

Conference Paper or Presentation?

In: Presenting your Research: Conferences, Symposiums, Poster Presentations and Beyond

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Conference Paper or Presentation?

The level of engagement with the material required of a conference presenter can vary hugely from one event to another. You may have noticed that I have been referring in this guide to your 'paper or presentation', and this is because either of these might be required of you. 'Giving a paper' once meant just that: an academic sitting down in a room with an audience listening as the paper was read aloud. No eye contact was required and no questions or other interventions would be expected until silence fell at the end of the paper reading. I have suggested here that this was the way things were done in the past, but this could still be the case if, for example, you were being asked to give a paper at a research seminar or symposium. However, 'giving a paper' could also, nowadays, mean giving a full-scale presentation, with data projector, handouts and several breaks for comments and questions.

The terminology is no friend to a presenter here. In the same way that being invited to 'give a paper' is no guarantee that you are simply going to be reading your work aloud to others, neither does being asked to 'contribute a presentation' ensure that the organisers are expecting a full-scale presentation. There are also, naturally, some events where both forms of dissemination (and anything in between) are acceptable, but you do need to know in advance what might be expected of you.

To some extent the differences between dissemination methods are related to subject or discipline areas, so you might be able to ask around, or attend a few conferences, so as to get a good feel of what is considered to be the norm in your field. There is no easy way to ascertain from a call for papers or other advance publicity what type of presentation is expected, so I would always advise that you check as soon as your paper is accepted. I would not especially urge you to find out before you submit your proposal, because the form need not have any impact upon your decision to submit an outline, but as soon as it has been accepted and you start to prepare, make sure that you are absolutely clear about what is expected of you.

During the course of your career you are likely to be sharing your ideas in a variety of ways, so it might be useful here to consider the advantages and disadvantages of different methods:

Giving a Paper

How does it Work?

- You sit or stand and simply read your paper to an audience, after which members of the audience might ask questions.
- Your paper might be circulated in advance.

What are the Advantages?

- You have a high level of control over the event because you know exactly what you are going to say.
- Your audience might feel more relaxed, knowing that you have the paper right there in front of you and so are unlikely to make any blunders.
- You do not have to worry about technology, or moving around.

What are the Disadvantages?

- It can be difficult to remain vibrant and engaging if you are struggling to maintain eye contact as you read.
- If the paper has been circulated in advance there is the danger of the audience becoming bored.
- Reading aloud can result in a tendency to speak in a monotone and speed up, so it takes practice.

Top Tips

- Try to avoid too many rehearsals, as this can lead to a monotonous presentation style.
- Intersperse your paper with notes such as 'expand here' or 'add detail here' so that you can go off script for just a few moments so as to enliven the event, but only do this once you feel confident about your ability to give a paper.
- Notes such as 'smile', 'talk slowly', 'eye contact' and 'halfway' can help to keep you on track and keep your audience engaged.
- When you rehearse the paper, listen out for 'written English' as opposed to 'spoken English' as this can grate a little with the audience. Think, for example, about how many times you would use words and phrases such as 'furthermore', 'prohibitively', 'proceed' and 'finally, in conclusion' in your everyday speech. These need to be amended in your paper as much as possible.
- If your paper is being circulated before the event, take out the 'notes to self' you have included in your 'script paper', and also think about handouts. Using a handout, where you can go off script and ad lib for a while, can help to break up the event and enliven it, without throwing you off course too much.

Giving a Full-Scale Presentation

How does it Work?

- You may still read, this time from a script, but you are more likely to be working from prompt cards or, if you are confident in your ability to do so, from the natural prompting of the data projection screen.
- You will be standing with nothing (except perhaps a lectern) between you and the audience, each member of which will expect good eye contact, plenty of facial expression and a confident stance.
- You will expect questions and comments from audience members, either at the end of your presentation or at the end of a group of presentations.

What are the Advantages?

- You have more choices about how you present your material and so can, potentially, create a more exciting event for your audience.
- You might be able to fit more material into the time available.
- You can involve your audience more in the event, should this suit your purposes.
- You can make more of an impact on your audience as a person, so it can be useful for networking.

