Research, Innovation Transfer and Graduate Studies

THOMPSON RIVERS UNIVERSITY

THE STUDENT PRESENTER'S GUIDE TO CONFERENCES

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CONFERENCE PARTICIPATION

There are many different rules of thumb when it comes to advice on how to behave at a conference. This is caused in part by the large variety of conferences out there. Some academic conferences are very formal and regimented – even during social activities – while others are incredibly informal. That being said, you should always conduct yourself as if the conference was formal, and there are some general guidelines which should always be kept in mind when you are attending any conference.

During the Sessions

- Show up on time for registration, the different sessions, and for any planned activities. If you are late for registration you may not be able to attend the conference, and if you are a speaker and you are late you may not be permitted to present. If you are an audience member and you enter late for a session you will not only interrupt others in the audience who are listening to the speaker, but you will also rudely interrupt the person delivering the talk. If you must be late, be sure to take off all outerwear (coats, hats, etc.), and take out any writing material you may need, outside of the session room to avoid excess noise. Also, make sure to sit in the seat which is closest to the door, or stand at the back of the room if there are no available seats which are easily accessed. Do not go and clamber over people to reach a seat.
- Do not eat during a session. Having a coffee or water is fine, but avoid packaging which will make noise when opened.
- Turn off your cell phone. Having your cell ring during a session is considered extremely rude behaviour and should be avoided. If you are expecting an urgent call sit near the door, put your phone on vibrate and answer it after you have exited the room.
- Try to avoid exiting the room during a talk. Getting up and leaving a talk, even if the speaker is depressingly dull, is considered rude behaviour as it disrupts the speaker and your fellow audience members, and it can give the impression you are not happy with the presentation. Such impressions can be very worrisome to presenters, especially to those who are inexperienced or very nervous.
- During the question period at the end of the session it is always a good idea to ask the presenter a question about their research. This shows you are interested in their work, and it will help stimulate dialogue among the rest of the audience. It will also be a beneficial exercise in thinking critically about others' research and your own.
- Try not to monopolise the speaker's time when asking questions or making a comment. There is time after the session to talk to the presenter in person if you want further information on a point.
- When commenting be sure to offer constructive criticism if you take issue with an aspect of the research. Negative statements will only serve to make the presenter uncomfortable or argumentative, and will make you appear unprofessional. Of course positive feedback is always welcomed by the presenter, so if you liked something be sure to say so.
- Just be polite and courteous to others around you and you will be fine.

At the Social Events

- It's party time! Well, yes and no. Certainly having a good time is a key aspect of the conference social events (dinners, prearranged outings, etc.), but this should not be taken to extremes. You may often see other conference participants imbibing to excess, and some faculty members as well, but this does not mean you should act in a similar fashion. Dancing on the table tops is not the best method of developing a professional image and reputation. Also, having a hangover the next morning, especially if that is when you have to present, will not make your presentation enjoyable for anyone. You will not be at your best, and your talk will suffer as a result.
- It may be fine to wear relaxed clothing to a conference event, but be sure to check about the welcome or closing dinner as they may be semi-formal. However, avoid clothing which is too revealing or in poor repair. Keep in mind you are still at an academic event, and you should dress appropriately.
- While it is understandable for you to feel out of place and intimidated while at a conference, try to get out there and meet some new people as much as you can. Conferences are a great venue for networking. Go and talk to the presenters who had interesting research, or who are researching similar areas as you; they probably want to discuss their work with you as well. Having a business card with your name, contact information, research interests, and university affiliation is an easy way to get your name out into the research community, and it negates the awkward scramble for a pen and paper on which to write someone's name and e-mail address.

The contacts which you make at a conference will often come in handy in the future when you are further into your academic career. They are individuals with whom you can discuss research ideas and findings, who you can contact for information on research source material, and who you can call if you need a place to stay when traveling around the world.

HOW TO WRITE AN ABSTRACT

Many conference organizers require applicants to provide an abstract when applying, and many only use the abstract to determine if a paper will be suitable enough for presentation. Others use both the abstract and a full paper to make their decision, or only the full paper. Whatever method is employed, being able to write a solid abstract will serve you in good stead later on in your academic career.

When submitting an abstract to a conference, be sure to check whether it will be published in the conference proceedings or not, and to examine the institution's policies about copyright and intellectual property. Will the published work remain as your property to publish in the future as you see fit, or does it become the property of the university removing any ownership or usage rights you had?

An abstract generally is quite short, and serves to not only introduce the conference organizers to the material which is covered by the paper, but also it must entice them to read the full paper and to listen to your presentation. All of this is often done in less than 200 words. However, an abstract is not a summary of your paper; instead it should give a description of the paper's contents. It is a stand alone segment of your paper which outlines the most important aspects of your research.

