

Conference Presentation Tips

Conferencing 101: How to Deliver a Compelling Presentation

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PRESENTATION FORMAT

- The form of your conference presentation is determined by two things: the format of your session (15 min. or 20 min.? Panel discussion or roundtable?) and the format of your preparation (are you reading from a paper or are you presenting from notes?).
- Note that we tend to present faster during the real thing when reading from a paper (because we read faster under pressure) and tend to present slower if presenting from notes (because we're more likely to get stuck on a tangent or improvising).
- If reading, originally budget 2 minutes per double spaced page, and still try to provide room for improvisation or thinking off the cuff. These are moments when you look up from your paper and say things like "By the way, this is similar to how other people have talked about X, which is a little beyond the scope of my talk today. But it would be great to brainstorm more about that with you during the Q&A."
- If reading, be sure to mark moments when you need to pause or add emphasis. Write out verbal cues like "quote"/"unquote" that are not included in a written text. Remind yourself to look up after each paragraph or so to sustain eye contact.

CONTENT

- Thank your organizers and other panelists, but jump right in. It's fine to have a "hook" if it's quick, but it's also fine to get into your claims as soon as possible.
- Flag your argument by saying it is an argument! "Today, I will argue that ..." Only say this once! Your short presentation should only have one central argument.
- Provide a reductive, accurate, and numerated summary of your talk as early as possible, and include this in a slide if you are using a PowerPoint. ("In this talk, I want to persuade you of the following three things...")
- In the body of your presentation, provide transitions frequently and explicitly. Be stingy in your references to other critics but generous in your offerings of context and synopsis.
- This is not the time to engage all the scholarship ever written on your topic! If you are in serious dialogue with someone, give us the dialogue, but arguments are more important than name-dropping. And summarizing in your own words is easier to follow than bringing in a lot of quotation.
- Try to reserve quotation only for text that you are close reading.
- Unless this is a highly specialized conference on a particular author or text, do not assume common knowledge of your text.
- Keep sentences simple. Let's say no more than a couple dependent clauses per sentence as a good rule.
- Your conclusion should not only remind us of your argument but also why it matters in relation to interventions you are making in your field, discipline, method, etc. Your conclusion should also make explicit some avenues for further discussion. Think of your entire paper's goal not just as communicating your argument, but also as generating good questions from your audience.
- If you are doing close readings of any quotes from a text, consider offering this typed out on a handout so people can continue to analyze the text after your slides/talk have moved on.



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CONTENT, CTD.

- Within your talk, indicate areas you are particularly excited to talk more about in the Q&A. (“I don’t have as much time as I’d like to discuss X, but I’m happy to go into more detail, especially as it relates to Y.”)
- Have your last slide prompt questions by providing a lingering image, quote, or question you would like to take up.

VISUAL AIDS

- If you are making a slideshow, consider using it less to communicate and more to structure. Slides can be used to give a roadmap and remind people where you are in your presentation, rather than being full of bullet points.
- No matter what, do not have a talk that is so dependent on your visual aid that you cannot present without it.
- Get to your talk early so you can settle into your room and troubleshoot any technical issues. Mingle with the room or the other panelists to help put your nerves at ease.
- Bring your own adapters. Have your presentation in multiple formats and locations (on a thumbdrive, on your laptop, in the cloud, etc.)
- If there are images (for instance) that are absolutely crucial for following your paper, bring them in hard copy, too.
- For accessibility reasons, bring a printed copy of any slides. If you are writing out your presentation, bring a couple hard copies of that, too. And if there are any passages you are spending a lot of time close reading, provide a handout for others to consult. This will also encourage them to discuss the passage at more length in the Q&A.
- Make sure your e-mail is somewhere on your PPT or your handout. Some people are too shy to ask a question or there isn’t time, but might want to get in touch later.

DELIVERY

- Practice is especially important, whether you use notes or a written speech, in order to get the timing right. Practice, practice, practice!
- This will also help you identify your nervous habits. If you tend to talk too fast, pepper your talk with reminders to slow down, or timestamp paragraphs in your written copy (how much time you should have used before you reach each paragraph.) This will allow you to adapt during the talk itself as you consult your time-keeping device/phone/watch.
- If you tend to fidget or play with your watch or tie or necklace, give yourself something else to play with, like a discreet object you keep on your podium, or even something you keep in your pocket to distract yourself without distracting your audience. You can also redirect some nervous energy by pointing to the screen if using a PowerPoint instead of gesturing wildly.
- Your tone will set the tone of your audience’s response. If you are more casual, your audience will be more casual in their questions. If you’re mean or eager to criticize other scholars, your audience will be prepared to do the same to you.
- Try to indicate how excited you are to be “chatting” with them or “thinking out loud” about some topic or text, rather than getting into a rigorous (possibly bruising) debate.
- You might engage your audience by, for instance, asking for a volunteer to read a passage you then comment upon. This extends to your co-presenters or panelists. Try to get to the talk early to chat and be friendly with them, which also helps put your nerves at ease.