What are the Disadvantages?

- It takes more confidence to get it right, but this will come with practice.
- More can go wrong, so you need back-up plans in place.
- The likely response of a more excited audience is less easy to predict.

Top Tips

- Be clear about when you expect audience intervention. Audience members need to know whether you are happy to be interrupted as you go (unlikely, in most cases) or whether you expect comments or questions at the end.
- It is a good idea to let people know how long you expect your presentation to last, and how long they will be given to ask questions or make comments.
- Always, always have a back-up for the presentation aids you are using. Data projectors can fail, demonstrates can fall apart and even the humble overhead projector relies on a working bulb.

Giving an Interactive Presentation

How does it Work?

- You are still giving a presentation, but you are asking the audience to respond throughout the event, rather than just at the end.
- The audience involvement might take the form of a survey or poll, or short breakout groups. It might involve online polling with results immediately available, or regular question and answer sessions throughout the presentation.

What are the Advantages?

- Audience members feel part of a process; their views are being canvassed and their responses really matter to you.
- There is less intense, unwavering focus on you standing up and delivering.

What are the Disadvantages?

- You need to be ready to change some of your choice of material for presentation in response to the audience interaction – this can be challenging.
- Potentially, you need to be able to present some material without a script, as you will be responding directly to audience members rather than having prepared in advance – this takes confidence in both the robustness of your material and in your ability to present.
- Audience interaction such as this frequently involves technology (smart-boards with ‘clickers’, Twitter feeds, online polling through texting and so forth) and this does not always oblige at the crucial moment.

Top Tips

- If you are using ‘instant technology’ such as a Twitter feed or online polling responses which are sent direct to a screen behind you, try to arrange to have a supporter present to act as a monitor, filtering the responses for you before they hit the screen, just in case any rogue responses creep into the system.
- If you are going to include a group activity, make sure that there is space enough, without everyone having to start moving furniture.
- If you can, ask selected delegates in advance if they would be happy to be ‘group leader’ for one of the groups, urging them to ensure that feedback is timely and constructive.

Chairing a Conference Session

How does it Work?

- You will introduce a speaker or set of speakers, listen to their papers or presentations and then 'field' questions. That is, questions from the audience will be addressed to you and you will either ask one speaker to respond, if there is only one speaker, simply nod encouragingly to the speaker when the first question is asked, inviting a response.
- If no questions are forthcoming, it would be up to you to ask the first question so as to get things moving.

What are the Advantages?

- You need do no more than this, but you do get the benefit of conference delegates seeing your face as part of the conference; this is useful for networking.

What are the Disadvantages?

- You do not get any opportunity to advance your own research position. You might introduce yourself very briefly before you introduce the speaker, but beyond this there is little to do.
- If the speaker is less than inspiring, you might have to think of several questions to ask. If the speaker has been contentious, you will have to referee between disagreeing experts.

Top Tips

- Your introductory remarks should be hugely complimentary – speakers rely on those chairing their session to boost their confidence at the last minute.
- However well you research a speaker, you cannot do as good a job as could the speaker, so ask the speaker or speakers to send you a little biography in advance, if time allows. That way you only say what pleases them and you will not be risking getting any detail wrong.
- Hold your nerve when it comes to questions. Often people take a little time to compose their thoughts, or to pluck up the nerve to ask a question, and they will not thank the chairperson who rushes in before them.

Presenting at a Research Seminar/Colloquium/Symposium/Research or Interview Panel

How does it Work?

- This is a more low-key event, usually with a smaller audience, sometimes with no more than a dozen or so academics sitting around a room listening to a paper. It might involve a data projector or other presentation aids, but this would not necessarily be the case.
- Questions are usually confined to the end of the paper.
- Notice that I have included 'research or interview panels' in this category. Although the situation may be more nerve wracking in that you are hoping to have a research idea approved, or be awarded funding or offered a job, or given leave to progress to the next stage of your research, the principles are the same and so you could follow the advice offered throughout this guide as you approach these particular situations.

