Writing a Conference Paper

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1. **Why Bother? The Values of Orally Presenting Research**

Writing a conference or symposium paper can be an intimidating and time consuming task. Oral presentation differs markedly from written submissions, and poses unique challenges to anyone presenting their research. This short handbook is designed to help you identify some strategies for success. These strategies are focused around the communication of complex ideas in an accessible and professional manner.

1a. **Negative Aspects**

To begin with, it is worth considering some of the negative aspects of deciding to present a conference paper. We can group these (loosely) around the following headings:

1. **Time**: To begin with an obvious point, preparing and presenting a conference paper takes time. Most research students have severe restrictions on their time, so if you are weighing up whether or not to present at a conference, questions of time management should be foremost in your mind. You will need to spare time for writing, proofing, and rehearsing your paper — not to mention designing any visual material/handouts, and actually attending the conference itself. It might be worth discussing your progress with your supervisor before committing yourself to present.

2. **Money**: As Cyndi Lauper famously stated: "money changes everything". And your decision on whether or not to attend a conference will, for most, have to take financial considerations into account. By the time you tot up conference fees, flights, and accommodation expenses, the lure of a conference can fade substantially. Be very aware of the support available within the university, and any bursaries/scholarships you can apply for. These applications can often have strict deadlines and procedures — if you aren't sure ask your supervisor(s) or school Postgraduate Director/Director of Research.

3. **Energy**: Few doctoral students have energy to spare; so it is worth weighing up the advantages of presenting a conference paper against the disadvantages of what can be an exhausting experience.

4. **Stress**: For most inexperienced researchers, simply attending a conference can be an anxiety- and stress-ridden undertaking, especially if it is taking place outside of your host institution. Knowing that you have to present your research findings to the eminent (and not so eminent) names on the conference register, can be a daunting prospect. Considering how stressful
completing a doctoral project is anyway, it is well worth considering just how much extra stress an untimely conference could put on your plate.

1b. Positive Outcomes

That's not to say, of course, that attending conferences and presenting research are not worthwhile endeavours; they are… sometimes. And when they are, there are a range of benefits that can easily outweigh the negative elements listed above:

1. **New Research:** Attending conferences is the most effective way to discover new research within your discipline. Consider, for example, the length of time it takes to write and publish an article (typically 12-18 months) or a book (perhaps 3-4 years). Many of these documents begin life as an experimental conference or symposium paper.

2. **Network:** Conferences provide fantastic networking opportunities. Use them to identify prominent (and emerging) voices within your field of research. Strong social ties lead to publications, job opportunities, and invitations to present your research. For early career academics (post-PhD), such productive social ties can enhance employability immeasurably.

3. **Feedback:** Feedback can be scarce at doctoral level. A conference is a great opportunity to receive ideas and (hopefully constructive) critique. This feedback is invaluable, because your audience will most likely engage directly with your ideas, and won't be distracted by punctuation and referencing issues. Furthermore, because they're hearing your research ideas for the first time, their fresh ideas may see virtues or flaws that you (and your supervisor(s)) have missed.

4. **Establishing your research:** Giving conference attendees a chance to meet you personally will increase the chance that they remember you, and connect your name with a particular research field.

5. **Practice:** The intellectual and emotional challenges posed by conference Q & A (not to mention general networking) is fantastic practice ahead of interviews, and the inevitable viva. Use conferences to refine your communication skills – PhD research is isolating, and such social practice is rare, so make the most of it.

6. **Route to publication:** Perhaps the most tangible benefit of participating in a conference is the potential to publish your research – this can be directly (through conference proceedings) or indirectly (through contacts gained). Either way, it is a great opportunity to get your work out there.
2. **Selecting an Appropriate Conference**

Before committing yourself to a conference, you might wish to consider the merits of doing so against the prestige of the conference in question. Is the institution internationally respected? Do the keynote speakers reflect ambition and excellence? Are there opportunities for publication? There are also practical considerations to take into account: Where is the conference and how will you travel? When is it taking place and does this conflict with your other commitments? Can you attain funding to lessen the financial outlay? Does the location of the conference appeal for other reasons?

This section explores the preliminary stages involved in readying a research ideas for a conference.