What an Abstract May Include

- What the research problem is.
    - Why are you conducting your research? What are you looking at?
- Importance of the problem.
    - Why should a reader care about your research problem? What is innovative and important about it?
- Approach to solving the problem.
    - How did you conduct your research? What sources or methodologies did you use?
- Results or Conclusions.
    - What have you found? What is going to be argued in the paper?
- Implications of the Research.
    - What impact will this research have on the subject literature, scholarly community, or discipline?

These sections of the abstract are often stand alone sentences, although there is some leeway in the formatting. However, keep in mind any word limits set by conference organizers and do not exceed them. Also, the information contained in an abstract should not be repeated word for word later in the paper.

Abstracts for the arts or humanities and sciences do tend to differ in their content, so discuss your abstract with your professor or supervisor before submission.

TRAVELING TO A CONFERENCE

Attending an external conference is a good way to share and discuss your research, and to meet people who you may wish to work or continue your studies with when you complete your program at TRU. Many conference opportunities can be found on-line, through professional organizations, on the Research website, and through your research supervisor.

Travel Funding Opportunities

Travel funding for conferences may be found:

1. Through the conference organizing committee;
    1. Conferences will sometimes cover all or a part of a presenter's travel expenses, so it is a good idea to check.
2. From external granting agencies;
    1. These opportunities are sometimes competitive, and all require you to apply well ahead of the conference dates. Start the application process early, and be sure to submit a professional, well

written, comprehensive, and accurate application. The Research office, and your supervisor, will be more than willing to help you through the process.
3. From internal sources;
    1. The Research office, your research supervisor, and your department may have access to funds which you could be eligible for.

Travel Expense Reporting

You may be eligible to receive a Travel Advance, or any funding may be given to you after the completion of the conference. In either case, if you receive external or internal funding you must submit a travel claim, signed by your supervisor, to the Research Office before any funds will be given to you.

Remember:
- Per Diem is only for meals you pay for out of pocket, not those provided by the conference or another source.
- Keep all original receipts. You will need them for your travel claim.
- Retain all boarding passes for planes, boats, or trains. They are also required for travel claims.
- Consult the Finance website for further information on the travel process, and for information on allowable expenses. Finance also has a Travel Handbook which will be of great help.
  http://www.tru.ca/finance/travelhandbook.html

Responsible Travel Etiquette

Remember, when traveling, whether it is within Canada or abroad, you should practice responsible travel etiquette at all times.

Etiquette changes depending on where you are in the world, and some resources which will help you to understand these country-specific modes of behaviour can be found on the internet.
- One site, although it is written with an American business audience in mind, is from ExecutivePlanet. They provide articles about business etiquette for many countries around the world.
  http://www.executiveplanet.com/index.php?title=Main_Page
- Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada also provides a sourcebook of etiquette advice for international business travelers. http://atn-riae.agr.ca/export/4027_e.htm

HOW TO PRESENT A POSTER PAPER

Some scientific conferences are moving towards their participants presenting their information through posters rather than the more traditional format of a paper-based talk. This allows interested people to view the posters at their leisure, and to discuss the research with the presenters in person; however, this method of presentation, if not done correctly, can become frustrating and tedious for everyone involved.

Before Development

- If the required information is not available on-line contact the conference hosts to determine the amount of space available for your poster, and the length of time people will be able to view it.
    - This will dictate the amount of information you can comfortably include in your presentation, and the methods used to convey the research.

Developing Your Poster

- Do not include all of your research information. Posters offer a limited amount of space with which to convey the important aspects of your research. You should include:
    - Project title
    - Research problem faced, or the main points, and why your research is important.
    - Research methodologies/methods
    - The experiment
    - Findings
- The material included should allow the audience to easily understand all of this information, so, depending on the poster size, it should include three to four pages of text along with a few diagrams or images

which will help to illustrate the research. The figure captions can also substitute for some of the text, and should be self-contained.

- Most of the text should be in point form. A viewer does not want to spend a large amount of time reading paragraphs, so the information should be made available in the most easily digested format available.
- The figures should illustrate a single point, and be easily understood/read.
- More complicated information on the research, which includes equations, formulae, or calculations, can be printed off and made available to audience members who are interested in further information. Do not include overly detailed or complex information such as lengthy statistics or numerical data on your poster as it adds clutter, and it tends to cause confusion or boredom for the viewers who do not share your interests or expertise. If someone is interested in seeing the specific data collected you can arrange to meet the person later, or you can bring your information with you and have it on hand for such instances.
- Feel free to include humour in your poster, in good taste of course, as this will also increase readability and the viewers' information retention.
- Make sure to proofread!

