

[Guidance for a Constructive Culture of Exchange, plus two addenda](#)

November 22, 2019 at 2:50 pm

This blog contains the excellent advice of Nancy Rose to MIT faculty and students, along with my own two addenda on **Etiquette** and **Advice to Presenters**

Subject: Some guidance for our upcoming seminars
Date: Tue, 22 Jan 2019 10:11:02 -0500
From: Nancy Rose <nrose@mit.edu>
To: All faculty, visitors and graduate students

Dear Faculty and Student Colleagues,

Many of us have been thinking about how we can respond, individually and as a department, to concerns about the climate of the economics profession, and how best to affirm our mutual commitment to a supportive environment that empowers each of us to realize our full potential and contribute the best of our talents.

As one step in that ongoing effort, I am writing to share with you some guidance in advance of our department's job market talks, which begin tomorrow. These are not meant as rules written in stone. But I hope they will prompt each of us to reflect on how we can ensure – in seminars and in our departmental interactions more generally – that MIT Economics combines intellectual vitality with an inclusive and respectful environment in which to exchange ideas and advance knowledge.

I hope that each of you will join me in making sure that our department's seminar culture not only achieves our shared goals for job market seminars, but also serves as a role model for others. I welcome feedback at the conclusion of our hiring season, as we continue our efforts to sustain a welcoming environment for all.

Thank you for your engagement on this important issue–

Nancy

Guidance for a Constructive Culture of Exchange in MIT Economics Seminars

Research seminars are one of the highlights of our department's academic life. They provide opportunities for participants to learn about and probe the boundaries of new research, for presenters to gain the benefit of constructive feedback, and for students to develop skills as participants in research discussions. All of these are best achieved when the seminar environment is respectful and inclusive, and when all participants keep these goals in mind.

Building on recent discussions at the AEA meetings and elsewhere on the culture of seminars in our profession, and informed by a number of conversations with our faculty and students, this memo shares some guidance for “best practices” to help ensure that department seminars promote an open and vibrant exchange of ideas within a positive environment for both presenters and participants.

1) Allow presenters time at the beginning to frame their talk without interruption. A “10 minute rule” has been successfully implemented in several field seminars, allowing only brief clarifying questions

during this initial period. And as that leaves 70 more minutes, please don't feel you must get all your questions in at minute 11!

- 2) **Share the floor.** Please remember seminar time is a scarce resource. If you haven't had a chance to read the paper, please try to determine whether the paper addresses your question before you ask it. If you have already asked several questions, you might consider allowing a bit of time and space to see if others wish to contribute.
- 3) **Raise your hand to indicate that you wish to ask a question or contribute to the discussion.** This gives the presenter agency to mediate the discussion by calling on audience members, and avoids interrupting the presenter mid-thought, a courtesy that may be especially appreciated in job talks. If the presenter doesn't see someone's hand, the organizer can help by pointing that out. A question or comment often leads naturally to some back and forth exchange with the speaker. But if you continue to be dissatisfied with a response, please don't hold the talk hostage. Instead, allow the presenter to move on, and follow up offline. Please make *every* effort not to interrupt or talk over the presenter or another participant.
- 4) **Avoid sidebar conversations with other participants.** Keep whispers to no more than a short (clarifying) question or response. Anything more should be deferred or asked publicly; please raise your hand and share your question or concern for the benefit of all. Even quiet sidebar conversations between participants rarely are as unobtrusive as intended, and distract the speaker and others in the audience.
- 5) **Strive for fair and equal treatment.** Many studies suggest that women are likely to be interrupted more often than are men in settings like this. The same may be true for softer-spoken participants regardless of gender. Resist contributing to that disparity!
- 6) **Organizers:** Please be prepared to intervene in real time if necessary to call attention to someone whose raised hand has been overlooked, to return the floor to the presenter, or to remind participants of our norms of courtesy and respect.

Thank you!

Nancy L. Rose
Department Head and Charles P. Kindleberger Professor of Applied Economics
MIT Department of Economics
The Morris and Sophie Chang Building, E52-318A
50 Memorial Drive, Cambridge, MA 02142
(617) 253-8956
<https://economics.mit.edu/faculty/nrose>

Addendum to Nancy Rose's excellent email. Randy Ellis, March, 2019

Common Courtesies

- 7) **Show up on time** for the seminar.
- 8) **Stay until the end of the seminar.** If you must leave early, it is much more polite if you arrive early

and privately tell the speaker that you have another commitment and will have to leave promptly at time X:XX.

9) **Mute your cell phone.** (If you are presenting, you could intentionally do this just before your talk, even if it was already mute, to signal to others that they should remember to do that as well.)

