

**PREPARING AND DELIVERING CONFERENCE PAPERS**  
**James Gelvin, UCLA**

**PREPARATION**

1. A conference presentation is a distinct category of communication. It is not just the written word in spoken form.
2. This means you cannot just take something you have written and cut and paste it to make a conference paper. You have to write a CONFERENCE PAPER.
3. The ear and the eye work in different ways. The eye can always go back over a passage if necessary; the ear can't. The eye can take a break and come back to a passage; once the moment passes in a presentation, it's gone. Take this into account when you prepare a conference paper:
  - a. Numbers are great: There are three reasons for \_\_\_\_: 1, 2, 3. There were eight effects of \_\_\_\_: 1, 2, 3, etc. They focus attention.
  - b. "Flag" as much as you can. In other words, in a conference paper you should remind you audience continuously just what it is you are talking about: There are three reasons World War I broke out. The first reason World War I broke out is.... The second reason World War I broke out is....etc. This would be mind-bogglingly boring in a written piece. See what I mean about the difference between written and spoken communication?
  - c. Use simple declarative sentences.
  - d. If you must, you can use up to two clauses in a sentence.
  - e. NEVER BEGIN YOUR SENTENCE WITH A DEPENDENT CLAUSE. EVER. Your audience will have to wait to find out what you are talking about until you hit the independent clause. Most won't.
  - f. Hint for writing: Write out the paper as you would a normal paper, run on sentences and all. Then go through it and split up as many sentences as you can and rearrange any that you began with dependent clauses.
  - g. Whereas you should rarely use passive voice in your written work, passive voice is not only acceptable in conference papers, sometimes it better focuses attention where you might want that attention to be focused, such as on the object of an action and not the subject.
4. You won't be able to "wing it" so don't even try. Winging a presentation is a skill that *some* presenters develop over time (I haven't). If you are at this workshop, you haven't had the time.
5. You should begin your paper by telling your audience exactly what it is that you are going to say. It might be as simple as "What I want to talk about today is..." Or, it could be historiographic, as in "The problem of the origins of Arab nationalism has gone through three stages in the literature. 1, 2, 3. What I want to do is offer a fourth way of looking at the problem..." Or you can start off with an anecdote which directly addresses the issue/s you want to discuss.
6. Remember: You are making an argument. Everything in the paper must relate to that argument. If something doesn't, cut it.
7. Never use quotes unless they are extremely short. This is your paper, not someone else's and peoples' minds wander when listening to quotes.

8. Avoid foreign words. You don't know how many languages your audience knows. Also, I find it difficult to switch from one language to another so I usually garble foreign words (this would not be the case for those raised in multi-lingual environments, but they should avoid foreign words also for the first reason).
9. Remove any words you are likely to stumble over. "Mind-bogglingly" above is a good example.
10. Avoid jargon. No one cares if you can talk like a French post-modernist. They just want information.
11. Only cite theory if critiquing it is the subject of your paper.
12. A fifteen minute paper—the usual time allotted for conference presentations—is under 8 pages. No—not exactly 8 pages; UNDER eight pages. Think 7.5- a couple of lines on page 8.
13. No one has ever been criticized for delivering a 13 or 14 minute paper.
14. How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice your paper multiple times before showtime, then once again right before showtime.
15. If when you time yourself in a practice session and your paper comes in at exactly 15 minutes, you will be over time at the conference. Add 1½-2 minutes to your practice time to come up with an accurate assessment of your time at the conference.

### **THE PHYSICAL PAPER**

1. Write out the paper in a normal fashion, with paragraphs, in 12 point font, double spaced. That way you can measure 7.5 pages.
  - Then indent, use boldface or italics, leave larger spaces between new ideas, etc.
 When you have a list of things you might want to put each one on a separate line (see example passed around).
  - Convert your 12 point font to 14 point.
  - Mark transitional words (however, nevertheless, etc.) with pen if you think they might cause problems when you deliver the paper. That way they will catch your eye.
  - You might also want to use pen markings (blue, red, green—not black) to write instructions for yourself as well, such as "pause for laughter." Sometimes when I want to make sure I don't pause before the end of a sentence or clause, I draw an arrow above the passage so I know to continue.
2. Count your words and find the halfway point in your paper. Mark it. You should be there at 7.5 minutes. If you are not, mark passages in your paper you can cut to end on time. You might want to run a single pen line through them so you can keep them if you have the time or eliminate them if you don't. (How will you know when it's 7.5 minutes? I keep a pocket watch on the lectern. You might just want to take off your watch and lay it there.)