Organization

- Start early! It will often take much longer than anticipated to write-up the results and to develop any figures which need to be included.
- Strive for clarity and for aesthetics. The poster must be visually appealing to the viewer, and the inclusion of colour and pictures often creates the desired result.

Poster Construction

- Again, start early and keep everything legible. The text, captions, graphs, charts, or diagrams should be easily read from about two meters away. Colour can enhance clarity, specifically of the figures, but make sure each colour is strong and easily differentiated from the others used.
- Depending on how you are able to transport your poster, you may want to design it so it is easily broken down and reassembled at the conference site.
  - Using colourful paper, or mounting your information on Bristol board, will increase its attractiveness to the audience.
  - When mounting the information, be sure to do so with glue which does not wrinkle the paper. Photo glue can be good for this, and it is strong enough for the job. Do not use tape as this appears very unprofessional and hap-hazard.
- However, with today's printer and computer technologies many presenters are opting to have their posters professionally plotted on large printers. While this can be the more expensive option, it does produce a final product which looks clear and polished. It negates any possibility of having your poster appear as if it was thrown together at the last minute.
- Make sure to have a large and explanatory title, and include your name and academic affiliation.
- Including a photograph of yourself, or the research team, is an option for gaining audience interest.

At the Conference

- Be sure to dress appropriately for the conference. Some conferences require business attire, a jacket and tie for men and professional clothing for women, although business casual dress will often be fine. You may want to check with your supervisor or other faculty member to be sure. Avoid overly casual or revealing clothing, and clothing which is worn out or dirty; dress as you would for a job interview at a professional office (conferences are often networking avenues for both academic and employment contacts).
- Be clear on the times for posting, taking down, and when you are required to be with your poster. Being late putting the poster up wastes time and looks unprofessional, and not taking it down in time could result in the conference organizers removing it for you.
- You may want to provide contact information, such as an e-mail or mail address, so people interested in your work can contact you later. Personal business cards are also a good idea.
- Ask the conference organizers if thumbtacks will be available to put up your poster, and bring your own if they are not.
- Practice talking about your research before you go. The more you practice the more comfortable you are going to be when talking to people at the conference.

- Relax and have fun! Conferences are not intended to be trials of endurance. Instead, they bring together academics, businesses, and other interested parties to share ideas and convey the latest research findings in a collaborative and friendly environment.

HOW TO WRITE A CONFERENCE PAPER

While there is no right or wrong method of writing a conference paper, there are some general rules which should be adhered to.

A conference paper is not the same as a paper or thesis which you have written for class. Papers written for class or publication allow the reader the luxury of going back and re-reading a section for clarity or for a reminder of an important point; however, conference papers do not allow the audience the same luxury as they are intended for oral delivery. They need to be designed for maximum clarity in the communication of the research while maintaining the integrity of the important points.

- Do not include all of your research information. Conference presenters often only have 20 minutes or less to communicate their information (approximately 8 typed pages, double spaced), which is not enough time to include all of the details. Instead, boil your research down to the most important points. Only include the information that is essential for the audience to understand your work.
- Make sure to include the information found in the abstract somewhere in the paper. Generally, like any other research paper, a conference paper will include a small section which situates the research in the context of the related literature in order to outline its importance. The question, why should the audience care about the research, needs to be addressed.
- Repetition is a good thing. Unlike written papers, oral papers do not allow the listeners to go back and look up a forgotten or unclear point. It is a one-shot deal. Repetition of the key points can help listeners receive and retain much of your talk, but do not overdo it. Repeating the central points in the introduction, in the body, and in the conclusion will be enough.
- Avoid jargon. Listeners do not have access to footnotes which detail the definitions of the discipline specific terminology, so try to avoid it wherever possible. The use of some jargon is unavoidable in some cases, and should be clearly defined when used. Some presenters provide the audience with definition handouts, though this can shift the audience's attention away from the presenter and can cause more confusion than clarity.
- Avoid complicated information. Calculations, complex processes or methods, and large amounts of statistics can result in audience confusion, or the worst case scenario, in putting your audience to sleep. Very few people in the audience, in general, will have the academic background and interest required to understand such information. Instead, convert this information into a visual aid (graph, chart, diagram, etc.) for the audience to examine at leisure.
- Keep quotations to a minimum. As a presenter needs to indicate when a quotation is being delivered, often by stating "quote" at the beginning and "end quote" after it is completed, excessive quoting can serve as a detractor rather than an aid to your argument. Only include the quotations which are absolutely necessary to your argument, and keep them short; long, rambling quotations often cannot hold an audience's attention for very long.
- Include citations if you like. Having citations in your paper, even though no one will see them, is a sure way for you to have a ready access to author names and source titles during the question period. Some audience members may want to know where you found some of your information, and having your sources written down will help you to answer quickly and correctly.
- Visual aids are great if used correctly. Not all papers require the inclusion of a visual aid, but many can benefit from them. Visual aids can increase the clarity of your argument, and they provide interest to the audience; however, when using visuals of any sort make sure to discuss them. They should not be included in your presentation simply for interest or aesthetic appeal; images do not speak for themselves, and they need to be discussed as appropriate.
  - They need to be clearly labelled or captioned, and in the case of copyrighted material, they also need to include the source where the image was found.
  - Keep them high quality. Images are often shown at conferences using PowerPoint or overhead projectors. Whichever medium is available, or which you feel comfortable using, make sure all images are crisp and clear, all colours are distinguishable from their neighbours (in the case of maps, graphs, or tables), and all captions/citations are large enough to be easily read.
  - Avoid clutter. Do not try and squeeze the maximum amount of information onto one overhead or PowerPoint slide.

