

Presenting a Paper at a Conference

John Madden, Cerritos College

If you have never presented a paper at a conference before, you have a good experience ahead of you. Your audience will be mostly other community college students, with a smattering of teachers, and they will be friendly. They will be interested in what you have to say, and will want you to succeed. Do not be afraid of them. When you are not presenting your own paper, visit the other sessions and listen to others presenting theirs. It is a wonderful opportunity to meet new people and learn new things.

I. Preparation: The Dry Run

Two weeks before the conference date, do a complete “dry run” of your presentation in front of someone who can critique you. Use your full written text and all your props, charts, illustrations or audio-visual materials.

A. Written Text: Write out everything you will say in your presentation. Do not rely on notes or on extemporizing as you go along: write out your presentation—in large print.

B. Time: Pay careful attention to your time-limit (15 minutes in most cases), and time your oral presentation to make sure that it is inside the limit. Do not rush your reading. Everyone hates a rushed delivery, because no one can understand what you are saying. One full page of double-spaced text takes about two minutes to read at a comfortable speed. So for a 15-minute limit, your absolute maximum is seven pages. BUT:

- You should leave time for a question or two, so you must shorten your text by a page or two.
- You should take a minute to introduce yourself, so you must shorten your text by another page.
- If you have any charts or pictures or A-V material to explain, you must also shorten your text.
- If you need or want to pause to explain further anything in your text or give examples, you must also shorten your text.

C. Organization: When you are standing in front of an audience, you don't think as freely as you do when you are alone at your desk, so organize ahead of time all the materials you will use, and set them out in the order in which you will need them. Make sure that any passages in books are bookmarked so you can find them instantly. Arrange your transparencies or charts in the correct order. If you need to use any kind of machine, practice using it ahead of time.

II. The Presentation Itself

A. Dress: Unless told otherwise, dress style is up to you. Some men will be wearing jackets and ties, and women will be wearing dresses; others will be dressed more casually. But *casual* should mean “business casual”—no jeans, no hats. Avoid the extremes of very baggy or very tight. It never hurts to dress up and start getting used to adult professional life.

B. Scouting: Arrive early so you can locate your room. Take a look at how it is set up and where you will be speaking. Decide where you will put your papers, visual aids, flyers, etc. Check to see if your audio-visual equipment is in the room. If it is not, figure out how you will go ahead without it (or initiate your back-up plan, if you've arranged to share equipment with another presenter).

C. Introduction: A moderator will probably introduce you. Still, it is a good idea to recap and expand a bit on the formal introduction. Make sure your name and school come across to the audience. What is your major? Where do you live? If you think your national/cultural origin would be of interest, you could mention that. What is the origin of your paper: is it a project for a biology class, a paper for English, part of a group project, or just something you wanted to investigate? To what school do you hope to transfer? You might also want to thank UCI for hosting this conference—especially if you notice a UCI representative among your listeners! Do not take more than a minute for this introduction (time yourself) but DO say something about yourself.

D. Courtesy: Avoid scurrying about from room to room during presentations. As you might imagine, that distracts everyone, especially the presenter(s). We prefer that you stay in the room for the full session. Now, if a dire need should require your presence elsewhere and you absolutely *must* leave or enter a room, at least wait for the speaker to conclude. But please, for everyone's sake, plan to remain in the room until *all* presentations are completed. Give your fellow speakers the consideration you would want shown to you.