

GPSG Resources



How to: Present at Conferences

A guide for graduate students

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Presenting a paper at an academic event (conference, symposium, research seminar etc) can be a daunting prospect for experienced scholars, let alone for graduate students. Your paper may be the end result of a long and tiresome research process in which you have invested a significant amount of time, money or career resources. Or it could be a theoretical contribution where you examine previous accounts and develop your own arguments. It may even be a last-minute sketch of your future research plans containing an idea you feel strongly about. In any case this is your moment and you want to make the most out of it. Hopefully, the following suggestions will assist you in your preparation for the next conference. Obviously these are only a few tips emerging from my personal experience rather than a definitive account. The basic principle guiding this list - the most important rule - is striking the right balance between what your own material is about and what you want your audience's experience to be.

1. Avoid reading from a script.

It's a big turn-off for everyone attending the session; there is nothing less appealing than merely reading out loud a paper at a conference. Considering that most people can read, the event adds nothing to the hardcopy of your paper distributed to the delegates. In fact it is damaging because everyone gets immediately bored and you may appear disrespectful to your audience. If you are presenting a paper you need to devote at least two days to re-work it / turn it into a talk. Do not be afraid to dump large chunks of background material or the minutiae of your methods / sample / peripheral arguments. The audience is not your PhD Viva panel - they just want to get the thrust of your contribution; they (you) can always go back to clarify something during question time.

2. Adjust content to the audience.

There is absolutely no point in presenting something that others will not understand or be interested in. Make your talk relevant to your audience from the start; make it interactive and insert examples, jokes or anecdotal reflections that make this a personal encounter between you and your audience of that moment. That is not to argue for the "dumbing down" of academic standards or of your original ideas however complex those may be. But unless you demonstrate the relevance of what you are presenting to those listening to it the presentation will be a waste of time for them and for you.

3. Adjust form to the occasion.

If the conference or symposium has a central theme or question try to refer to it at the beginning or at the end of your talk. The same applies to the specific topic of your panel / session. If you are lucky enough not to be opening the event you may refer back to something someone said at a previous session / paper / panel so as to

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stir up debate. If you are closing the event then that is a good opportunity to give your own perspective on the event, highlighting its benefits and summarising the contributions. If there is nothing you can really use, perhaps you could refer to a recent or developing story in the news. Build a virtual dialogue between your individual talk and the broader event. That's the point of the conference, otherwise we'd just get the papers and go home.

4. Start smoothly and maintain attention.

The best strategy when you prepare a talk is to put yourself in the shoes of your audience. Starting with a very complex and sophisticated statement that includes references to scholarly material and advanced concepts may not be the best way to win the audience. Pace and timing are very important, and within the e.g. 20 minutes of your talk there is time for everything, from the self-deprecating joke that will draw

attention at the beginning, to the peak of your talk when you throw in your main argument, to the point when you get controversial. A good tactic may be to include a few (brief) pauses during your talk so that the audience get the chance to digest your ideas and, why not, scribble down a question or two. Several people will drift away during your talk – do not take this personally (again think of how many times you've yawned during someone else's presentation!). If used appropriately, pauses are a good way to take those people "on board" again – i.e. re-focus their attention.

5. Give an outline of your argument.

Provide your audience with a map of your talk so that they don't feel lost. This could take the shape of an 'agenda-handout' or of a slide, and really helps those listening to you feel a part of your presentation. Signpost all the major sections of your presentation via visual and verbal means. A "tidy" presentation is not only more comprehensible, but also helps everyone refer back to specific points of your talk during the Q&A session.

6. Make the most of visual aids (such as PowerPoint or a similar package).

Calculate approximately 1 slide per minute of your talk (so if you're faced with a 20-minute presentation opt for a 15-20 slide presentation). Try not to overload or underload the slides. The ideal font size is 14-16. Much smaller than that may be illegible and irritating for the audience. You may want to number the slides so that you (and those watching the presentation) keep track of progress. Most presentation packages are now very user-friendly and with a few hours of preparation you can build an impressive, state-of-the-art show that will complement your main talk. In visual terms go for continuity (consistent fonts and colours), variety (bring in pictures and graphs depending on the subject matter) and catchy content (that's what it



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is about anyway!). Use the internet to get the best and latest data and visuals for your topic. Once again, I am not arguing that you should turn your presentation into a pop culture event, but investing into a good presentation will really show respect for your audience and for the event. In addition, if sometimes you feel nervous about all eyes in the room being focused on you a good slideshow is a great way to divert the audience's attention away from your person and towards the substance of your talk!

7. Handouts help.

The above principle applies to handouts too: pausing to refer your audience to a handout or a slide can be a welcome break from the flow of your talk. More importantly, people go away having something tangible with the main thrust of your paper and your name on it. Add your affiliation, email and homepage. The ideal size is 3-4 A4 sides – much more than that may be expensive and intimidating.

8. TCYIF (The Chair Is Your Friend).

Do not, under any circumstances, go over the time limit. The audience will get tired (we humans have short attention span especially when it comes to things like “the origins and constitutional consequences of the principle of ministerial responsibility”). Finishing *before* the Chair ...gags you is vital and also shows respect to your fellow-panellists.



9. Be bold, be controversial.

To put it very cynically, when the party's over few remember a modest little paper with no ambitions (however well that may have been executed). You have a unique chance to (diplomatically) present your opinion on certain things and perhaps, if you are lucky and

well-prepared, to challenge long-held academic views or old taboos. As long as you have some evidence or arguments to support those views, it will only stimulate discussion and help people remember your name.

10. Before and after.

The truth is that what happens before and after your presentation may be equally or more important to what happens during your presentation. Some of the most important intellectual battles and collaborations have taken place in the pub afterwards. Talk to people. Try to get their honest feedback about your presentation. Most (normal) people will be positive, encouraging and helpful, perhaps pointing out an area or two where you can improve next time. Do not panic if that happens, make sure you keep notes of their comments and thank them for their help. You may want to prepare a few business cards before the conference (a piece of paper with your name, affiliation and contact details will do). Networking is a vital part of academic events and if you feel good about your paper then let the world know about it!

All these tips may sound quite daunting if you are considering giving a paper presentation at a conference. Yet you can start with small steps and practice is everything - a great way to do that is by presenting at a research seminar or event organised by your own department or university. Furthermore, the PSA Graduate Network organises a series of graduate and regional conferences around the calendar, whose mission is precisely to create an easily accessible, relaxed and supportive environment.

Author Note:

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