What are the Advantages?

- This situation would usually be less demanding of your material than standing up in front of a large audience trying to give a full-scale presentation.
- You might be an invited speaker, in which case you could be fairly sure of an appreciative audience.

What are the Disadvantages?

- These events are quite intimate affairs, so if you do get a difficult questioner it can be hard to diffuse the situation.
- You have to get your timing just right. If you talk for too long you will be depriving your peers of the chance to advance a position in relation to yours, and this can lead to frustration.

Top Tips

- Because these are often smaller events you need to make sure that you get all of the details right: Exactly how long will it last? What equipment, if any, will be available? How long should you leave for questions and discussion?
- There is sometimes a social element to research events such as this, so plan your timing so that you can stay on for a chat or a meal afterwards.

Leading a Panel/Round-Table Discussion

How does it Work?

- You may or may not be giving a paper; your role is to ensure that the discussion which

follows from any paper given runs smoothly.

- Discussion might be the only activity of the panel or round-table. The organisers may have circulated papers in advance ready for a discussion, or you might simply focus on possible answers to one research question in a discussion, rather than any formal papers being included.
- You will be expected to introduce your fellow speakers, ensure a smooth flow of Q & A and discussion, and close down the discussion in a timely way at the conclusion of the event.

What are the Advantages?

- If this is an area of especial interest to you, you might enjoy taking charge of how the discussion develops.
- It might allow you to be involved in a conference and to share your research without having to prepare any presentation material in advance.

What are the Disadvantages?

- You will be sharing the time with others, so you might not have sufficient chance to explore your specific research area with other interested scholars.
- If you struggle to keep control of meetings and such like, then you might have to concentrate on the practical elements of the event, to the detriment of your research dissemination.

Top Tips

- If you know that you find chairing a meeting stressful, and you struggle to keep things to time, think twice about this: being a member of the panel might be better than leading it.
- Prepare as if you were introducing a presenter at a conference: ask the other speakers to send you the details that you could use to introduce them, if time allows.
- This is a shared event, so find out about the research activity of your fellow speakers, enough so that you do not just speak over them throughout, but rather dovetail their research activity to yours. This is an art, so do not expect this to go perfectly every time.

Contributing to a Panel/Round-Table Discussion

How does it Work?

- The activity is as already described above, but your role is simply to contribute.

What are the Advantages?

- There is less pressure on you and you can gain the benefit of listening to the views of others in closely allied areas of research rather than focusing solely on disseminating your own research.

What are the Disadvantages?

- You have less time to make your point and you might risk being overlooked if the panel is made up of vociferous academics.

Top Tips

- Discussions begun at a round-table or panel event often spill over into the next break in the conference programme; it helps if you can choose, in advance, the two or three points that you are determined to make so as to facilitate later discussion.
- Beyond making those points, relax and enjoy listening to your fellow scholars.

Running a Conference Workshop

How does it Work?

- This is nothing like giving a paper. Instead, you will be leading a group of your peers through activities designed to elicit responses to your research.
- You might begin with a brief overview of both your work and the workshop set up, but after that the session will be activity based.
- Rarely, you might be giving a conference workshop which is based upon your research, but is designed to improve the skills set of the participants, rather than being principally concerned with the dissemination of your research.

What are the Advantages?

- If prepared properly these are enjoyable and satisfying events to run.
- You will raise your profile within the academic community.
- The network of enthusiastic followers of your research will increase.

What are the Disadvantages?

- Workshops take a fair amount of time to prepare and are only for the determined and the confident.
- There is often preparation work to do on the day itself, so you might miss seeing papers or presentations which are of interest to you.

Top Tips

- Control your material; control your time; control your workshop participants. If you have doubts about your ability to do any of these things, think again about committing to this enterprise.
- Attending a few workshops should give you a good sense of whether you would be able to lead one in the future.

Knowing that there are so many ways in which you can contribute to an event will, I hope, inspire you to continue with your search for the perfect place to showcase your work. Of course, locating the event is just one stage; finding the material is the next challenge.

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