- o Place yourself in the position of the audience, and look at the images ahead of time. This allows you to determine if there are any discrepancies in the images, or if they are clear enough to use.
  - o If you are using PowerPoint it is a good idea to make overhead transparencies of all the slides in case there is a problem with any of the equipment at the conference. Always have a low-tech backup option available.
- Have fun with the title of your paper. This is sometimes the only indication to the conference goers of what your talk will be about (an abstract is occasionally included in the conference program), and should be interesting enough to make people want to come and hear your talk while remaining descriptive enough to give them some idea about what you will be discussing.
- Humour can greatly increase the audience's enjoyment and retention of your talk, but it should be used tastefully. Use it to enhance, rather than detract, from your argument.

HOW TO PRESENT AT A CONFERENCE

Conferences are a great venue for you to enter into the research and academic community. While there you can make connections to other people who share your interests, and who may be able to help you with your research or employment later in your academic career. You will also be able to gain a further handle on the current state of research within your, and other, disciplines, and you will be able to see where your research is situated within your field. That being said, conferences are also about having fun. You will meet many great people who share the same interests as yourself, and you will probably come away from one with many new friends.

Before the Conference

- Make sure you practice your presentation in full before you go. There is nothing worse than someone who has thrown their presentation together at the last minute, and who is obviously not prepared. Practicing beforehand will not only allow you to determine the presentation's length – you need to stay within the conference's set time limit – and clarity to an audience, but it will also allow you to become comfortable talking about your research. You might want to practice your presentation in front of people who can give you some constructive feedback on the presentation. Also, make sure to become proficient at using and talking about any visuals you may have, as without such practice you are sure to make a mistake, effectively throwing your entire presentation into chaos. The more you practice, the better your presentation will be.
- Many people feel that it is poor form to read a paper at a conference instead of memorizing your information and freely talking about your research. However, for people who are not comfortable speaking in front of a large group, who are inexperienced at conference presentations, and who do not have English as their first language, reading is a good way to remain clear and cohesive in their information delivery. Also, reading papers directly is much more common and acceptable within the humanities than the sciences. That being said, if you do decide to read your paper make sure it is written in a conversational tone which is more interesting for an audience than formal academic writing. There is the danger of having your presentation degenerate into extreme boredom if it is not designed to be spoken instead of read.
- If you do decide to read your paper, or if you are just going to talk freely about your research, it is a good idea to print out your information in a large print. You can easily lose your place on the page when you look up at the audience, and a larger font can make it easier to get back on track quickly.
- Make sure your talk is clearly structured and easy to understand. Let the audience know what ground you will be covering and where the talk will be going. This is especially the case for longer presentations where audiences can become lost in the flow of information.
- Before the conference starts you may be asked to forward a copy of your paper to the session chair. This person will be responsible for your session running smoothly, and to maintain a friendly, relaxed, and fair environment for you to present in. The chair will read over your work to become familiar with it in preparation for introducing you to the audience once you are at the conference. This person can also provide you with feedback on your work if you so desire; you should ask to see if this is a possibility. Some chairs may also ask you if you would like them to stimulate the question/discussion period with a question developed by you. This allows you to have some control over the questions you will be asked after your presentation is over, as you can prepare an answer which further illustrates your knowledge about the subject and your research.