10) **No answering phone calls in the seminar room.** If you do answer a cell phone call (from vibrate mode!!!) never talk until you have left the seminar room. Mute or hang up and call back later, or make the caller wait ten seconds while you leave the room.

11) **No email or web surfing in the front three rows.** If you plan to be looking at your cellphone or laptop or read papers during a talk: a) try not to, or b) sit in the back of the room.

->I was at a seminar in Spain given by a woman, and every man in the room was checking their cellphone or laptop for messages, while only one of the ten women were. This was not a coincidence.

12) **No napping.** If you are prone to napping or had a bad night's sleep, sit in the back of the room or don't come.

13) **Keep questions brief.** Many professors think they are making brilliant comments, which others feel are bad or unnecessarily long. Err on the side of too few, and ask questions instead of giving advice.)

14) **Write down your thoughts.** If you have a lot of comments or uncertainties about a presentation, write them down. Discuss or give them to the presenter at the end of the talk. Most presenters are delighted to get constructive comments after their talk.

->I have always been immensely grateful to Daniel McFadden, who instead of interrupting my job market paper presentation, gave me a page of very high-quality comments. 15) **No questions during the final three minutes.** Let the presenter summarize and conclude the presentation.

Randall P. Ellis, Ph.D.

Professor, Department of Economics, Boston University

ellisrp@bu.edu Off: +1 617-353-2741 <http://blogs.bu.edu/ellisrp/>

Advice to presenters facing inappropriate, intrusive or awkward questions, Randy Ellis November 2019

1. Don't recognize any hands up or intrusions when still on your introductory few slides or five minutes. Nod them away or if rude, say "Please let me finish my overview first." Then finish your overview while trying to anticipate questions.
2. Never interrupt your talk in the middle of a sentence to react to a person raising their hand. Finish your sentence.
3. Nod at someone who has their hand up to recognize them and then return later (hopefully soon) to let them ask their question.
4. Try to give succinct answers, saving your own time.
5. It is OK to say "I don't know" for a factual question. Just not too often. Avoid speculation.
6. If lots of hands go up, try to choose someone who has not already spoken. Also, take it as a signal that you

- have just said something confusing and try to clarify it.
7. Learn to distinguish a comment (or suggestion) from a question.
 8. Try to have the confidence to move on with a comment rather than a question. Just say “Interesting comment” or “Thank you.” Others who agree that the comment is a tangent or of secondary importance, or rude, will respect, not disrespect, you for this.
 9. Take the comments and questions of junior faculty and people in your field more seriously than those of old farts.
 10. Restate a question if it is unclear and answer your version. Also, restate it if it was said too quietly.
 11. Be willing to repeat something you have already said, in a slightly different way, to try to improve comprehension.
 12. Try to use specific examples to motivate concepts: Pizza rather than good Q, Bart instead of Agent J.
 13. Pick on someone in the audience if it will add humor and concreteness.
 14. Feel free to say “That is a good question. I will get to that in a few more slides. Ask again if I don’t.”
 15. If the question is tangential to the point you are making in your paper, consider saying “That is an interesting point, perhaps we can discuss it after the seminar.”
 16. Writing down new ideas is a good idea, but not if the point is something obvious you should have already thought of, which makes you look foolish. Even if you already know about the idea, acknowledging the idea, such as by writing down a single word, may be good.
 17. Ask a coauthor, colleague, or friend in the audience to take notes. Tracking your time on the intro/data/methods/results/extensions/conclusions is also helpful.
 18. Don’t say too often: “That is a really good question.” If so, you should have answered it already.
 19. If someone else is giving a very long speech, and you think others will recognize that it is inappropriate or too long, be willing to interrupt or cut it short. “I think I get what you are saying...”
 20. Don’t allow faculty sitting in the front row to ask you private questions that everyone can’t hear or understand. Interrupt them and say “Could you please speak up so that others can hear you.”
 21. If you feel that the questions have interrupted you too much to finish your talk, say “I see my time is running short. I need the next few minutes to cover XXX (my methods or results or conclusions or whatever) without interruption and get back on track.” You can do this before the final five minutes.
 22. Try not to be snarky, dismissive or rude. Strive to be gracious and open to suggestions.
 23. Assume you will have intrusions and plan a shorter talk with extra bonus slides if you have time.
 24. Assume you won’t have enough time to cover sensitivity analysis and extensions and plan accordingly.
 25. Always take your final three minutes without interruptions. Tell the audience you need to do that to finish your talk. Have a strong conclusion to use, even if you didn’t finish your results.
 26. Be sure your name is on the final slide. Don’t just show “Thank You,” but rather show your name, affiliation and paper title, as on your first slide. If you end on your conclusions, include your name. It is the single most important thing you want people to remember.
 27. Pay attention to other strong presenters (men and women) and try to imitate them.