

Preparing to Present a Conference Paper

Where do I start?

Finding a conference and a "call for papers" for a conference can be very frustrating for students who are just beginning their graduate careers. The most effective first step is to seek assistance in your department: ask your professors and fellow students about conferences that are looking for speakers or presenters, panel presentations, and session leaders. Many disciplines have developed email listservs and general postings in department offices that regularly distribute and announce these conferences.

What steps do I take once I have found a conference that I am interested in?

Most conferences will list general format guidelines in their "call for papers" announcement. In general, the conference host requires a short abstract or proposal of the paper that you will read at the conference (usually from 200-500 words), along with a curriculum vitae or resume with your level of education, conference experience, and area of interest. The "call for papers" will also list several specific topics as a focus for the conference. It is a good idea to discuss how your particular idea relates and the benefit to or impact on the theme or specific subject of the conference. Make sure that the abstract that you send is clear, that it addresses the issues that correspond to the conference, and that it is both grammatically correct and easy to read. It is imperative to send the information on time so that your proposal receives full consideration.

My paper has been accepted; now, how do I write my essay?

Understandably, you may be a little nervous about presenting your ideas to a group of professionals. But there are tips that can help to quell your anxieties and prepare you for a quality, effective presentation.

- **What is your major?** It is extremely important to remember that every discipline has different standards, which means that almost every field of study is going to expect a specific format for both the conference paper and the presentation. Ask your professors and fellow students for examples of conference papers to give you a starting point for your own work. Also inquire about general presentation strategy and format.
- **Who is your audience?** Knowing who your audience at the conference can be helpful in determining what background and specific terms you will need to define in your presentation. For instance, if you are presenting to an audience of American Literature scholars, then there is no need to identify Kate Chopin. Is this a graduate student conference? Regional Conference? Are several disciplines represented in the conference? Are you a student presenting at a prestigious, well-known conference? Make sure to keep this in mind when you begin your paper so that you can address these issues before you get started.
- **Transitions should be clear.** Obvious oral cues like, "I have three points. Number one will cover . . .," which may sound wooden in writing are appropriate when read aloud. Also, if you know that there are particular points that you want to cover, arrange these points as "landmarks" in your presentation. This will help you transition from point to point with greater confidence and ease.
- **Use appropriate punctuation.** Dashes, semi-colons, and parentheses will not be visible to the audience. Remember that this is an oral presentation, so make sure that your essay is appropriately written and punctuated to accommodate both you as the reader and the audience. In addition, if you quote text, pause and indicate the quote by saying "quote . . . end quote." The ultimate goal here is clarity and getting your point across to the listener.

- **Don't use lengthy quotations or quote too much material.** This is confusing and unproductive. Your audience wants your ideas, not what you have gleaned from others. Don't simply apply someone else's ideas to a different text. If it is absolutely necessary to include lengthy quotations, provide the audience with a handout of quotations to which you will be referring. You want the audience to remember and quote *your* paper, not someone else's work.
- **Anticipate questions and criticism.** Anticipating questions and criticism will make you more at ease with presenting. Prepare a list of ten challenging questions. This will prepare you for the toughest questions that may be asked, and will also help you gain confidence. Also, leaving open-ended statements like, "we can discuss this in more detail later" or "this opens up many potential areas for research" is a good way to direct the conversation and question/answer period after you have finished presenting.

What do I need to know to deliver a successful conference presentation?

Here are some basic tips from the Claremont Graduate University Writing Center website:

- **Practice your presentation** for friends, in front of the mirror, or on tape.
- **Be relaxed, but maintain good posture.** Stand up straight and hold your head up straight. Breathe quietly and deeply.
- **Use your voice for projection and inflection.** Don't forget the importance of pauses. Don't be afraid of silence. Silence can be extremely effective and is certainly preferable to filler words such as "uh," "you know," and "like."
- **Maintain eye contact with both sides of the room.** Whether you are reading, speaking from notes, or talking extemporaneously, it is important to look at your audience. If it is difficult for you to look directly at people, then look at their foreheads or just above their heads.
- **Adjust the microphone** to the proper position before you begin to speak. Be conscious of where the microphone is, but do not lean into the microphone.
- **Speak slowly and clearly.** Most people have a tendency to speak too fast when speaking in public.
- **Do not go over the time limit.** Practicing your presentation should eliminate this problem. If, however, the "question and answer" session extends beyond the time limit, it is your responsibility to end the discussion as quickly as possible.
- **Bring a bibliography to reference when answering questions.**
- **Show your audience that you are interested in the essay!** Use vocal inflection and be engaging.