

Below are some guidelines as to how to prepare a conference paper. These guidelines are structured along the following themes:

- I. Choosing a presentation technique
- II. Preparing the written text
- III. Preparing the oral presentation
- IV. Organizational aspects
- V. Discussion time
- VI. Some more FAQ

## I. Presentation technique

Do NOT give your paper without illustrations. If you do, it will be much harder for the audience to follow your arguments, and it will therefore be more difficult for you to persuade them. Moreover, using illustrations looks more professional.

There are basically 3 kinds of illustrations: handouts, transparency sheets, and PowerPoint presentations.

*POWERPOINT* presentation offers most in terms of possibilities: it looks VERY professional, can contain ANY kind of information, allows you to create special effects to emphasize certain points, and is entertaining to watch. Important also is that such a presentation does not cost anything at all, and is easy to create (and to alter later for another paper if you wish). It also pre-structures your talk to a high degree, making it easier for you to talk freely: the information is there on the screen anyway. The order is fixed too, so you don't have the problem of possibly getting your transparencies mixed up (or putting them on the projector upside down...) For all these reasons, I strongly encourage you to use PowerPoint for your paper presentation.

If you have a laptop, you can prepare your materials on its hard disc, take the laptop with you to the conference, connect it to the beamer, and use it. It may be useful to familiarize yourself with the connection procedure: which port do you need to connect the beamer cable to? If possible, try out your presentation using a beamer before going to the conference. It may also be useful to take a small screwdriver with you to the conference (but NOT in

your hand luggage: airport authorities may not allow you to take it on board!) to fasten the cable screws (or unscrew them later!)

If you do not have a laptop, or do not wish to take it with you to the conference, you must make sure that you can use the PowerPoint document. There are two ways of doing this. Either you send the organizers your document by email and request them to save it to the hard disc of the desktop computer connected to the beamer in the room where you have your presentation. However, I strongly advise to take a copy of your PowerPoint document in any case. But beware: if you used a significant amount of pictures in it, the document may be too large to fit on to a floppy disc. In that case, see to it that you can burn it to a CD. (And enquire with the local organizers whether the computer there has a CD-drive!)

Three warnings are important if you decide to use PowerPoint:

- A. Inform with the conference organizers **WHETHER** you can use PowerPoint at all. If you can, then request a room which is equipped with a beamer, and confirm its reservation!
- B. Make transparency sheets of your PowerPoint slides (this can be done easily by printing the PowerPoint document, and then making sheets of these print on a copying machine), or better still: provide yourself with some alternative presentation, either with sheets or a handout. The beamer may be out of order, or the connection may not work, etc. If you have no substitute for PowerPoint, you may not be able to give your talk at all! Also think of the fact that maybe you will be a little nervous, so you cannot afford to lose much time over technical problems.
- C. If you can, try out the connection to the beamer before your presentation, preferably the day before. This may mean that you have to contact the organizers, so that they may appoint someone to help you with the technicalities. For your presentation, ask a friend or someone you know to accompany you and support you if necessary.

*TRANSPARENCY SHEETS* are also a good means to present your paper.

- You may assume that overhead projectors are standard equipment in most conference rooms nowadays, but it is wise to check anyway!
- If you can, prepare coloured sheets. They are more fun to watch and you can use colours to emphasize certain aspects of your argument.

- Do not make too many sheets: for a 20-minute talk, 10 sheets is enough.
- Use a large enough font for the text on your sheets: if people are far away, they will be unable to read a point 12 font. Go for point 18 (or larger) instead.
- Do not cram too much information on one sheet – better to have the audience concentrate on a few items that are, however, clearly structured and presented.
- Make a sheet with your name, affiliation and the title of your paper, and put this sheet on the overhead projector at the very beginning of your talk (or even before). Also put your email address on this sheet: people may wish to send you comments on your talk privately after (or even during!) the conference. The initial sheet will make it unnecessary for you to present yourself to the audience (hence saving valuable time), and will ‘break the ice’.
- Number your sheets, so that you do not get confused over the order of presentation during your talk: you will have *other* things to think about while presenting! (You can, of course, ask a friend to help you with the sheets.)
- One thing for which transparencies are not really suited is to present longer texts. If you want the audience to have a look at longer text extracts, then use a handout for this.

