

# Writing a (Brilliant) Conference Paper

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# What makes a bad presentation?

- What turns you off?
  - Over-length
  - Jargon
  - Lack of clarity
  - Lack of focus (cramming too much in)
  - Poor use of visual aids
  - Irrelevant to my interests
  - Poor delivery

# What makes a great presentation?

- Presented with clarity
- Presented with purpose
- Is relevant for the audience
- Uses visual aids or handouts effectively
- Is appropriately structured
- Fine-tuning and practice

# Presenting with clarity

- Be precise, concise and clear. Use plain language and talk through your ideas in a logical manner.

“Academic writing in our time tends to be over-abstract and over-inflated. You will impress your listeners by being clear and concise. If you try to blind them with your unbelievably sophisticated vocabulary and complex ideas they will be bored and you will not get the useful feedback that should be your primary reason for participating in the first place.”

- Avoid jargon– don't be overly complex for the sake of complexity:

“Unless you are speaking to a very specialised audience, nobody will know what you're talking about. If you do use terminology, it is courteous to explain terms the first time you use them. Better still, provide a glossary in the form of a handout.”

- Be focused (don't present on your whole dissertation):

“Many beginning scholars try to cover too much ground in one presentation, tend to go on too long, tend to use too much jargon (just to prove they know it!), and can too easily come across as arrogant.”

- But also be confident about what you know (and therefore can talk confidently and accessibly about):

“Build in some points where you can extemporise: if you have to give a brief description of something you know well, don't write it, just make a note like this “[explain X, Y or Z]” in your script. That way you can look up and talk directly to you audience, which lets you connect with them and check they are following you. It also lets you switch register and tone, which makes you easier to listen to and keeps people interested. Finally, it makes you appear confident, even when you are not.”

# Presenting with purpose

- What is the purpose of your presentation? Why is it important? Why should I care?

“The main piece of advice I would give is as a speaker to be sufficiently engaged with the material to such an extent that the need to actually read a paper is obviated or can be kept to an absolute minimum.”

“Why should your audience care? If you're giving a reading of a novel that most people won't have read, e.g., what are the most far-reaching implications of the argument, which would be of interest and relevance to anyone in the field?”

“Always have a **Big Take-Away point** in your paper that your audience can take away with them, even if they remember nothing else. Why should they care about your paper? Hint what it is at the beginning, summarise what it is at the end. Then people who are not interested in the precise topic can still feel they've got something from your paper.”

# Presenting with Purpose: Exercise

- What is it about?
- Why are you saying that?
- What matters about that?
- What's important about that?
- Why? What's the point of that?

Work in pairs and take turns to ask each other the following questions about your proposed presentation / research topic / essay topic / dissertation topic.

Follow up on each answer e.g. “what is it about?”, then what matters about *that*” etc.).

# Think about your audience

- Pitch at the right level so the audience is not bored by hearing things they already know or that they do not understand
  - “Know your (likely) audience and adapt your material, since it's about communication. Speak to their existing knowledge and their interests.”
- Add variety by using props, showing slides, playing music, showing video clips
  - BUT only use things which are directly relevant to your presentation
- Take the audience by the hand and lead them through the journey (of your paper) – tell them a story

# Telling the story: Exercise

- What is the story of your presentation?
  - Can you explain it to someone who is unfamiliar with your discipline?
1. Find someone who is not working in the same disciplinary area as you.
  2. For one minute, person A should outline their presentation/ essay/ thesis /dissertation research to them in an accessible way. Think about the audience and what they already know or what is of interest to them.
  3. Person B should listen to the description and note down any jargon or areas that are unfamiliar. This should then be fed back to person A.
  4. Finally, swap so that person B presents to person A and receives feedback from them.

# Using Visual Aids

Use slides to:

- Focus attention on the content, rather than you
- Reinforce key points
- Provide visual counterpoints to key ideas
- Indicate structure
- Elaborate a crucial definition or exquisite quotation

**Use visual aids sparingly and only where necessary:**

“Use AV support where it genuinely helps communication, but remember that it is distracting if it isn't directly pertinent.  
Blank ppt slides can help with this.”

