

PRESENTING A CONFERENCE PAPER – SOME HINTS FOR CONFERENCE VIRGINS...

If you are new to presenting a conference paper, here are some hints that you might find helpful.

- Does your paper fit the conference?

Of course, you will have considered this, but it does help to think carefully about exactly how the paper might fit in. Every conference organiser will have stories of the person who submitted an abstract that was totally unsuitable (i.e. a paper on elephants when the conference is on pigs...) – don't let this be your paper! If you are unsure, you can always make further inquiries.

- Find out what is required

If you have decided that this conference is suitable for you, then find out what the conference organiser requires. Do they want a title, an abstract and title, or abstract, title and full copy of the paper? *Following the organiser's instructions to the letter* gives you a better chance of getting your paper accepted!

- Stick to the word limit that the conference organiser sets. When they say they want a 50 word abstract, they mean it! It might help to underline key words that fit in with conference themes.

- Submit the abstract/title early, or on time at the latest

Late papers may not be accepted, so maximise your chances by getting your paper in early. By doing this you not only win brownie points with the organiser, but you get a better chance of getting a favourable time slot on the conference programme. You will also maximise your chance of getting mentioned in the conference programme that enlists the speakers. Often late additions are not mentioned, and that won't enhance your reputation. Ensure that your email or contact is clearly available, and correctly spelt.

- Prepare to give your paper

Preparation is key to giving conference papers. There are several ways in which you can prepare for your paper.

- Structure the paper carefully. Find out what time allocation you have- is it 30 minutes, 20? An hour? Prepare enough material for the time you have allocated, but be aware that often, paper timings will need to change on the day, so have emergency material in case you need to go on for an extra 10 minutes, or have a skeleton outline, in case an extra paper has to be fitted in to your panel, and you only have 10 minutes when you expected 20.
- Don't try and say too much. Remember that audiences have relatively short attention spans, so keep it simple, explain any technical words, and recap key points if you can. A well structured paper is easier to listen to than a free-form ramble, keep your audience in mind at all times! An introduction, a middle section and a conclusion is a simple formula to follow, and will help you organise your thoughts.

- Eye contact with the audience is important. Remember to look up at all of them, sweeping your eyes around the room every so often. This helps to keep their attention, and suggests to them that you are confident in what you are saying (even if you aren't!!). Mark pauses in your paper to give yourself time to look up, and collect your thoughts. Try to speak as clearly as you can, and not too fast or too slowly.
- Rehearse your paper in front of a friend, or aloud in private. Through painful personal experience, I have found that reading it through in your head never corresponds to the time it takes to read it aloud in public. The more times you read it, the more you will be familiar with it, and if you are familiar with what you are saying, your confidence will increase.
- Prepare for the room. Go to the room you are speaking in before you give the paper, to give yourself an idea of where the room is, and what shape it is, and what furniture you have. This not only means you won't be frantically running across an unfamiliar campus 5 minutes after you were supposed to start, trying to find the room you are in, but it also means you will be prepared in advance, and can move furniture to your requirements. You also not have the sudden shock of being faced with a large/tiny room unexpectedly. Check with the organiser on the day or earlier that there have been no alterations to the programme. Don't be afraid to ask for exactly what you want – if there are windows open in the room that are bothering you, ask for them to be closed, or if you don't like the height of the table, you can always ask to see if another can be provided (in advance, which is why checking out the room in advance is so important.)
- Technology requirements are subject to the inevitable rule that any technology you want to use can and will fail. Always have back up plans, so that you aren't stranded when the powerpoint/computer fails. Make your requirements known to the conference organiser well in advance, and if they don't ask you, tell them anyway, don't assume that they will know. Don't assume either that they will be able to accommodate you, as not all conference venues can accommodate the latest technology. Plan for the event that versions of software may be incompatible, and for overseas conferences, plan for different power supplies and plug sizes!!
- Don't worry about the size of the audience! Some of the best papers I have ever heard have been given to huge rooms where there are only a handful of people. Never take audience size personally, as there are many factors as to why people can't attend your session. It is highly unlikely that anyone will ever ask you how many people there were in the audience, and you certainly don't have to state it on your CV! A good chair will always be interested, as will the other panellists.
- Don't be too hard on yourself! If the paper doesn't go as planned, or you don't feel you explained yourself very well, don't worry. On your CV, you don't have to give an evaluation of the paper, and you might find that giving a similar paper to a different audience another time works totally differently. The best academics have given the worst papers, and the worst

academics have given the best papers. It's a bit like golf, it takes practice and skill but it's not a precise science!

- Expect questions, but don't worry if there aren't any. Again, it is not an indicator of how good/bad the paper was. If there are uncomfortable silences, a good chair will pose a question, but you can always engage with the other speakers about their papers if there are no questions from the floor. If you don't understand a question, you could ask for it to be rephrased, and don't worry if you don't know the answer, as you can't be expected to be prepared for everything!
- After the conference, keep a copy of the details of your paper and session dates/times. You might think at the start of your career that you'd never forget giving a paper, but they soon rack up, and if you don't keep a record it can be really hard to remember! It can also be useful to keep information of who attended and spoke at a conference, as they (or you) may want to get in touch.
- Finally, don't forget to enjoy your conference paper! This is an opportunity for you to hold forth on what you know about with a captive audience. You are the expert on your research, so enjoy being centre stage! Who knows, you might even be able to get a publication out of it. Editors of journals and books frequently go to conferences, and if one is in your audience, if you are prepared and confident, you might impress them enough for them to approach you. People usually abandon/forget/lose their name badges on the second day of the conference, but keep yours on so that you can be easily recognised.

Good luck!!

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