*HANDOUTS* are a convenient way to help you in presenting your paper.

- Make sure you have enough copies with you; if necessary enquire with the organizers how many people to expect. Some 15 – 20 copies should normally be OK. If you are short of them, request people in the audience to share copies.
- Distribute the handout at both (or multiple) ends of the rows of seats to speed up distribution (and not to lose time over it).
- Mention your name, affiliation, and email address on top of the first page of your handout. If people take your handout home, they will remember you and can get in touch with you if they wish.
- Structure the information on your handout in a clear and transparent way.

## II. Preparing the written text.

Your paper will be presented to an unknown audience of professionals, in a foreign language, and within a very strict time limit. That puts high demands on your presentational skills. Therefore, it is imperative to prepare well for the event. One very efficient way (certainly as a beginner) is to write out the whole paper beforehand. Do this in the following way:

- If you use PowerPoint or a handout, limit yourself to a maximum of 6 pages (line spacing 2), if you use transparency sheets to maximum 5 pages. This is because handling the sheets takes time as well.
- Write in a simple and clear style, coming close to everyday speech. (The English speaking academic tradition favours this, so do not be afraid that people will think you dumb if you use simple sentences and clear language. Do not forget that this is an oral presentation, and everyone in the audience wants to understand what you are saying.)
- Read through your text *several* times to check whether its structure is clear, whether the sentences are easy to understand, whether the connections between the sentences are transparent, whether it says exactly what you want (and need) to say. Work on the text and revise it as you go along.
- Read out the text aloud as you work on it, to hear whether it ‘sounds’ OK.
- Show a preliminary version of your text to your supervisor with a request for comments and support, as well as correction of the English.
- Revise your text accordingly.
- Make sure you are certain of the right pronunciation of all English words. If uncertain, use a pronunciation dictionary. It may be useful to mark word stress in a different colour as a help.
- Print out a copy of the final version of your text in a font large enough to be read from a distance.

## III. The oral presentation

- Memorize the text; you can use small cards for memory support – have the text somewhere in front of you in case you get stuck, but do not ‘read’ from the paper.
- Rehearse your presentation several times orally.

- Have a 'dress rehearsal': ask a few friends to listen to your presentation and to give you feedback on it.

There is not much more you can do in order to prepare the oral presentation of your paper. But there are some more things you can do to make your presentation a success:

- Try to control your nerves: think of how many other ordinary people have done this before.
- During your presentation, do not sit! Stand in front of the audience, and do not shy away. Have your memory cards, your text, and your sheets / handout / computer ready. If you dare, stand close to them, that gives an impression of self-assurance.
- Think that nerves often do not show. You may be trembling inside, but often nothing of the kind shows on the outside.
- Breathe deeply and calmly; often that has a beneficial effect on your state of mind.
- Speak loudly and clearly. A good trick is to ask people in the back whether they can understand you. This creates an informal atmosphere and makes you look confident.
- Speak slowly. Your time is limited, but you have prepared your talk accordingly, so there is no need to rattle away.
- Establish eye contact with the audience; this makes it less frightening. They are human beings just like you, and most of them have gone through the agonizing experience of giving a first paper themselves, so they know how it feels; therefore, many people in the audience will be sympathetic toward you.
- Try to be humorous; it relaxes the atmosphere and takes the sting out of it all.
- Use body language to make clear or emphasize what you want to say.
- Do not be afraid that you will be ready *before* your 20 minutes are up. Audiences generally highly approve of this: it makes it less strenuous for them, gives them more time for interaction with you, and – most importantly – shows professionalism on your part.
- Of course you may wish not to be ready before your time is up, because the discussion is what you dread most. Therefore, a few words on discussion are in order.

