

University Library: Skills for Researchers

Conference Papers

A conference paper is the text of a paper or presentation given at a conference, symposium, seminar or similar. There are many advantages to attending an academic conference, whether to present a paper, listen to others, inspire new ideas or to network and build relationships with other researchers in your field. Conferences are particularly useful for postgraduate researchers who are just starting their research and are perhaps not quite yet ready to write an article. They are 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. While there were online conferences before, the Covid-19 pandemic saw a large move towards online, accessible conferences becoming normalised. Unfortunately, that trend is now slowing but it's worth double checking whether the conference you are interested in is in-person, online, or mixed. This opens a wider range of possibilities for presenting your paper and attending conferences at a geographical distance.

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? Would you benefit from an online environment? Regardless, here are some ways of finding out about conferences:

- 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.
- Social media, such as Twitter, is a good way of getting more personalised recommendations, and many conferences select a Twitter hashtag for their event so you can follow remotely.
- Following particular institutions, either because of their strong research in your area, or the presence of a specific academic, using RSS feeds, mailing lists and other social media is an excellent way of keeping up to date with their events.
- Searching on [Eventbrite](#) is a good way of looking for small, or one day conferences; however you may be looking at single events within a larger conference so more investigation will be needed.
- 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, such as the [Annual Research Conference \(ARC\)](#) at the University of Wolverhampton.

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. Is it in-person or online? If it's in-person, are the travel arrangements and financial implications plausible?

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; following instructions will give you a better chance of your paper being accepted. 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, either online or in-person. 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. Additionally, visual aids work extremely well in an online settings as a range of options become available. Consider whether you will be presenting live through conference software (if so, which piece of software?) or submitting a video file; if submitting a video of the presentation, is it possible for you to be live to answer any questions afterwards?
- 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. Try to end with the most important point you want your audience to take away.
- What is the time limit? Don't try to cram too much information into your time limit – your audience will find this very difficult to follow. 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.
- If possible use notes rather than a script. While this can be nerve-wracking, like any presentation the more natural and spontaneous the delivery the better. Reading word for word from a script can lead to a wooden and uninspiring performance. In the majority of cases, your audience knows how intimidating it can be to present and will be sympathetic.
- Prepare a back-up plan. What can you do if something goes wrong, like technology failure? As your paper has been accepted, you will have contact details for the organiser(s) and they should have given you information about the presentation space (either online or in-person). If in person, scope out the room in advance of your paper; both so you know exactly where it is on a potentially unfamiliar campus and have an idea of the layout, size and technology available. Don't be afraid to ask for what you need from the organiser in advance.

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. Make a note of other papers or academics you are interested in to potentially contact in the future.
- 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!
- Keep a record of your paper and the details of the conference. This can be built up over time to record all your speaking activities and add to a CV or publication history in the future.

Help and Advice

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