



Ten tips for presenting a conference paper

Advice from a guide prepared by two academics will help you to impress a conference audience

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Encouraging questions in the hall by flagging up weaknesses in the paper can avoid awkward silences and win audience sympathy

Speaking at academic conferences can be a scary prospect (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/how-give-good-academic-conference-paper>). Here is some advice from "How to give a conference paper (https://www.academia.edu/15569469/How_to_Give_a_Conference_Paper)" by Edward James, emeritus professor of medieval history at University College Dublin (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university->

rankings/university-college-dublin), and Farah Mendlesohn, professor of literary history at Anglia Ruskin University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/anglia-ruskin-university>)

- A conference paper is not an article. You can fit about 2,100 words into a 20-minute paper session. If you try to fit in more, you will either gabble or run over time. Both are not just embarrassing, they are plain *rude*.
- If it is an international conference, there will be people there to whom English is a second or third language. Even if their English is good, they may not be familiar with your accent. Speak clearly.
- Smile when you start. The importance of this cannot be overstated. Smiling lifts the voice (this is why singers often smile on high notes). It makes you sound enthusiastic even if you aren't. The audience is on your side. It doesn't want you to fail. On the whole, this should be an enjoyable experience, and it will be the more so if you start by realising we are all in this together.
- Do not read to the desk. If you hold the paper up at nose level, you will be talking to the room. This helps both to project the voice and to maintain contact with the audience.
- You can fit in only *one* theoretical idea. There is time to expand on it and to explain how it applies to the texts you are discussing, but you do not have time to discuss more than one.
- Start the paper with your thesis. Even if this isn't how you write, you need to think of a paper as a guided tour. Your audience needs some clue as to where it is going.
- There is a good chance [that your study of a subject] is incomplete. This is *good*. It will make the paper seem open to argument. The trick is not to let it look directionless.
- Encourage questions, leave things open, say things like "I haven't yet thought x through fully" or "I'm planning to consider y at a later date...". It will enable the audience to feel they can contribute to the development of your ideas. [With] really beautiful papers, all that is left for the audience to do is say "wow". It's awkward for the audience: they want to be able to comment; and it's embarrassing for the presenter who thinks no one liked their paper.
- "Preparation" is important but not "rehearsal". Too much rehearsal may make you sound dull. The aim is for a paper that sounds spontaneous, but isn't. Do not practise reading the paper aloud (it will sound tired by the time we hear it), but *do* practise reading to punctuation from a range of texts.
- Whatever you do, do not imagine that you can take a section of a paper written for a journal, or a chapter written for a book, and simply read it out. A paper written for academic publication is rarely suitable for reading out loud. Get used to the idea that you should write a paper specifically for the conference. It will be less dense, less formal, with shorter sentences, and more signposts for the listeners.



How to give a good academic conference paper (</news/how-give-good-academic-conference-paper>)

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READ MORE (</NEWS/HOW-GIVE-GOOD-ACADEMIC-CONFERENCE-PAPER>)

These tips have been reproduced with the consent of the authors and a full version of this guide, which also includes tips on speaking without reading, is available for download here (https://www.academia.edu/15569469/How_to_Give_a_Conference_Paper).

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READER'S COMMENTS (3)

#1 (/comment/4576#comment-4576) Submitted by darris on October 16, 2015 - 11:36am

This really is teaching grandmothers about accessing poultry protein. It is a typical managerial reduction of a complex issue to one of banal process. It is on a par with those who think teaching is just a matter of speaking loudly enough or having appropriate objectives. The most important issues are ones of content, what you actually say, at what level, and in what context. Unfortunately, though, managers would have nothing to contribute here, of course

#2 (/comment/4633#comment-4633) Submitted by Natalia Bremner on October 18, 2015 - 11:40pm

I think the justification for advising presenters to 'speak clearly' is self-evident. Was it really necessary to insult both speakers of languages other than English AND those of us with 'non-traditional' UK accents in order to get this point across? How were these prejudiced assumptions not picked up when this article was reviewed and edited? Does this indicate a lack of diversity amongst the THE editorial staff?

#3 (/comment/4732#comment-4732) Submitted by Neil Lent on October 23, 2015 - 12:49pm

I'm guessing this may be a disciplinary thing but it's been a very long time since I've seen a presenter actually read their paper. Generally speaking my experience is that a 'paper' tends to be a presentation (with visuals) with the aim of making the audience want to read the paper itself. This makes sense to me: why read something out to an audience who are capable of reading?

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