Before Your Session

- Each presenter is assigned to a session with other people who will be talking about similar information (thematically similar, or connected in some other way). These sessions begin at a specific time, and at some conferences you may also be assigned a specific presentation time. Whichever format the conference organizers have decided on, make sure you are not late! If you are late you will often not be able to present, and it throws off the conference schedule while making you appear unprofessional.
- It is a good idea to arrive at your session 10 – 15 minutes before it starts. This allows you to meet the session chair, the other presenters, and to become familiar with the room. It will also allow you to familiarize yourself with any equipment you need to use (data projector, microphone, laptop, etc.). If you will be using PowerPoint for your presentation you can set it up at this time, although some conferences ask for your power point slides several hours prior to your presentation (check with the conference organizers regarding this, and about equipment before you go as you may need to provide your own laptop or projector for this). The session chair will be there to help you with anything you may need.
  - o At this time the session chair will also notify you on how she/he will tell you when you are getting close to your presentation time limit. They may do this by verbally telling you, by writing the remaining time on a white or black board, or they may hold up cards with the remaining time.

The Presentation Introduction

- The chair will begin the session by welcoming everyone and introducing themselves. The chair will then introduce you by giving some information on your university affiliation, the title of your talk, and any other background information they may have. Some chairs will deviate from this general example by providing more or less information. If you would prefer, you can introduce yourself, but make sure to notify the chair about that before the session starts.

The Presentation

- Do not start your presentation with an apology. Many speakers do this even though it is not necessary, and can often reduce the audience's trust in your expertise.
- Regulate your voice. Modulate your speech to keep what you are saying interesting. There is nothing harder to stay awake through, especially if the room is warm, than a monotone voice. Also, make sure to project; someone who mumbles, or periodically uses words such as 'um' is not only difficult to listen to and understand, but the person will be unable to convey confidence in their argument.
- Control your body. Try not to play with paper or a pen while you are speaking. These actions tend to distract the audience from your words, and you will be prone to dropping them – somewhat embarrassing. Feel free to walk around the stage during your presentation, and to be active in your body language. Exude confidence and excitement for your topic. Try to avoid crossed legs, or fidgeting, as such actions can convey nervousness or anxiety to the audience, and serve as a distraction to your information. Just be yourself; a conference is not the time to try and be something you are not.
- Maintain eye contact with the entire audience. By making eye contact with the people in all sections of the audience you show that you are relaxed and confident in communicating your research, and it will serve to hold the audience's attention. This is somewhat difficult if you decide to read your paper, but even then you should take the time to glace up and look around the room. Also, do not forget to look over at the session chair from time to time since she/he will signal you when your speaking time is almost over.
- Relax and have fun with the presentation. If you are enthused and excited about being there and about your work, the audience will be as well. If you are having fun, so will everyone else.
- If you have practiced your paper, and have written it for clarity, ease of understanding, and for an oral presentation you should be fine. There will be no misunderstanding of terminology or argument, the importance of your work will be conveyed, your research findings will be clearly and convincingly argued, and the audience will not become lost along the way. The presentation will be great.

Question and Discussion

This is often the most anxiously awaited aspect of the entire presentation; however, if you are adequately prepared you will be fine.

- You may want to brainstorm some possible questions before you come to the conference, and develop suitable answers for them – you may even want to sit down with some friends and practice answering some questions. Even though you will never be able to foresee all of the questions you may be asked at the conference, by practicing you can become familiar with thinking on the spot and with discussing information you have not prepared a script for.
- When answering your questions be sure to take the time to think about a suitable answer before you say anything. Pausing before answering shows you have adequately thought about the question and are not just rattling off the first thing that comes to mind.
- Be polite when answering. Occasionally you may have someone in the audience who asks a seemingly impolite or personal question, or gives an unkind comment; if this occurs try and stay composed. Do not to become involved in a lengthy discussion with the questioner, and do not be afraid to say you will discuss the question in more detail with the person after the session. This avoids the start of any arguments, and allows other audience members to ask their questions. The session chair will also be there to help you in these types of situations.
- Remember that saying you do not know the answer is fine. You can not be expected to be an expert in all areas, even if they are in some way related to your topic. Even the most experienced scholars will receive questions that they cannot answer.
- Thank your audience for their stimulating questions and for their interested in your presentation.

Follow-Up

- Participants will often ask if they can contact you after the conference in order to request some of your research information or perhaps a copy of your conference paper. If you promise to provide a copy or specific research resources be sure to do so; your credibility as a researcher and presenter will be enhanced, and potentially you may form valuable academic partnerships in the process. However, be sure to enquire about the use the person wants to put your paper or information to, and, although this is rarely a problem, make sure he or she is not infringing on your copyright ownership to the work. If you are unsure if there is a potential problem, talk to your research supervisor prior to sending any information.