LEARNING AND INFORMATION SERVICES

Conference papers

There are many advantages to attending an academic conference, whether to present a paper, listen to others or to network. Conferences are particularly useful for postgraduate researchers who are just starting their research and are perhaps not quite yet ready to write an article, or want to meet other students. They are also an excellent way of gathering feedback about your research through audience questions and discussion. This can stimulate new ideas for developing your paper, perhaps into a journal article. This guide outlines the steps you might want to take in finding relevant conferences, preparing your paper and presenting your work on the day.

Finding and choosing a suitable conference

Conferences broadly fall into two types: large annual conferences or one-off events usually organised by university departments, special interest groups or postgraduate researchers. Think about which might suit you more at this point in time; would you prefer a smaller conference with other postgraduate students, or are you looking to network with well-known academics in your field and share your work with a wider audience? Either way, here are some ways of finding out about conferences, and deciding if they are right for you:

- Many subject areas have listservs (lists of people who have signed up to receive emails about a particular topic) or websites where calls for papers (or CFPs) can be added and shared to subscribers. H-Net is an example of one for Humanities, and has a network called H-Announce that will send out conference news and CFPs every week.
- Once you’ve found a conference, look carefully at the details to decide if it is of interest. Do you recognise the name of the keynote speaker? Do you know any of the organisers? If you are looking to attend rather than present, look through the lists of speakers and papers, and gauge how useful it might be.
- You can also ask your supervisor if they know of any relevant conferences coming up, or for their opinion about a conference that you would like to attend. Going to a conference within your own department or the University can also be a great way in to presenting and attending conferences.

Responding to a Call for Papers

If you decide you would like to present at a conference, you will need to respond to the conference’s call for papers. This will normally outline a theme for the conference, often with a bullet-point list of sub-topics or areas that the conference organisers are interested in. Think about the following:

- How well does your research match this conference’s focus? Try to avoid forcing your research to fit with a conference that is not closely linked to your area; not only is it likely that you will not get asked to present (therefore potentially wasting your time and the organisers’), if you are invited you will most likely feel worried about being out of place.
• Pay close attention to the information that the CFP asks for. In particular, there will be a word limit for the abstract that you are asked to submit, and often additional documents such as CVs may be required. Send all the necessary information, keeping within the word limits, by the deadline requested.

• Your abstract will require careful thought. Try to condense the key points of your paper (or intended paper, if not yet written) but make sure there is enough detail to give the organisers a sense of what you will be discussing or arguing. You need to strike a balance between being succinct, thorough, but also – importantly – engaging.

Preparing your conference paper

Unlike most academic writing, conference papers are obviously intended to be read aloud. For this reason they require some careful thought. Consider the following:

• How will you be presenting your paper? With a visual presentation such as PowerPoint, with paper handouts for the audience, or just by reading aloud? Visual aids can be a powerful way of getting your points across more succinctly, and also give some extra interest; you may need to work slightly harder to liven up a paper that will be purely read out.

• Your argument needs to have a very clear and logical progression that the audience can follow. You could outline the structure of your paper in your introduction for clarity, or recap main points or connections in suitable places.

• Practice reading your paper aloud over and over, and be rigorous with timing yourself. Slow your talking speed right down, and make sure you run to just under the time allotted. Feeling like you are running out of time on the day will only lead to a rushed and panicked presentation, particularly if you are already feeling nervous.

On the day

Attending or presenting at a conference can be nerve-wracking, especially if you do not know any other attendees. These are some ways to make the experience enjoyable and productive:

• Arrive early. It is much easier to start talking to other delegates when there are fewer people there. If you arrive later, everyone else will already be chatting, and you may find it harder to start a conversation.

• Talk to the people that you are sat next to. At the very least, you should have connected research interests and may be at a similar stage in your studies or career.

• Remember to talk through your paper at a measured pace and resist the urge to talk quickly; the point of a conference is to get your ideas out there, so people need to hear them.

• Try not to worry too much about questions at the end. It is better to say you are not sure about the answer (but offer to get back to the individual at a later date) than flounder trying to make up an answer. You will probably find that you can answer most questions without too many problems however, as you will be talking about your own research!

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