hours lost!
- In general, short lectures are always more efficient.

2. Role of Chairman

PRIMARY TASK: protect audience’s time against speaker

EXPLANATION: everybody, surely presenters, want to talk themselves rather than listen to others. Speakers always speak too much and long.

Start exactly on time.² Irrespective of number of people present. Even if, unfortunately, unpleasant for speaker. Waiting for late comers is myopic short-term. It rewards late-coming and punishes punctuality. It leads down the slippery slope of more and more late-coming.

¹ First spontaneous associations of academics with internal seminar are “boredom” and “time loss”.

² Mathematical analyses show that optimum is to minimize ambiguity of starting time.

Chairman should cut inefficient intermediate discussions. Audience accepts chairman's decisions even if wrong.

Chairman/organizer can give speaker compliment at end. Other than that, questions and answers are not preceded by compliments such as "thanks for this nice talk Joe" or "good question". Those are cliché, inflatory, and lead down slippery slope.

Do NOT read title of presentation. No clichés ("exciting topic").

3. Bilaterals

- For external speaker: meetings/bilaterals AFTER presentation, not before.
- Bilaterals with students only 20 minutes. With others 30 minutes.
- Better few bilaterals than poorly motivated ones. Do not push colleagues into it. Visitor does not mind time for herself.
- Regarding planned bilaterals, visitor is entitled to visit bathroom, check email, get a tea/coffee. Rest periods can be good.
- Going over time in bilateral inconveniences colleagues. If your time of bilateral starts, enter office also if preceding bilateral still goes on. Do not wait outside. Even, organizer might enforce ending and time limitation of bilaterals by entering office.
- Instruct colleagues, especially students:
Do not embark on one "lecture". Instead, quick overview of own interests, and questions that demonstrate invested attention into work/homepage of visitor. During overview of own, feel where visitor might like, or not like, to hear more.

4. Prior coordination with speaker

- Get title/abstract in time. Inform speaker about time limitations of seminar and interests of audience. Do so before speaker's preparation of presentation.

- Coordinate on wishes for time schedule (including bilaterals). Some speakers like concentration time right before lecture, or nap after lunch; especially elderly speakers.
- Encourage (but not force) speaker to allow intermediate questions/discussions, yet not exceed time for presentation. Acknowledge that this is difficult for preparing lecture (flexible ending), but still best to do.

5. Various

- Minimize distance seminar room to offices; **try hard**. Get fixed time/place.
- Seminar preferably right before lunch (so prolonged discussions during lunch).
- Speakers from far: no arrival on day of seminar, but evening before. Most speakers are tired after travel, so no joint dinner the evening before presentation but rest/preparation. (Can try to find out visitor's preference.)
- Nice office for external visitor, so that good memory.
- Meetings, lunches, dinners: all speak English; no own languages in sub-conversations.
- Dinner: optimal number of people is five. Six or more than people engage in separate subconversations. Odd number is good to avoid fixed-pair-conversations.
- Help visitor in finding way, preferably with car pickup from hotel; very preferable!
- Don't send too many announcements: then people ignore.
- Attending seminar serves public good and is to be encouraged: nice for colleagues & speaker. Often, strong encouragements are needed, to go along hierarchical lines: head of dept. encourages members, supervisors are responsible for their Ph.D. students, and so on. Do not enforce master students or bachelor students to attend: too much a misuse of their time.