

## Timers at the Convention

*Five generals, gathered in the gallery,  
Blowing plans . . .  
the secret code is flashed:  
Now is the time, now is the time. . .*

—Bob Kaufmann (“Battle Report”)

News flash! News flash! “Now is the time, now is the time” for timeliness during MLA convention panels. Have you ever attended a dynamic MLA panel, eagerly awaited the opportunity to ask a panelist a question at the end of the session, but discovered that because a speaker went overtime the hope for an engaged conversation was dashed? Have you ever been the final participant on a panel and found your plans to deliver a carefully prepared—and precisely timed—fifteen-minute presentation were blown and instead you delivered in one rushed breath a five-minute impromptu summation of your scholarship because the panel moderator was unable to keep the previous panelists from going just a “few” minutes overtime? Have you ever sat on a panel in which a moderator dutifully flashes the “two-minute time up” warning to the speaker, and the speaker responds by stating, “Oh? My time’s almost up? Well, in summary . . .” and then ten minutes later continues with “So to wrap things up . . .” and then another five minutes later—after the third reminder from the moderator—prefaces “I’ll conclude with this sentence . . .” as he or she reads a two-minute and page-long “sentence”? Have you ever had to begin your panel fifteen minutes late because the previous panel went overtime and the attendees had not yet cleared the room? Well, the Ad Hoc Committee on the Structure of the Annual Convention has listened to your concerns!

The most common complaint that the MLA convention office receives each year concerns the lack of discussion time in session panels. In response to the membership’s request that panels—and panelists—begin and end at the appropriate time, we are continuing the use of timers at the convention. MLA convention assistants—“those generals, gathered in the gallery”—will be distributing timers to all the MLA session rooms and we expect their use to become standard. Timers will indicate when panelists have two minutes left and when their allotted time is up. This technology will facilitate what can often be an awkward professional and personal responsibility for the moderators.

How can you help? If you are on a session panel, be considerate of your fellow panelists and your audience. If you have not already timed your presentation, please do so *before* your planned session time. The MLA Program Committee approved guidelines for session speakers and organizers ([http://www.mla.org/guidelines\\_for\\_speak](http://www.mla.org/guidelines_for_speak)). These guidelines inform speakers to “assume that a page of double spaced, typed material, in a standard elite-size font, takes about two minutes to read, without any extemporaneous comments added during the reading.” This means that if you have fifteen minutes you can read seven and a half pages at a brisk pace; with twenty minutes you can read ten pages. To save time, consider that panelists’ introductions could be eliminated, distributed in print form, or limited to the speakers’ name and institutional affiliation. I’ll conclude with this sentence: Time your presentation before the panel moderator’s timers are forced to do it publicly for you.

*Meta DuEwa Jones, on behalf of the Ad Hoc Committee  
on the Structure of the Annual Convention*