Conferences: Presenting Papers & Posters

Presenting your work publicly generates useful feedback from both young and well-established scholars in your field. Giving conference papers and serving on panels are also good practice for academic job talks and the professional responsibilities of an academic scholar.

PICKING A CONFERENCE

The nature of academic conferences varies greatly, from smaller graduate student conferences, organized and run entirely by graduate students, to major professional conferences consisting of several days of simultaneous panels. Be sure to think about the kind of venue at which you want to present your work. If it’s a rough draft, you may wish to present at a graduate student conference or at a smaller regional conference, before polishing the talk for a major conference.

TYPES OF PRESENTATIONS

The kinds of presentations you may make at an academic conference also differ. You may give a short 15-minute paper as part of a three- or four-person panel with a moderator. You may be asked to give a longer talk. Or, as is common in the Sciences, you may be asked to submit a "poster." Look at conference call for papers carefully to determine what kind of presentation you'll be asked to make, since the nature of the presentation will determine the parameters of your talk.

PRESENTATION TIPS

● **Learn by observation**: Attend other people’s talks, and take note of qualities of talks that you like, as well as things that bother you. Model yourself after someone whose style of presentation you admire.
● **Know your audience**: You’ll have to give more background to a general audience, and more technical detail to audiences familiar with the field of research you’re discussing
● **Practice your talk**: Give a practice talk to an invited group of people who will give you constructive feedback. Ask them to identify what works well and to help you identify any verbal tics or body gestures that get in the way of your message.
● **Make visuals readable and relevant**: Most people put too much information on their powerpoint slides. The other common mistake presenters make is to read their slides. Your audience can read; if you use visuals, they should point to key ideas that you elaborate on in your talk. If your presentation includes powerpoint or slides, allocate 2-3 minutes per screenshot or slide.
● **Fit your talk to the allocated time**: It’s rude to go over your time limit, and rushing through the end of your presentation is ineffective.
● **Try to relax**: Don’t read from a script, and don’t talk too fast. Be confident: you know more about your work (flaws and all) than anyone else.

ONLINE RESOURCES: CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

● Advice on giving different kinds of academic presentations, from a conference paper, to a poster, to acting as a discussant on a panel can be found at: www.cgu.edu/pages/861.asp
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- Advice on how to avoid giving a boring presentation: http://web.archive.org/web/20060830131212/http://www.si.umich.edu/~pne/PDF/howtotalk.pdf

**TIPS ON PREPARING POSTERS**

- A poster board is typically 4 feet high and 6 feet wide, but the reverse orientation (tall and thin) is also seen. Double-check beforehand on the size of the boards that will be available to you.
- In preparing a poster, simplicity is key. A typical reader spends only a few minutes looking at a poster, so minimize clutter. Use attractive graphics to call attention to pithy, informative statements.
- Sentence fragments may be easier to comprehend than complete sentences. Bulleted lists are effective. Consider breaking text into chunks.
- Prepare drafts in advance and ask others to provide feedback on how easy it is to read and understand.
- If the work presented in the poster has been described in more detail in a paper, make a handout that summarizes your work and includes the URL from which it may be downloaded.

**DISCIPLINE SPECIFIC ADVICE ON POSTER PRESENTATIONS**

- Association for Computing Machinery [http://xrds.acm.org/article.cfm?aid=332138](http://xrds.acm.org/article.cfm?aid=332138)
- For scientific posters [www.swarthmore.edu/NatSci/cpurrin1/posteradvice.htm](http://www.swarthmore.edu/NatSci/cpurrin1/posteradvice.htm)
- Washington NASA Space Grant Consortium [www.waspacegrant.org/for_students/student_internships/wsgc_internships/posterdesign.html](http://www.waspacegrant.org/for_students/student_internships/wsgc_internships/posterdesign.html)