2a. **The Call for Papers**

- Specifies which types of paper that the conference will accept
- States the guidelines for each type of paper
- Outlines a deadline for each
- May provide details of future publication(s)
- Should impress the type of audience being targeted

2b. **Location(s)**

Assess the practicalities of reaching the conference:
- What can you claim by way of expenses?
- Are you likely to encounter problems?
  - Language
  - Currency
  - Can you find and access accommodation?
  - Is the conference in one location?
  - Orientation
  - Cultural difference

2c. **Networking**

Establish contacts:
- Fellow postgraduate researchers
- Established academics
- Respected voices from your field of research
- Potential avenues for collaboration & publication
- Reconnaissance on potential examiners

2d. **Publication**

- Is there a planned (and agreed) publication for the conference proceedings?
• Quality of publisher?
• How many papers will they accept?
• Are only keynote speakers to be published?
• Is selection itself refereed? By who?

IF YOU CAN’T FIND ANSWERS, ASK!
3. Writing and Submitting Your Abstract & Title

It is worth remembering that, depending upon the scale and prestige of the conference, organisers will receive many applications for research presentations. With this in mind, the effectiveness of your title and abstract is of paramount importance. Just as job applications are measured against set criteria and specifications, so too are conference decisions made upon particular details. This section surveys some key considerations in the submission process.

3a. The Title

Writing an effective, attention grabbing title is a tricky business. Titles must be brief, but they must also convey the scope, content, and particular focus of your research paper. Read the following guidelines and complete the practical exercise – investing time and energy in your paper title can maximise your chances of acceptance, and beyond this encourage conference participants to take interest in your research.

1. **Brevity**: Use as few words as possible – organisers (and potential conference participants) will scan lists of titles to identify relevance, quality, and originality. Papers are often grouped into relevant panels based upon titles alone, so give your readers what they need to place you in an appropriate panel.

2. **Dynamism**: Mundane titles do little to indicate a dynamic and noteworthy air to your research. Use verbs/verbal phrases to convey energy in your title, e.g. "Reconceiving…", "Assessing…", "Rethinking…", "Forming…", "Exploring…" etc.

3. **Scope**: You should try to communicate the scope of your project to your reader(s). This helps to limit expectations, and clearly articulates the range of information that you intend to cover. Consider the data-yield that you wish to explore, and how you can capture this in the title of your paper.

4. **Specificity**: Don't isolate readers from your work by overusing technical terminology. Be specific and clear, without 'hiding behind' ambiguous terminology. Participants in conferences, particularly interdisciplinary ones, will shy away from intimidating or esoteric paper titles.

5. **Excitement**: It can be difficult, but you must try to resist the urge towards drabness. Be playful with your title, whilst maintaining the clarity of your scope and focus. Try to grab your readers’ attention and set your paper apart (for positive reasons!) from other speakers.
Practical Exercise 1: Constructing Titles

List the key terms that your research paper relates to. If this was available on a search database, which key terms would you want to lead a researcher to your paper?

Now, number these terms in logical progression, i.e. prioritise your core key terms, and identify the order in which secondary key terms are explored.

Next, (re)construct versions of your title using no more than 10 words, and containing verbs/verbal phrases.
3b. The Abstract

The abstract is expected, in most cases, to contain enough information for a conference organiser to judge the suitability of your research for their event. As such, conference organisers will expect to find information relating to: a description of the area of your research; an account of what you did, why you did it, and what the outcomes were; the relationship of your work to the academic field; relevance to the conference theme; and information of interest to the conference participants. Consider the following guidelines before drafting your abstract.

i. Structure

As with the paper title, brevity is essential in writing any abstract. Typically, organisers will accept 200-300 words (if they don't specify a limit, use 200-300 a general guide). Try emulating the following structure:

– Introduction/research problem (1-2 lines)
– Objective/research goal (1)
– Research Design (3-4) – where/when/how/what data?
– Results (3-4)
– Conclusion (1)

ii. Style

In terms of style, it is vital that your abstract is energetic and flows smoothly from one sentence to the next.

• Be concise
• Use short, simple sentences
• Keep subjects and verbs close together
• Employ the active voice where possible
• Use present tense: ‘The paper argues/discusses/probes/surveys’, etc.
• Avoid jargon or overuse of terms that require clarification
• Advertise the originality of your study
• Don’t reference other works unless it is unavoidable

iii. Scope

Ideally, you will have already written (at least a version of) the conference paper. If so, you can confidently detail the scope of your findings. When your research conclusions are clear, be firm with your convictions. Use the present tense to assert
your ownership of these conclusions: "I argue"; "the paper concludes"; "X determines..." etc. Often, however, people apply for conferences with proposals of research ideas, or wish to present explorative papers of research that is so new, the scale of the findings has not been realised. In these cases, you should leave your scope open-ended, without giving the impression of being incomplete. Terms such as 'explore', 'discuss', 'probe', etc. can hedge any uncertain conclusions; BUT be wary of 'hiding behind' ambiguous terminology.

iv. Focus

Your paper should explore one aspect of a larger problem/topic:

- Identify this focus
- Centre everything around it
- Use your title to gesture towards it
- State the focus early; you don't have room for elaborate 'lead in' material
- Orientate your focus around the conference theme(s)
Practical Exercise 2: Construct / Revise Your Abstract

Repeat key terms/themes of the writing in order of logical progression:

Outline your research problem statement: What problem/gap in research is your paper addressing?