## DELIVERY

1. Slow down! There is a tendency among presenters to speak too fast, either in an attempt to beat the clock or out of nerves. Rule of thumb: each page of (unaltered) text should be about 1 minute 45 seconds to 2 minutes.
2. Obey the time limit. You should have practiced at home so this should not be a problem. Remember: thanking the other panelists or your host or a shout out to mom will count against you in time, so take that into consideration.
3. Your chair will probably notify you when you have 3, 2, and/or 1 minute left and when your time is up. Again, if you followed the guidelines in the previous section and practiced at home this should not be a problem. If you go over remember two things:
  - a. You are being selfish to your fellow panelists and to the audience. Extra time for you means less time for q & a.
  - b. Accidents happen. If you do go over time, try to wrap up as quickly as possible. Be polite to the moderator, but remember he/she will not cut off the microphone or push you off the podium. Nor will there be an orchestra to drown you out.
4. Eye contact. Lots of eye contact.
5. You don't want to present a flat affect, nor do you want to present in a monotone that you think demonstrates the seriousness of your thoughts. Talk like you would talk normally.
6. On the other hand, don't move around or gesticulate too much. It is distracting. You want your audience to focus on your ideas, not on your hands.
7. Use the lectern. Rest the paper on the lectern. Don't hold your paper in your hands. It's distracting.
8. Use the microphone. Make sure you are consistently speaking into it. Don't turn away from it.
9. Don't let the audience see you turning pages. That, too, is distracting. Rather than lifting a page so that the audience can see it, slide the offending page to the side to get to a new one.
10. If you are using slides, power point, etc., check out the technology ahead of time. In my experience, only about two-thirds of those who use power point do not waste their audience's time with technical difficulties.
 

(SPOILER: I'm old fashioned): Use slides and power point only if necessary (for example, if you are discussing a map or a piece of artwork). You really want people to focus on you and your ideas and not on an image. **AND NEVER USE POWER POINT TO PROJECT YOUR PAPER, OR EVEN THE HIGHLIGHTS OF YOUR PAPER. WHAT'S THE POINT OF YOUR EVEN BEING IN THE ROOM IF THAT'S WHAT YOU DO?**
11. You can improvise a bit, but the audience will hear it as improvisation and know it is a departure from your text. It just sounds different.

## OTHER

1. If there is a discussant, make sure he/she has the paper in his/her hands at least 10 days before the conference. Most discussants do not read the papers until they board the plane on the way to the conference, but you might just get the one who is scrupulous or who won't have time to read three or four papers immediately before the conference. This is for your own good: You want your discussant to give intelligent comments on your paper and giving him/her time to digest it will help this process.
2. Most conference audiences listening to graduate students will be empathetic and want you to succeed because they want the information in your paper. After all, unless your parents are in the audience, they've all chosen to come to your panel voluntarily.
3. Sometimes professors show up to their students' presentation, sometimes they don't. In the former case, they sometimes show up to demonstrate their support. In the latter case, they don't show up because they might think their students don't need coddling. Or they might show up because they are truly interested in what you have to say or they might not show up because they have a conflict. In other words, don't read anything into your professors' presence or absence.
4. Listen or pretend to listen to the other panelists. Don't work on your paper while they are speaking. Don't fidget. Don't offer to pour the person sitting next to you a glass of water, or whisper to them about something the speaker has said. It's just plain rude and you wouldn't want someone to do that to you.
5. Go to the restroom before your panel, and not just for the obvious reason. Yes, your panel will probably be scheduled to be two hours long—so watch the water intake. But you should check yourself out in the mirror. Hair out of place? Tie over collar? Deal with it and be done with it. In any event, people focus on the strangest things and your job is to get them focused on your ideas and your ideas alone.