Tips for Presenting a Conference Paper

Revise your paper for oral presentation

1. Read through your paper and make sure you have plenty of (not-very-subtle) signposts marking your argument. Remember that people will be listening to your paper, so you have to draw all your connections and make all your points very clearly.
2. Try to include a focused discussion of at least one perfect example used to reinforce your claim.
3. Know how many minutes you have been allotted. For this conference, you have about 15 minutes.
4. Make sure your paper falls within your allotted time frame. Here’s how to make sure:
   • First, determine how fast you read. Pick a full-length page from your paper and time how long it takes to read it. Read slowly. If it takes less than two minutes, you’re reading too fast for your audience to follow you.
   • Do the math (I won’t spell it out here) to determine how many words/pages you can read in 15 minutes. For the average person, that is about a six page paper.
   • If your paper is too long, reduce. Don’t plan to read faster!

Preparation
1. Now that your paper is ready, practice reading it out loud. Not once, not twice. But until it feels as though you have it memorized, probably three to six times.
   • Time yourself. Make sure you’re not reading too fast or too slow.
   • Practice before a friendly audience. Ask them to stop you if they have trouble understanding you. Ask them, too, not to suggest major changes. You already know the argument is good. At this point, you want to make it clear.
   • Become comfortable with your paper as much as possible so that you can PRESENT it and not just READ it. People whose noses are buried in their papers and never look up and never change their tone of voice are BORING to listen to, no matter how good the actual material might be. Try to cultivate a tone of voice that says, "Here's something really interesting that I've noticed about this material" rather than "Here's a paper I wrote."
   • Make diacritic marks for pauses, emphases, and places where you should raise or lower your pitch.
2. Make a simple, one-page handout with your name, e-mail address, paper title, and key passages from other scholarship your paper features. You might even include an outline or pictures to help your audience follow what you’re saying. And a short bibliography will allow them to follow up on your ideas. Bring 10 copies to distribute to the audience.
3. Look at the conference schedule.
   • Know which session you’re in.
   • Choose which sessions you want to attend.
   • 4. Arrive in plenty of time to register. Avoid rushing.

Presentation
1. Bring a bottle of water. Your throat might get dry, and the water will help keep your voice clear. (Most conferences have a pitcher of water and cups at each session, but I’m
always afraid I’ll spill the cup.)

2. When you get to the podium or front of the room, thank the sponsoring department for organizing the conference and allowing you this opportunity to share your work. While you’re doing this, smile and look at as many different audience members as you can. It will help relax you and establish a comfortable rapport with your audience.

3. If there’s a podium, you may want to use it to steady your hands or your paper. If there’s not a podium, don’t be surprised or horrified if your hands are shaking and your paper rustles. Those are common sights and sounds at conferences.

4. If you’re seated at a presentation table, think about standing up to give your paper.

5. Take a slow breath and begin reading. Don’t rush.

6. Read with energy, and LOOK UP!

7. If you find yourself getting too nervous, stop and take a drink of water.

8. Once you’ve completed the paper, look at your audience once again before heading to your seat. Relax.

Question & Answer

1. Most sessions allow for a brief Q&A after all the panelists have presented. If someone asks you a question about the paper, you’ll first want to echo it back to ascertain you understood the question. Then answer the question to the best of your ability - even if that means saying, “I don’t know.” Usually questions are a genuine sign of interest in your work. Don’t take questions as an attack. Recognize them as an attempt to engage you in a conversation about something you’ve spent a lot of time thinking and writing about.

2. Conversely, jot down questions you have when listening to other papers. Again, stay in the collegial spirit by developing genuine questions. If you can muster the nerve, ask them. If not, see how the questions asked compare with the ones you’ve written down.