

Proposing and Presenting Conference Papers

Tips for Writing a Successful Proposal

- Think of a really good title. Keep in mind the two main rhetorical functions of academic titles: they serve as a hook/attention grabber, and they give a clear sense of what will be discussed. Your title needs to assist and intrigue proposal reviewers AND it needs to be able to compete on the program once it is printed.
- Establish your contribution clearly and quickly. In a very short amount of time, you need to make clear how your project is both conversant with the existing scholarship on your topic and, more importantly, how your project is intervening in that scholarship to provide new knowledge or to complicate previous knowledge.
- Use direct, signpost-y language. Remember, reviewers often are looking at dozens of proposals and have to be able to scan and quickly get a sense of the conversation, critical intervention, and argument. They will be looking for phrases like these: “*I argue*,” “*the gap my project seeks to address is...*,” “*while previous researchers have focused on X, I am going to focus on Y.*”
- Consider how your project might also be intervening in the larger cultural moment, responding to an extradisciplinary exigency in addition to a disciplinary exigency. Increasingly, establishing the kairotic moment your project is responding to is important (considering this can also often attract more audience members).
- Consider the conference theme, but don’t be confined by it. Too much work to incorporate the language of the conference theme can make people roll their eyes and make the proposal feel forced. Instead, think about the issues behind that theme or the metaphoric significance of it and how those might intersect with your project.
- Don’t forget the “So what?” In addition to communicating *significance* with your statement about critical intervention, you need to clearly state the value of your argument and project (this is often an especially powerful way to close a proposal). Again, this is a place for signposting language.

Things to Avoid

- Excessive name-dropping or quotation from scholarship.
- Hostility to previous scholarship. You can critique, challenge, and move away from it, but don’t be mean.
- Excessive qualification and hedging that clouds argument and contribution.
- Giving away identifying information.

Increasing Chances of Being Accepted at National/International Conferences

- Propose on the current hot topic but in a surprising way. The popularity and currency associated with research topics in the academy is like fashion. Things are in one year and out the next.
- Propose as a panel, rather than a stand-alone paper. Panels require less labor on the part of conference organizers, and so they are more likely to be accepted.
- If you propose a panel, try to have panelists from different institutions. Institutional diversity, geographic diversity, methodological diversity, etc. all increase likelihood of the panel being accepted.
- Emphasize audience participation or takeaways.
- Check to see if you can indicate on the submission form that it would be your first time at that conference.

Tips for Giving a Successful Conference Talk

- Emphasize subject, intervention, and argument quickly. Much like with the proposal, be aware that you are working in a relatively small amount of space 15-20 minutes (7-9 pages of text). All of the information above about writing the conference proposal also applies to giving the talk (disciplinary and extradisciplinary exigencies, sign-posting language, answering the “so what?” question).
- Remember that this is an orally-delivered talk. As academics, we spend a lot of time reading and writing in order to process (really challenging, often abstract) ideas in our mind. It is a much different thing to do that work speaking and hearing.
- Rehearse the talk as many times as possible. I like to have it basically memorized. I practice in front of my cat and my partner at home. I give the talk in the hotel room in front of the bathroom mirror. I sometimes force other friends attending the conference to listen to it.
- Rewrite your prose so it is easy to speak. This is why practice is so important. There are plenty of sentences that, while beautiful on the page, do not work coming out of one’s mouth in a stressful situation. Be really careful with complex subordination, parenthetical asides, and metacommentary. It is easy for audience members to get lost.

Side Note: *There is a fair amount of debate about whether people should read conference papers or work from slides/ notes. I think it is possible to do both successfully. Know yourself and just keep in mind that it is an orally-delivered talk. I say “I don’t read; I perform from a draft”*

Side Note: *DO NOT BE RELIANT ON TECHNOLOGY!! Projector issues, wireless connectivity issues, dongle issues, etc. are notorious at conference. Always have a back-up plan. Sound/video are especially risky to be reliant on.*

- Cut down on direct quotation (especially from dense theory). Instead, work with concepts and paraphrase. If you do include quotes, be sure to verbally indicate as you are presenting that you are working with a quote (i.e., say the words “quote” and “end quote” as markers). It is also often useful to have the quotes projected as a slide or on a handout for audience members to latch onto.
- Make eye contact with your audience members and smile from time to time. I actually write little notes in brackets in the draft of my paper in front of me to remind myself of this (notes like “[look up at audience]” and “[slow down]” and “[dramatic pause]” pepper my talks).
- Print the talk or notes in a larger font. I do 14pt or 16pt. Also, number your pages. It is surprisingly easy for information to end up out of order.
- Prime audience members to ask questions or make comments at the end of the session. I often conclude with a discussion of limitations and what I see as next steps and then a phrase like “What I would love to hear from you all is....”
- Encourage social media discussion of your session. Increasingly conferences have official hashtags and ways of marking hashtags of particular sessions. It can be a cool way to see how others are processing the talk.

Making the Most of a Conference

- Network. Introduce yourself to scholars who you admire or whose work your work is reliant on. For the most part, academics are fairly down to earth and excited to talk to graduate students. Also, find people who are doing work similar to yours at other schools. Find someone to propose a panel with in the future or to collaborate with.
- Recruit audience members for your session. Go to sessions on similar topics, invite the speakers to your session. Talk your session up with folks you meet or run into.
- Consider attending Special Interest Groups (SIGs) on topics in the field that interest you. Most conferences have some version of them.
- Find free food/swag/books. Publisher parties are becoming less and less of a thing, but most conferences will still have something that involves some food or a cocktail drink ticket.
- Don’t burn out. Go to sessions, yes, but don’t feel like you have to attend a session in EVERY time slot.