This paper is...

Research ‘Solution’ Statement (How are you correcting / bridging this issue?)

This paper is...
Practical Exercise 2

Use your problem and solution statements to draft your abstract according to the structure outline (below):

– Introduction/research problem (1-2 lines)
– Objective/research solution (1)
– Research Design (3-4) – where/when/how/what data?
– Results (3-4)
– Conclusion (1)
Practical Exercise 3:

Below is a conference call for papers from a real event. Read the information and evaluate the title and abstract against the above criteria. Would you accept this proposal for your conference? Why?

LAW, LITERATURE, AND TRANSLATION CONFERENCE
TRINITY COLLEGE, DUBLIN 9-10th of June 2012

There is no law without literature for law is also literature. Irish druids were not only poets: they were also invested with judicial authority. Still to this day, literature and translation of literature often deal with law, but very often the focus lies on the many ways of breaking the law. Especially in Ireland, poets and jurists are both celebrated and blamed for their talents in using words. Both are endowed with the power to charm their audience, sometimes at the cost of truth. The training of both a jurist and a poet involves a certain degree of self-characterization formed and influenced by culture. Law and literature, like all the humanities, share a common interest in the human experience and they look into what makes them specifically human. However, law aims at the clarity of an objective science whereas the power of literature and its translation rely on emotion and sensitivity of interpretation. Unlike what is expected from law, they feed on ambivalence, ambiguity, paradox and contradiction. Both Law and Literature are caught in the extensive possibilities but also the limitations of both written and spoken words. This conference aims to create an interdisciplinary dialogue between scholars of law, literature, and translation studies, and it seeks to explore the various interactions between these disciplines. It takes a broad approach to the fields of law, literature, and literary translation, welcoming papers considering key areas such as the following (and beyond):

**Law in literature**
- legal and criminal figures in literature
- crime and punishment
- writers and criminals
- heroes and public offenders...

**Law as literature**
- the rhetoric of law
- the narrative of law
- law as a performing art
- staging law
- law as performance
- criminal confessions and jurists’ memoirs
- legal reading and interpretation
- translating law and comparative law

**Law of literature**
- censorship
- freedom of expression
- freedom of information
- libel and defamation
- ethics

**Law and translation**
- Ownership
- Copyright law
- Questions of originality
Submitted Abstract Title & Proposal:

'Wandering in Translation: William Tyndale and the Liber Vagatorum'

In 1528 Martin Luther edited and prefaced an edition of a German pamphlet entitled the Liber Vagatorum (The Little Book of Vagabonds). So-called “Grandfather” to the (Elizabethan) English ‘rogue-pamphlet tradition’, the text claims to warn the general public of vagrant criminal types through a sensationalised taxonomy of deviant offenders. From “False Murderers” to “Naked Beggars”, the vagabonds are fundamentally defined by their illegal mobilities; they wander from community to community, soliciting false charity through manipulation and deceit. My paper argues that Luther’s interest in circulating this work represents a reformist conditioning of the verb “to wander”, and that this conditioning was translated into English culture through the work of William Tyndale with lasting effect. In his translations of the New Testament, undertaken just two years before Luther’s endorsement of the Liber, Tyndale consistently censored “wander”. In so doing, the arch-reformist translator reveals a key anxiety at the heart of English and continental reform – the charge of erring from the ways of Christendom. Exploring the etymological history of “wander”, the paper maps its changing usage from pre- to post-Reformation years, concluding with a reflective account of the translator as a marshal of ‘vagabond’ words, phrases, and beliefs in the early decades of English print.

Which strategies can you identify in the abstract? Which strategies are missing?
How closely does it seem to relate to the conference agenda? Is the abstract accessible? Concise? Relevant? Coherent? Understandable?
4. **Writing the Paper**

Once your abstract has been accepted, you have to write the paper. Writing a conference paper poses unique challenges, and even if you are converting an already polished work, there are certain conditions that must be met.

