**How to Deliver an Effective Conference Paper**

December 22, 2010, 3:00 pm

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Last week, Mark wrote about “[Getting Ready for Conferences](http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/getting-ready-for-conferences/29530%22%20%5Cl%20%22comments%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank),” and among the many helpful suggestions in the comments section, one of our readers, *ruthieo*, asked for tips on how to prepare a presentation.  Here at ProfHacker, your wish is our command.  In what follows, I will share some tips for giving an effective paper at a conference.  Please note that this advice is from the perspective of a literary scholar; in MLA fields it is customary for presenters to read their papers.  Not all disciplines share this convention, so this advice may be less relevant for readers in other fields.

Whether you are headed to the MLA, the AHA, or some other conference in the next few weeks, there are several things that you can do to deliver an effective conference paper.

**Timing is everything**

Do not expect to deliver a twenty-five page article in the space of twenty minutes.  Trying to do so typically leads to one of two outcomes, both negative.  The first of these–the “speed-reading” option–guarantees that your audience will not understand more than the first twenty seconds of your paper before giving up in frustration.  While it might be physically possible for you to read that fast (I have seen it happen), your listeners won’t be able to keep up with you.  This is a waste of both your time and theirs.

The second alternative is arguably worse: the “I’m-just-going-to-read-the-whole-paper-because-I-can” option, also known as the “Other-Panelists-be-Damned” option.  If you have twenty minutes to deliver your paper, make sure that your paper is no longer than twenty minutes when read at a reasonable pace.  That includes any off-the-cuff remarks you might want to throw in as you go.  Planning to read your entire essay, all twenty-five pages of it, is quite possibly the absolute worst thing you can do if your goal is to deliver an effective paper.  Not only will you be robbing your fellow panelists of their share of the time allotted for your panel, but you will also force the panel moderator into the uncomfortable position of interrupting you when you have gone over the time limit.  Lastly, you will be depriving everyone, panelists and audience members alike, of the time dedicated for discussion after the papers have finished, and this space for conversation can be very productive otherwise.

But how can you tell if your paper is going to be twenty minutes long?  This is an easy one: **PRACTICE READING IT OUT LOUD**.  The general rule of thumb is that it takes an average reader two minutes to read one page of double-spaced, Times New Roman font, but don’t rely on the rule of averages.  Read the paper out loud all the way through without stopping, and use a stopwatch to time the delivery.  This can be tricky to do because many of us (and by “many of us,” I mean “me”) have a tendency to want to stop and tinker with our prose along the way.  But when timing your talk, it is important to resist the urge to edit: just see how long it takes you to read the paper from the first to the very last word.

Once you have timed the paper, if it is too long **make the necessary cuts.** Be ruthless with yourself and with your words.  It is much better to edit the text yourself than for the panel moderator to do it for you by cutting you off in the middle of a paragraph or even mid-sentence.  It is also worth noting that it is perfectly acceptable to say, “In the longer version of this paper, I talk about X” to indicate the missing piece(s).  In fact, such a gesture can give audience members an opening for questions during the time dedicated for discussion.  But do not shirk the responsibility of fitting your paper within the time limits.  Not only is this a sign of respect for your other panelists, it is also a sign of respect for your audience.

In addition to helping sort through timing issues, reading a paper out loud serves other important purposes.  Vocalizing your text is a useful exercise because it enables you to work through the moments when you might otherwise stumble over wording.  It can also call attention to moments where you might need to take a breath.  It can also highlight words that might be easy to read on the page but tricky to pronounce when speaking.

**Prepare a reading copy**

When I am preparing to deliver a paper at a conference, I create a dedicated reading copy (DRC).  Note: it’s generally easiest to do this once you have gotten the paper within time limits.  In the DRC, not only do I **increase the font size** of my text, making it easier to see without squinting, but I also **manipulate page breaks** so that they come at natural pause points in the text rather than in other less convenient places like the middle of a sentence.  I learned this trick as a musician where turning the page at the wrong moment can completely shatter the mood of a piece.  To prevent such disruptions, musicians will often choreograph precisely when they will turn a page so that it is not intrusive or distracting for the audience.  The same idea can be very useful for readers.  Good page breaks come at the end of paragraphs, the end of sentences, or before block quotes.  They come at places where you would otherwise pause to breathe rather than in the middle of sentences where they can wreck the carefully-crafted momentum of a sentence.

Annotating the DRC is another musician trick that I have adopted.  Just as musicians write in crescendos and bowings, speakers can add their own notations to their DRC.  In addition to manipulating the page breaks, I often also make notes to myself and **gloss the text with visual cues** to remind myself of where the stress falls in a particular name, for example, or by underlining a particular word in a sentence that I want to remember to emphasize.  It’s important not to over-annotate the DRC since, after all, you still need to be able read it, but a few these cues can be very helpful.

Remember that reading a paper is like telling a story or playing a sonata.  A monotone style is not your friend.  **Varying your dynamics and vocal inflection** can help your listeners engage your argument.  Pacing your speech also makes it easier for your audience to understand your claims.  I’m not saying that you should dumb down your presentation, but it is worth bearing in mind that sitting and listening to three or four academic papers can be a challenge for even the most committed audience members, especially as the day goes on. A lively delivery style can make a dramatic difference.

**Check your technology**

If you plan to use technology in your presentation, be sure to **practice your talk with technology**, be it PowerPoint, YouTube, or a [recording of Ezra Pound reading “Sestina Alta Forte.](http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Pound/1939/Pound-Ezra_01_Sestina-Altaforte_Harvard_1939.mp3%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)“  Also **be prepared for malfunctions**. Get to the room early enough to make sure that the equipment is all present and in working order, and make whatever adjustments you need before the panel begins so that when it is your turn comes, everything is cued to the proper spot.  If the visual element is an essential part of your argument, you might consider bringing a handout as a backup just in case the projector bulb burns out or the adaptor doesn’t work with your laptop.

**A few other miscellaneous tips:**

I always carry my DRC in my carry-on in the event that my luggage gets lost on the way to the conference.  I also make sure that I have the paper saved to my hard-drive, that I have also emailed the file to myself, and that I have saved it somewhere in the cloud ([Dropbox](http://www.dropbox.com" \t "_blank) is great for this purpose).

If you need to print out a copy of your paper on the road, bear in mind that printing at hotel business centers can be expensive (at my last conference, the price was $.50/page), so you want to be sure that you don’t have to print more than once.  Also, hotel business centers are at least as prone to technological malfunctions as other technology centers, so give yourself time to locate the room and deal with any equipment issues.  Do not, in other words, wait until twenty minutes before you are slated to give your talk to find the printer.

It is a good idea to have a glass or bottle of water handy in case your mouth gets dry during your paper.

Also, be sure to have rehearsed the paper enough so that you are comfortable looking up at your audience.  If you are too nervous to make eye contact with members of your audience, then you might look at their foreheads or even at back wall of the room.  Looking up is also helpful because your voice will project more clearly when not aimed at the table or podium.

Lastly, if appropriate, feel free to make connections between your paper and the work of your fellow panelists. Of course, this doesn’t generally work if you are first on the docket, but if you are later in the line up, mentioning connections as an aside can be an effective way to create cohesion between papers.

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