Presenting at a Conference

By M. Worthy

If you are starting out on a postgraduate degree or hoping to break into the academic career market after working elsewhere you may have never attended an academic conference. Presenting your research at a conference is a vital step on the road to a research or lecturing career.

Your PhD supervisor will recommend that you think about presenting a paper after your first year or so of postgraduate study. But even with the support of a supervisor or mentor it can still be a daunting prospect. This article explores some of the skills you will need to develop in order to present a good academic paper.

1. Oral communication

It sounds obvious: of course you need good communication skills to present a conference paper. You have to spend 20-30 minutes describing an aspect of your research to a gathered audience. However, you might be surprised how many senior and eminent academics have not given thought to the specialist skill of oral communication.

You need to be aware that your audience may have difficulty absorbing large amounts of densely packed information. To help them understand your arguments you need to adjust your way of speaking. Make sure that
you speak at an even pace, not too quickly. Think about the volume at which you are speaking: most people have a tendency to speak too softly. Other communication methods are important to help you engage with your audience, such as making regular eye contact and including some ice breaking humor.

If you feel confident about your topic, try to render your speech into note form rather than as a fully written script. This means that you will speak more naturally, rather than reading with your head buried in your notes.

2. Time management

One of the most often criticized aspects of poor conference papers is the inability of the speaker to keep to his or her allotted time. You can make sure that you do not fall into this category by being well prepared. Have your paper finished a long time before the conference (many speakers try to write their paper hurriedly in the hotel room the night before they are due to speak!). Writing your paper ahead of time will give you the chance to rehearse.

Practice giving your paper and time yourself while reading it. The conference organizers should have told you how long your paper should be. Make sure you stick to that, otherwise you will look unprofessional on the day and you might have a chairperson who insists
that you finish your paper in a hurry, thus leaving you flustered and confused.

3. Adaptability

The question and answer session that follows your presentation is equally, if not more important than reading out a prepared paper. This provides the most exciting but also most challenging aspect of presenting at a conference. You have to be able to think on your feet in order to answer the questions from the audience. If you know your material well then this should present no problem. But to some speakers this aspect can be as nerve-wracking as a job interview!

As with an interview, do not be afraid to ask the questioner to repeat their question or to elaborate on it. If you genuinely have no answer to the question admit that you don’t know. This will win a lot more support than if you try to bluff your way through by talking about something else. Most conference audiences are sympathetic towards speakers who are new to the academic arena and will often ask gentle questions and offer useful advice, so do not be frightened: this aspect of the conference will be one of the most rewarding. If you are unlucky and get attacked by a hostile questioner, try to deal with him or her politely but firmly. Have the confidence to know that you are an expert in your particular area and you can defend your arguments.

The single most important aspect to giving a conference paper is the networking opportunities that it presents. You will be able to discuss your ideas and research to your peers during the paper sessions, but it is what goes on outside the formal sessions and during the coffee breaks and lunch breaks that will define your conference experience.

Try to meet as many other scholars as possible during the informal periods whose work interests you. This might mean being brazen and walking up to people and introducing yourself and asking them about their work. Try not to be shy about doing this; it is an accepted, normal part of the conference process.

The motivation behind networking is that you could meet someone who is beneficial to your future career: perhaps an external examiner for your PhD, someone you could conduct a research project with, or even someone who might be on a job interview panel in the future. It is also important to get a feeling for the state of your field at the moment: which institutions are leading the research in your field? Which scholars are winning the research grants? Most senior scholars are open and helpful towards those just starting out in the field. You might meet someone who you work with very closely in future, so don’t rule anything out!

Skills needed to present a paper at an academic conference
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