

Asking Questions at Psychology Paper Presentations

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At most conferences, speakers presenting papers invite questions at the end of their talks. Speakers who allow time for questions thereby demonstrate professional skill and respect for the audience, as do those who respond to questions in a clear, knowledgeable, and civil manner. Speakers and audience members can also learn from questions. Indeed, often the Q&A portion of a talk is particularly engaging. Thus paper presenters are well advised to leave ample time for questions and to respond to questions in a thoughtful, respectful, constructive way.

Audience members can benefit by asking questions. Here are some pointers on asking good questions.

1. If you want questions to come to mind while you listen to a research presentation, you must listen properly. Connect the content of the talk to other research you know. Think about how the work affects your understanding of the content domain. Consider ways the claims in the talk might (or might not) generalize. Engaging with a talk as a critical thinker naturally entails the generation of many questions.
2. Unless you have won a Nobel prize, do not use the question period as an opportunity to make comments on the paper or to talk about your own research. Questions should be requests for additional information, clarification, or elaboration that you believe the speaker can probably provide. Great questions encourage presenters to develop and enhance the articulation of their ideas.
3. Brevity is the soul of wit. Articulate your question succinctly. Don't monopolize the question period.
4. If you disagree with the speaker, it's OK to communicate that, but it should be done in a respectful, constructive, content-focused way. If you want to argue with the speaker, that's OK too, but arguments and further discussion should occur after the talk, not during question time.
5. In most settings it is not appropriate to interrupt a speaker with a query before questions are invited. But on occasion it can be constructive and helpful. For example, if you do not understand what seems to be a key point and you think that others in the audience are also confused about it, then interrupting with a brief fact-focused question might be warranted. Also, if the speaker appears to be struggling with nerves, sometimes a simple, straightforward question can help them get back on track.
6. As the presenter, assume that most questions are designed to help you. The questioner may well be trying to help you make your points more clearly, develop your claims, or provide further ideas for future work. Take every question as an opportunity to learn and think. Try not to be defensive.
7. The foregoing advice about asking and receiving questions applies to poster sessions too.