Before that, however, let us first look at some organizational aspects of conference papers you must know about.

#### IV. Organizational aspects

Most paper presentations at international conferences are limited to 20 minutes, followed by 10 minutes' discussion. Sessions are presided over ('chaired') by someone who has been appointed by the local organizers. Usually these are senior or at least experienced researchers, so you may trust that they know how to handle such a situation. The task of the chair is threefold:

- to make sure that your paper starts on time, and to introduce you to the audience;
- to guarantee that you stick to the time schedule; usually the chair will show you a yellow card saying '5 more minutes' after a quarter of an hour, and then a red card saying '1 more minute'. Often the chair will stop you after 20 minutes, though sometimes s/he may let you speak on;
- to preside over the discussion. Normally, the chair will thank you after your presentation and will invite contributions from the audience.

Beyond this, a chair may also consider it his / her duty to help you out with handouts, equipment, or any other things where you may need assistance, and may also help you in handling questions or remarks from the audience during the discussion, but there are considerable differences between people in this respect, so that you may not always take this for granted.

If you can, try to find out who the chair of your session is and go and introduce yourself to him / her before your talk is on. If you are unable to do so, go to the chair immediately before the session starts and introduce yourself.

#### V. Discussion time

This, of course, is what everyone dreads most, since you are at the mercy of the audience, and cannot really prepare yourself for it. However, there are a few things you can do to make it less of an ordeal:

- Remain calm: people in the audience will ask questions, not bite.
- Do not panic if you do not understand a question or remark. Simply request to repeat it: "I am sorry, but I am not sure I understand the question. Can you please repeat it?"
- Do not be ashamed if your English is not perfect: all non-natives make mistakes, and native speakers know that, and appreciate your efforts

to communicate in their language. I have NEVER in my whole life seen someone ridiculed because of his / her English!

- Listen carefully to what the speaker is saying / asking.
- If you do not know the answer to a question or remark, do not beat about the bush, but simply admit that you do not know.
- If a sensible piece of criticism is uttered, acknowledge it – say that you will take that into account, or that you will think further about it.
- Thank people for remarks; it costs nothing, is courteous, and conveys a pleasant image.
- Sometimes a question is asked about an aspect of your research that you have covered but had no time to present in those 20 minutes. If you had prepared sheets on that aspect, you may put these on now and talk about them.
- If you disagree with the speaker, simply say so in a polite and non-personal way, like “Well, I am not so sure...” Often this can be done courteously by putting your disagreement in the form of a question, like “But what if ...?” or “But wouldn’t you think that ...?”

The purpose of the discussion is to improve the quality of academic work. So please consider this as a means to find out about any shortcomings your research has, so make notes during or immediately after the discussion, so that you can use the criticism when you write up your paper for publication later.

## VI. Some more FAQ:

1. Do I have to dress up?  
*No, but you are allowed to, of course. The scientific community is generally not interested in your clothes, and you will see that about EVERY kind of style is allowed.*
2. Do I have to behave in a specific way?  
*Again, no. Try to behave naturally, that is, in the way that feels pleasant to yourself. And \*be\* yourself!*
3. What do I do if someone launches an irrational attack on me?  
*Simply say that you disagree, that you are of another opinion, and that you think you have good reasons to believe that your own position is not completely wrong.*

4. What if all of a sudden I have a blackout?

*No problem. Take your text in your hands, look whereabouts you were with your talk, and start reading from there on. If after some time your memory comes back, you can put away the text and speak freely again. If not, just continue reading till the end.*

5. What if my hands or knees are trembling?

*Well, what *\*is\** wrong with that? Everyone in the audience has been in such tight situations too, so they will certainly not laugh at it. If it happens, do not be ashamed of this – it is a natural reaction, there is nothing wrong about it!*

Anything else?