4a. **Length**

Typical conference papers are required to be 20 minutes long. We can break this down as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Paragraph 1</td>
<td>400-500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Paragraph 2</td>
<td>400-500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Paragraph 3</td>
<td>400-500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Paragraph 4</td>
<td>400-500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Paragraph 5</td>
<td>400-500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 24000 words
4b. **Structure:**

i. **Introduction**

The introduction must do three things:

- Introduce and define key terms (of the paper title)
- Situate these terms in the context of the paper (and conference?)
- Signpost the argumentative route: from paragraph 1 to 5 sequentially, gesturing towards (not ‘blurting out’) the conclusion(s)

**FULFIL THIS CRITERIA IN THIS ORDER**

ii. **Body**

This is the ‘meat’ of your argument containing data, literature, and analyses. The paragraphs must

- Build the argument logically
- Drive towards a predetermined conclusion
- Link fluently and consistently
- Communicate independent aspects of your overall paper focus

iii. **Conclusion**

- Announce your conclusion: it will re-engage those whose attention has wandered
- Revisit your main points quickly and concisely
- Return to your research problem
- Reflect upon your ‘solution’
- Try not to repeat yourself
- End positively and memorably: leave your audience with one clear ‘take away’ message
4c. **Style**

The style of a presentation paper should differ markedly from that of a written one. The oral medium demands clear transitions, appropriate punctuation, and as little reliance upon quotations and secondary material as possible.

i. **Clear Transitions**

Use oral cues such as

- “I have three points. Number one will...”
- “Let’s stop here and reflect...”
- “We can observe these findings in another...”
- “Here we see...”
- “What does this imply?”

...to entice and maintain audience attention.

ii. **Appropriate Punctuation**

It's worth remembering that the only person who will see your paper, at this stage, is you. Be kind to yourself, and avoid unnecessarily complex punctuation. Try to avoid, for example, parenthesis, dashes, and semicolons. If you pause to quote from a text, signal these words to indicate that you are doing so: "quote" .... "end-/un-quote". You must be careful that you don't quote too extensively, this can be confusing and disorientating for your audience.

iii. **Argument**

In a 20 minute paper, there is no reason for your argument to deviate or unravel.

- Articulate an aspect of the argument in every paragraph
- Give your audience what they need as soon as you can – don’t make them work for it, most of them won’t
- Introduce and conclude **forcefully** – use punctuation and style to assert your stance
- Find simple ways to discuss complex ideas
5. **General Preparation: Beyond Writing**

You can never prepare for every eventuality. Nevertheless, there are some bases that you can cover to minimise the risk of something going wrong on the day of presentation. Here are some factors to consider as you prepare.

5a. **Time**

- Practice your paper against the clock
- Associate time with important points
- Don’t waste time on preliminaries and lengthy introductions: at 10%, 2-3 minutes is all you can afford
- Make sure that your paper adequately covers the
  - Research question
  - Context
  - Research design
  - Findings
  - Take-away message

5b. **The Message**

Have a clear sense of your ‘take-away' message: what do you want your audience to remember?

- Convey the unique character of your research
- Place it firmly in the context of
  - Your paper
  - The conference
  - Be clear about what distinguishes your work from others’

5c. **Audio-Visual Aids**

Remember that audio-visual support can be an asset and distraction. Use slides to

- Focus attention on the content, rather than you
- Reinforce key points
- Provide visual counterpoints to key ideas
- Indicate structure
- Elaborate a crucial definition or exquisite quotation
5d. Reconnaissance

- Check the list of speakers and spend some time researching their recent publications
- Identify good contacts in advance; perhaps prepare a complement
- Check the room in which you are presenting
  - Equipment
  - Space
  - Hazards
- Study the question patterns in preceding sessions

5e. Nerves

- Preparedness: feedback, practice papers, guidance, advice
- Crib sheets: note key information and take it with you
- Pause for breath
- Introduce yourself as a student

5f. Handling Questions

- Practice the balanced response
  - Respond positively, even to criticism
  - Don’t get drawn into a tense or heated debate
  - Accept suggestions and speak to your inquisitor after the paper
  - Answer suggestions with questions
    - “I’m not familiar with the work you refer to; what point does the author make?”
  - Never ever ‘fake it’

5e. Beyond Writing: A Checklist

- Have you checked the level of detail at which to give the talk?
- Are you confident about what the audience will already know?
- Have you rehearsed the paper? With an audience?
- Are your slides readable?
- Have you checked out the room?
- Do you have a master sheet showing where you should be at which stage of the talk?
- Do you have a backup plan in case of equipment failure?
Further Reading
