

Writing a Conference Paper in the Humanities

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A conference paper is a paper that is orally presented to an audience. Almost all conference presentations involve a question and answer session after the presentation. Writers should aim to stimulate and guide the Q&A session in order to receive helpful feedback on their work.

Writing for a Conference Audience:

The audience for whom you are writing should determine the style, organization and content of your paper. **Write in a way that will help the listener understand your points.**

- **Write shorter, less complex sentences.** When sentences become too long, or when the relations between ideas become too complex, a listener will not be able to follow ideas that might be more easily comprehended by a reader.
- **Stick to the standard Subject-Verb-Completion sentence structure** more often than you might in other forms of writing. Avoid using the passive voice or long introductory phrases.
- **Be very explicit about a paper's structure in the introduction.** The introduction should explain a problem or introduce a question, state the author's claims, and map out the paper. Tell your listeners exactly what they will hear so that they know what to expect as they listen.
- **Give your reader frequent "road signs."** In a conference paper, you should make explicit statements of a topic's purpose. Whenever you introduce a new idea, explain to your listener why you are moving to that topic and how it relates to the overall argument.
- **Reorient your reader by providing interim-summaries.** Interim-summaries pause the process of working through the paper's claims to remind the reader of the paper's logical structure. They describe the progress the paper has made thus far and remind the reader of what's coming next.
- **Reduce the number of quotes and paraphrase instead.** You can push your quotes to footnotes that you can refer back to if necessary. Any quotes you do use should be given on a handout or projected if you are using PowerPoint.
- **Use visuals when you can.** When used effectively, visual aids can enhance the impact of your presentation by *showing* rather than describing information. For example, a graph may present your data better than reading statistical figures aloud. When first introducing an image, pause your speaking to allow the audience to take in the image. Briefly explain the image if necessary. In your paper, include cues to yourself for when you should move to the next visual.
- **Explain why the audience should care about your topic.** This process often involves making your own assumptions explicit to your audience. A great way to achieve this is to introduce a problem of general interest or to make explicit the train of thought that brought you to a particular puzzle.
- **Address the theme of the conference.** When evaluating a submission, conference organizers will consider how well a submission fits into the overall theme. You can add an introductory paragraph to your essay that explicitly connects your paper to the theme of the conference.
- **Read your paper out loud to yourself as you revise.** This will allow you to catch awkward phrasing and overly long sentence that you might not notice when reading the paper silently.

Managing the Q&A Session Through Your Writing:

Effectively managing the question and answer portion begins during the writing process. Several writing strategies can help prompt your audience towards certain questions and away from others. If you can anticipate questions that are likely to be asked, you can be prepared for them.

Use lots of examples. Audiences tend to latch onto examples better than abstract points. As a result, the audience tends to use the examples as reference points during the Q&A.

Sand-Bag Claims. “Sand-bagging” is removing details from your paper in order to prompt specific questions. The audience is likely to note the gap and ask about it. The best claims to sand-bag are those that 1) not everyone in your audience will agree with, and 2) you have a well worked out defense or explanation for. You should **not** sand bag the most central claims of your paper. Below are some situations in which sand-bagging can be effective:

- Leave out various non-essential parts of arguments in order to guide discussion: Leave the premises and conclusion in the paper but remove your defense of one of the premises. Or, include only the most important steps in your argument and remove some of the details of how you get from one premise to the next. Or, state an interpretation without fully defending it, and be prepared to give your defense when asked.
- Acknowledge alternative interpretations and state yours: If there are multiple interpretations of a piece of evidence that you use, list the interpretations and state which you think is correct. You can save your reasons for choosing your interpretation for the Q&A. Once again, you should only do this if your interpretation is not a part of your main point.
- Flag a point as an assumption: Calling something an assumption will prompt your reader to evaluate whether or not the assumption is warranted. Flag points that you will not defend or elaborate in the paper (but can defend or elaborate) as assumptions.
- Leave out objections to your view and your responses: You have likely considered several objections to your argument or interpretation and have come up with responses to the objections. Let your audience raise those objections and you will already have a response.
- Mention the significance of a point without explaining in detail: Raise an objection and then mention the situations to which you think the objection applies without going into the details. Suggest practical or methodological implications of your conclusion. Gesture to the historical importance of a claim.

An aside about the Q&A: If you can't answer a question, it's okay to say that you don't know. Thank the person who asked for giving you something to think about and move on!

- It is also a good idea to visibly take notes on key points or questions raised by your audience as a way to show you value their feedback.

Works Consulted and Additional Resources

- Carlin, Nancy J., “Creating and Effective Conference Presentations,” Kappa Omicron Nu Honors Society, Accessed April 10, 2013, <http://www.kon.org/karlin.html>.
- “Conference Papers and Presentations,” The University Center for Writing-based Learning at DePaul, Accessed April 10, 2013, http://condor.depaul.edu/writing/writers/Types_of_Writing/conference.html
- “Presenting Conference Papers in the Humanities,” CGU Writing Center, Accessed April 10, 2013, <http://www.cgu.edu/pages/864.asp>.