



Guidelines for session chairs – SEFI 2026

SEFI is grateful that you are willing to take the role of session chair. As session chair, your role is not only to keep time, but also to help create a respectful, inclusive environment in which speakers and audience members can participate fully. These guidelines are intended to help you prepare for and carry out successful sessions. We would like to thank you for your effort!

Objectives

- Set a respectful, professional, welcoming tone.
- Help keep the audience engaged in the topics being presented.
- Ensure the session runs smoothly and on schedule.
- Facilitate respectful Q&A and discussions.
- Be prepared to initiate discussion by asking questions if the audience has none.
- Acknowledge and thank presenters for their contributions.
- Make sure the atmosphere remains professional and friendly.
- Respond to issues and challenges that arise during the session.

1. Prepare for the session

- Read and familiarize yourself with [SEFI's Code of Conduct](#).
- Gather basic information needed to introduce the speakers properly.
- Read the papers in your session and prepare one or two questions for each speaker.
- Familiarize yourself with the presentation technology and how it will be used during the session.
- Arrive at least 10 minutes in advance so you are ready to start on time.
- Welcome the presenters, confirm the correct pronunciation of their names, and explain how you will manage time-keeping and questions.
- Remind speakers to avoid unnecessary jargon, speak at a reasonable pace, and explain acronyms.

2. Introduce the session

- Open the session warmly, briefly introduce the session theme.
- Remind the participants of SEFI's Code of Conduct.
- State time limits.
- Describe the Q&A organization and emphasize that the goal is to ask respectful, concise questions, focused on the topics presented.

Example: *“Welcome everyone to this session on X topic. During this session we will hear from x speakers, who will speak for 8 minutes each followed by 5 mins of questions. We want this session to be constructive and inclusive. Please keep questions brief, respectful, and focused on the presentation, so that we can hear from as many people as possible.”*

3. Introduce each speaker

- Provide name, affiliation and presentation title.
- Support the speaker, if necessary, with sharing the presentation.

4a. Manage time fairly – paper sessions

- Rule: the presentation time is max. 8 minutes, followed by 5 min for Q&A. This is likely the most difficult aspect of chairing a session, but an important one to ensure that even the last speaker can use the promised time, or the audience does not miss the start of the next activity.
- Apply time limits consistently across speakers. Give clear time warnings, for example at 3 minutes remaining, 1 minutes remaining, and time up.
- Do not allow one speaker's overrun to reduce another speaker's time, especially for early-career researchers or less senior presenters.
- As the end approaches (in order of excess):
 - Stand up.
 - Move closer to the speaker.
 - Interrupt the speaker politely.

Example: *“I’m sorry, but we don’t want to take time away from other speakers. Thank you for your presentation. Our next presentation is...”*

4b. Manage time fairly – discussion sessions

- Rule: the presentation time for each speaker is max. 6 minutes, the presentations are given back-to-back in the order determined by the chair with no individual Q&A between presentations. A 25 minutes discussion follows afterwards.
- Apply time limits consistently across speakers. Give clear time warnings, for example at 3 minutes remaining, 1 minutes remaining, and time up.
- As the end approaches (in order of excess):
 - Stand up.
 - Move closer to the speaker.
 - Interrupt the speaker politely.
- Once all presentations have concluded, invite all speakers to join the panel discussion and take their seats (or remain at the front).

5. Make the discussion accessible and balanced

You are the one who plays an important role in promoting an inclusive environment.

- Announce that the floor is open for questions. Use microphones where available, and remind audience members to use them.
- Elicit questions from multiple types of meeting participants. Where possible, alternate between different parts of the room and between senior and junior participants.
- Repeat or summarize questions if needed.
- Request that follow-up questions from the same questioner wait until others ask theirs.
- If there are no questions, please ask a question yourself.
- Keep track of the time and if there are more questions than time permits, remind the audience to continue the discussion after the session.
- **For discussion sessions**
 - Invite questions from the audience and encourage all speakers to respond from their own perspectives.
 - Foster interaction among the panelists, contrasting viewpoints, and explore the topic in greater depth.
 - Ensure that all panelists have the opportunity to contribute and that audience questions are distributed fairly across the panel.

6. Manage the discussion climate

Chairs should intervene if a question becomes aggressive, dismissive, discriminatory, overly personal, or more like a speech than a question.

Example:

- *“Let’s keep the discussion focused on the research question.”*
- *“I’ll ask you to phrase that as a brief question.”*
- *“I don’t think that framing is appropriate. Let’s move to the next question.”*
“We need to keep the discussion respectful”

7. Close the session respectfully

- End on time.
- Thank all the speakers and audience for their time and engagement. Thank the technical staff and the volunteers where relevant.
- Encourage ongoing discussion to move if the room is in use afterwards.
- Complete the session feedback form

Note: If there is discriminatory behaviour, harassment, or a serious conflict, the chair should not try to handle everything alone. Please contact the SEFI Persons of Trust or the local organizing team.