

Four cool ways to lead a panel, and one not-so-cool one.

People visit Escapade to see old friends, make new friends, share enthusiasm about what they love, and find new things to get enthusiastic about. That enthusiasm is stoked in panels, and moderators make a big difference in the panel experience.

Our discussion panels are “PC—Purposely Controversial”—because everybody has the right to say what they think, and everyone has the right to disagree. Grown-ups can have fun sharing differing, divergent, and sometimes utterly cracked positions, and all it takes is a little trust in the room. Everybody’s opinion is a valid thing to share, whether we agree with it or not (and frankly, regardless of whether it’s even *true* or not, because hey—fiction. Slash. Anything is possible).

There are probably as many ways to lead a panel as there are fandoms, but below are a few ideas you can think about, if you’re chairing a panel this year.

- 1 Play Games (can be physical, thought-provoking, fun)**
Some people have ideas for games like “Pros Bingo,” or bringing Nerf firearms into a panel about cowboys. If you’re one of those people, try it out! Talk it up before the panel. Get “volunteers” early. Laughter = success. Silence = “That was a great warm-up; now let’s talk!”
- 2 Be Thoughtful (also can be funny, significant, physical)**
Talk to your co-panelist(s) well before the panel; see where your opinions differ. If you’re of very different minds about your topic, share where you each are on the range, and consider whether attendees lie: between the two of you? Or radically further out? If your opinions are similar, question the room to find people with different opinions, and people will likely fall into the range somewhere. Do you have handouts you want to share? Bring them!
- 3 Be Significant (also can be fun, funny, thought-provoking)**
Think about how—or whether—your topic has been relevant over the years. Get feedback from panel attendees about different ways of looking at it, if it’s a long-standing fannish staple. Use your flipchart liberally. If you’re leading a panel alone, consider asking an attendee to help you keep track of hands, or keep notes on the flipchart. Collect the range of opinions, new ideas, or plans for post-con follow-up. See what threads come of it, and take photos of the pages to forward to the con-com, and/or type them up and forward that, too. They’ll be posted somewhere convention-related, and useful in follow-up online chats.
- 4 Use Visual Aids**
If your panel would benefit from video or visual aids, prepare them ahead of time, and give them a trial run. This is a great chance to be creative. Make a collage on the flip chart, use video clips, or read from relevant sources to stimulate discussion. These can all be great ways to get people talking.
- 5 Bully the attendees (can also be boring, annoying, disappointing)**
Orate for 45 minutes about what you think, and tell attendees why what they think is wrong. Talk more than (and over) everyone else. Only call on the same two people, and ignore people who disagree with you. Take the topic *way* too seriously. And beyond all else, really believe that the attendees came to watch you do that for the whole hour.

Guess which number is the way *not* to do it, and write that number here: ____ (If it wasn’t “5,” talk to Escapade staff and ask for help with your panel.)

It’s really easy to have a fun panel if you have a few seeds to start conversation, and then you let the conversation drive the discussion. If you’re new to this, talk to your co-chair and let them know what concerns, if any, you have. Share what you hope to achieve. If you’ve chaired a hundred panels, and attended a thousand, think about what made the great ones great: differing opinions? Spirited disagreement? Controversial topics and surprises? A thoughtful thread that isn’t so rigid it stifles conversation? *Laughter*? Fannish passion? —you get the picture.