# Using Visual Aids

- **Don't include too much text:**

“PowerPoint presentations are fine. Illustrations are great. But cramming a whole lot of text into a PP is counter-productive, as it will result in your audience struggling to read your slides rather than listening to you.”

“Avoid bullet points laying out the argument (it's not a corporate awayday), but use handouts or PowerPoint for longer quotations and any useful visual material (the latter is nice to project as a counterpoint to the argument, I think, even if you don't say much about it; invite the audience to ask you about things that caught their eye in the questions if they want).”

- **Be aware of readability:**

“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-resolution images look pixillated and shout 'poor planning!'”

# Using handouts

“A handout can be useful, especially if you want to provide lots of **detail** and/or **background** to your remarks, or perhaps a **bibliography**. It is a good **alternative to printing long texts on-screen**, and you can direct the audience to look at specific passages in the handout as you go along. Be aware, however, that some people will be reading your handout rather than listening to what you say, so in some cases you may want to distribute the handout at the end of your talk rather than at the beginning.”

“A handout may help people remember who you were.”

# Structure

“Have a strong outline of what you want to say.”

1. Tell them what you are going to tell them.
2. Tell them.
3. Tell them what you’ve told them.

1. Introduction (1 minutes)
2. Body (sections)
3. Conclusion (1-2 minutes)

Two main structural models:

- Circular
- Linear

**Introduction (300)**

Body Paragraph 1 (400-500)

Body Paragraph 2 (400-500)

Body Paragraph 3 (400-500)

Body Paragraph 4 (400-500)

Body Paragraph 5 (400-500)

**Conclusion (300)**

# Structure

- Break presentation into sections to allow:
  - Audience to follow
  - Audience to digest
  - You to focus on the key content in each section

“Signpost the moves in the argument, key turning points, etc.: good opportunities to move from a reading aloud mode to a more conversational style for a moment, to break up the delivery and maintain the audience's attention.”

# Introduction

- The introduction sets the context, scope and structure of your discussion. It should:
  - Introduce and define key terms (especially if these are used in the title), texts and ideas
  - Situate these terms in the context of the paper (and, perhaps, the conference)
  - Signpost the argumentative structure (i.e. first I will, then I will etc.: think about the *journey*)
- A strong start will:
  - Grab (and hold on to) the audience's attention
  - Help them (and you) to relax
  - Make the audience want to listen to you

# Structure: Body and Conclusion

- This is the ‘meat’ of your argument containing data, literature, and analyses. The paragraphs must
  - Build the argument logically
  - Drive towards a predetermined conclusion
  - Link fluently and consistently
  - Communicate independent aspects of your overall paper focus
- **Conclusion**
  - Announce your conclusion: it will re-engage those whose attention has wandered
  - Revisit your main points quickly and concisely
  - Return to your research problem
  - Reflect upon your ‘solution’
  - Try not to repeat yourself
  - End positively and memorably: leave your audience with one clear ‘take away’ message

# Introduction: Exercise

With your particular presentation or research area in mind, spend 5-10 minutes drafting a suitable introduction. Think about:

- Any key terms or texts and how you will describe these
- The context of your research and how much of this you should outline (be aware of your audience)
- How you might structure your presentation into sections that tell a logical, sequential story with a clear conclusion.

After drafting an introduction, swap your notes with a partner and offer some feedback on each other's draft.

# Fine-tuning and practice

“It is common to hear of postgraduates or professional researchers producing conference papers at extremely short notice and doing extremely well nonetheless. While I do not doubt that some people work best under pressure or are great improvisers, my advice is to **write conference papers as far in advance as possible**. It seems integral to speaking well to know the material and your argument well. The idea is to speak fluently from minimal notes or to read from an exceptionally finely crafted script and both these take **time and multiple rehearsals** to achieve.”

- Go back over your presentation several times.
- Cut out any material which does not need to be there:
  - unnecessary filler or padding that serves no particular purpose
  - repetition of a point already made or that would be better made elsewhere
  - run-on sentences

# Purpose of Presenting

- Why are you giving this paper?
- What do you want to get out of it?

“Focus on getting feedback, so try not to be over-protective or defensive of your ideas/paper.”

**It is a myth** that a brilliant conference paper must have brilliant research behind it.