

Advice from those who have been there before... Top tips on conference papers from LLC academics!

Make eye contact:

- Do not WRITE the conference paper - talk from prompts and visuals on PP slides instead. Easier to keep eye contact with the audience and keep them engaged.
- Do not literally "read" your paper, because if you do you will put people to sleep.
- Papers should not be read, they are not articles, they should be delivered orally and not exclusively from a script. It is the only way to effectively engage an audience.
- Look up as much as possible and try to address people all around the room (i.e. don't just keep looking in the same direction).
- Make eye contact: interacting with your audience is important, it's fine to read a paper but don't forget to make eye contact with the audience (it can help keeping them interested!)
- Stand or sit as you prefer. Make eye contact. Insist on having a glass of water – if necessary, take your own!

Think about your delivery:

- Don't read monotonously, nor too fast – read it as if you are thinking it. Make use of emphasis, if necessary marking up your paper like a play script. Rehearse it and leave time for questions at the end.
- Speak at a normal pace. If your material is complicated, speak slowly. Whatever you do, do not rush as people will be unable to follow you.
- At a recent conference in a rather grand room in London, I gave my paper, not from behind the lectern, but standing in front of it, wandering to and fro. Everyone said how much easier it was to listen when the person giving the paper was properly visible, and addressing the audience directly. But some of the very same people who said that to me, then gave their papers from behind the lectern. Moral: dare to be dramatic. Don't hide and don't skulk.
- Slow down and pause a lot: it might feel awkward, but actually it makes you sound more natural and it gives your listeners a chance to catch up with you.

Listening requires concentration and that requires effort. If you give them some little breaks, and they'll take in more of what you are saying.

- Speak at a normal pace. If your material is complicated, speak slowly. Whatever you do, do not rush as people will be unable to follow you.
- Speak to the whole of your audience in even sweeps (don't get fixated on one section of your audience or on the screen); learn to project your voice through the top of your head and off the ceiling onto the back row, never forgetting that you are talking to individual people.
- Speak loudly and clearly. Do not bury your head in your script. Make sure people in the back can hear you. This does not apply only to women!
- Speak slowly and clearly.
- If possible speak from short notes or without notes and as though in conversation; avoid reading out a script.
- Try to control physical mannerisms such as hair-tossing, hand-waving, hip-jiggling, rocking-back-and-forth, etc. Do not turn yourself into a cartoon if you can help it.
- Pretend that you will be torn limb from limb by a pack of bloodthirsty wolves if you say "um", "er", "like", "sort of", "kind of" (or any combination of the above).
- Be aware of your use of "umm" and "uhhh" and "ahh" and "y'know". Not only do they consume valuable time, they are intensely annoying.

Use visual aids:

- PowerPoint presentations are fine. Illustrations are great. But cramming a whole lot of text into a PP is counter-productive.
- Do not cram the PP slides with too much info - when it comes to conference presentations, less is more!
- If you're providing a PP, use sharply contrasting colours and keep it simple. Reading yellow type on a white background is torture, as is a fussy mixture of fonts.
- Make sure any illustrations you use in your PP look good on a big screen. Low-res images look pixillated and shout 'poor planning'!
- Clear your screen of anything personal (including tabs in an open browser that you might be using to demonstrate a web link); be aware that hidden programmes can often have pop ups that can be embarrassing.

- Pointer devices can often be used to go forward and backward in your presentation file (the pointers in the AT and DHT and elsewhere in the university do this; works for pdf files, too).
- Presentation software usually has a key option to blank the screen if you really don't need or want anything on display during a paper (usually B for black/blank and W for white); many people talk for ages with images and text on the screen that is no longer relevant.
- I don't use PowerPoint, which makes me very sensitive to the visual abominations that many people use to present their research (crowded screens, lousy formatting, etc.). In fact, sometimes I don't even use presentation slides at all. Radical, I know.

And finally, be prepared:

- Make sure your technology works before you begin. Wasting 5 minutes of a 20-minute slot fussing with your PP or your audio will only annoy your listeners and get you off to a terrible start.
- Know the practicalities (where it is, how the IT works, who is chairing...) Have a back up IT plan (e.g. dropbox and a memory stick).
- Always have a pdf version of any presentation file (PowerPoint, etc.) that you are using.
- Try recording your presentation ahead of time, so that you can judge its length and catch onto any annoying speech-mannerisms. This is guaranteed to be excruciating to listen to, but may be very helpful in the long run.