

How to give a conference paper
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This short guide comes out of several years of presenting papers, and many hours of listening and watching. Note that word “watching”. Too many presenters forget that a paper needs to be a visual, as well as an aural, experience.

There are essentially two approaches to giving a conference paper. One is to read the paper, the other is to talk to it. Of the two of us, Edward is much more likely to read and Farah more likely to talk to a paper, but we have both used the alternative technique where it seemed appropriate.

Neither of us believes that you can stand up there without notes and wing it. Anything that looks like improvisation on the day almost certainly has an awful lot of preparation behind it. We use the word “preparation”, and not “rehearsal”. Too much rehearsal may make you sound dull. The aim is for a paper that sounds spontaneous, but isn’t. Think of the grace of swans, and the mad paddling that’s happening below the waterline.

General Advice:

Always look at, and speak to, the audience rather than to the desk.

If you can’t see beyond the front row of the audience because your chair is on the same level as theirs, then it might be a good idea to stand up, so that you can make eye contact with as many people as possible. If you do stand up, don’t pace around too much, and if you find juggling with the coins or keys in your pocket an enjoyable activity, your audience will not be able to concentrate on anything you say.

If you are of a nervous disposition, number your pages, AND staple them together: nothing is worse than dropping your pages off the lectern and not knowing the order they should be in.

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.

If you are using visual aids:

- Keep it simple. Slides and Powerpoint take time to set up (and you are only one of two or three papers), and they lead to unnecessary worry about technological failures. Do you *really* need them? OHPs often work as well and are much less prone to go wrong.
- Talk about what you are showing. You can’t expect your audience to guess what your images are, and if you are not going to talk about the images, then all you are doing is providing distracting wallpaper. (The same goes for handouts.)

Smile when you start. The importance of this cannot be underestimated. 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.

Reading a Paper

Reading a paper makes sense if you are rather new to a subject and not yet ready to improvise. It also makes sense if you have very complex ideas to get over. Only a few people can maintain complexity of language when improvising.

Reading a paper is a very bad idea if you have a lot of *detail* to your research. You will be tempted to try and get it all in and you just can’t. See the next section for advice.

Most paper sessions are only 20 minutes long.

A conference paper is not an article. You can fit around 2100 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*. In one session at a conference last year the presenter was clearly more interested in achieving the World Record for Speed Reading than in communicating with the audience. (And remember, especially if it is an international conference, there will be people there to whom English is a second or third language, and even if their English is good, they may not be familiar with your accent. Speak clearly.)
- You can only fit in *one* theoretical idea. There is time to expand on it and explain how it applies to the texts you are discussing, but you do not have time to discuss more than one.
- If your theoretical ideas tie to other ideas you are considering, say this at the beginning, but add something along the lines of “if you are interested you can ask me about this later”. (This is a technique Gwyneth Jones passed on for ensuring you get a question. It mostly works).
- You need to concentrate on a small number of texts. More than three and your listeners will get lost.
- Avoid at all costs more than two lines of plot summary. You don’t have time. If you must have plot summary, don’t read this. Look at the audience and “digress” in an informal manner for a moment. It will help make the connection.
- Written papers tend to be “closed” papers. They have usually been written at the end of a line of thought rather than during it so they feel “polished” in a way that presented papers do not. The problem with this is that they leave no room for the audience to participate. Very new graduate students often hit this one: they present really beautiful papers, and 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. Go back to Gwyneth’s trick. Plant 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.
- 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.
- Do not practice reading the paper aloud (it will sound tired by the time we hear it), but *do* practice reading to punctuation from a range of texts.
- Finally, 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.

Talking to a Paper.

Talking to a paper always looks much more difficult than it actually is. It looks improvised. This sounds scary until you understand what improvisation is. Improvisation is building specifics around a ritualised, general structure that is so firm and rigid that it will never let you down. Ellen Klages did this sort of improvisation at the pool at ICFA last year, effortlessly spinning a song about a cat, kittens and a crowded house around a rigid chord and rhythm structure provided by Joe Haldeman. She could do it because she knew and understood her material and the way it worked.

An improvised paper works the same way. To be effective it depends on you knowing your work intimately; not just the content of the paper, but its structure and the way in which it fits into your understanding of your subject as a whole.

First, you have to write the paper. This is the bit most improvisers don't tend to talk about. There are some people who can improvise without writing a paper, but when you dig deeper it turns out to be because they have already written the book.

Papers for improvisation tend to be longer than papers for reading, in part because while most read papers are produced specifically for conferences (we are generalising a bit here), improvised papers are much more likely to have been extracted from a larger piece of work. There are consequences to this.

- This kind of paper is likely to have one overarching idea, and a number of other, smaller ideas that form its skeleton.
- It may well have a great deal of detail, either in the form of evidence, or complexity of argument
- There is a good chance it is incomplete. This is *good*. It will make the paper seem open to argument. The trick is not to let it look directionless.

How to handle this?

1. Start by writing an outline of what you have written. What is the major idea? How do the other ideas fit under this? Tip: if you can't do this, you need to restructure the paper.
2. Write your outline down on one page (this is easier on a computer), leaving space for annotations.
3. Go through the paper with a highlighter and highlight these ideas. You will need them highlighted so you can flick through to them if lost.
4. Work out what is the crucial piece of evidence you need for each idea. Add them into that one page outline, and again, highlight them in the original paper.
5. Decide what you have written that you absolutely *have* to read. This may be a quotation, or it may be something you have written that has to be expressed in a very particular way. Again, put it on that one sheet of paper and highlight it in the original text.

You have now got an outline from which to talk to; a paper to go back to if you run into trouble, highlighted for ease of flicking through; and by now a thorough knowledge of the structures of your paper, the way it *works* as a piece of thinking.

The benefit of this kind of delivery is that you can get a lot more *ideas* in. You will, however, have to cut back on detail. It works brilliantly if what you want to explain is the way you are thinking about something.

When delivering this kind of paper, the main trick is to look confident. Not only will it fool your audience, but it will fool your hindbrain too. Deliver the paper from the one page, but keep the copy next to you. Flick through it if you need to read a quote or a line you want exact. (Use tags to mark pages). Treat it as if it were a novel you were discussing. You've read it, you want to talk about it. You want to convince us that we want to read it too.

Whichever approach you choose, good luck and have fun.

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