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Topic: Conference Presentations

Speakers: Professor Fernando Arenas, and Professor Carol Klee

*Professor Klee brought handouts with guidelines for writing abstracts. See Alexis Howe or Mandy Fleming if you would like copies. Prof. Klee also recommended a book: Surviving Linguistics: A Guide for Graduate Students (with a section on conferences)

Why attend and present at conferences?

Attending and presenting at conferences is a building block in the process of professionalization

Conferences are a place to network with other graduate students and faculty from other universities. You may stay around after the talk and approach people you would like to meet, or you could network during a cocktail / social hour. Personal contacts with faculty in the field are essential. For example, when you are up for tenure, you will need outside references.

Reputations are built little by little in part at conferences. In small fields, such as Portuguese, everyone knows one another; they know who attends conferences and who does not.

Attending conferences is the best way to keep up to date with the work that is being done in the field. Articles typically come out approximately two years after the research has been done.

At what point in graduate studies should a student begin to attend conferences?

Any time, could be in the first year, but more typical in years 2-5. It may be more difficult to present at the MA level, but it depends on the student.

At the PhD level, be more strategic about where you go and what you present. Otherwise, you may get distracted (this was said regarding literatures and cultures)

In linguistics it is a bit different. One can present smaller projects without being too distracted.

Be careful about doing too many conferences. You should also be trying to get published.

How do I find out about conferences?

List serves of various kinds, word of mouth, or through professors and / or colleagues.

Some places to look are:

Linguist list

H-Luso

American Portuguese Studies Association

African Studies Association

Brazilian Studies Association (BRASA)

Latin American Studies Association (LASA)

Asociación de Lingüística y Filología de América Latina (ALFAL)

Associação Brasileira de Literatura Comparada (ABRALIC)

Be mindful of deadlines for the major conferences you want to attend.

Types of conferences:

There are conferences that tend to be more supportive and conferences that are more stressful. Grad students should start with the more supportive ones.

Graduate student conferences: Students may decide to begin with a graduate student conference (a more supportive environment). Limit yourself to one or two graduate student conferences, and then focus on attending professional conferences. In choosing a graduate student conference, look at: program, university, thematics, plenary speakers, who is attending.

International conferences allow you to make contact with a wider group of people. They also allow for an international circulation of your work. Being able to present your paper in multiple languages is an advantage (in order to bring it to a diverse group of people).

Is it better to go to the same conference every year or to go to different conferences? Try to do both. If you find a major conference in your field, attend regularly, but also look for new ones.

Newer conferences are becoming increasingly eclectic. For example, the Cine-Lit conference in Portland, Oregon: an international conference that is held in conjunction with the Portland International Film Festival (takes place every year in February)

The MLA (held annually in December) is a great conference experience. It may be a good idea to present at MLA before going for a job interview (you will be more familiar and comfortable when you go for the second time)

Where can I look for funding to travel to a conference?

In the department: \$600 per student, however it's competitive, not every student will get it

GAPSA

COGS

You can save money by staying with another graduate student, rather than in a hotel. Often times the conference organizers will offer to set you up to stay with a local grad student.

How do I prepare my abstract?

The abstract is very important because if it is not good, you will never get passed the reviewers

Typically the abstract is a maximum of one page (250-300 words)

Keep it simple, but make it sexy by explaining how it will contribute to the field.

Tie what you are doing to previous research in the field

Some literature on writing abstracts has said that 4-6 hours is a good start on writing the abstract, and that it may take 12 hours total (while this may be a bit overboard, the idea is that you must put time and effort into the abstract)

No grammar or spelling mistakes

Get feedback: send it to your advisor or other faculty members

Look at the exercise of writing an abstract as practice for applying for fellowships and / or grants.

Additionally, see handout from Professor Klee

Proposing a panel / session

Depends on the conference. Some will send out a call for papers and a call for sessions. Contact the conference organizers beforehand to ask how to go about proposing / organizing a panel / session

The paper

A conference paper may be the result of a paper written for a course. The professor may tell the student, “This is a really good paper. Let’s look for a conference that you can present it at.”

You are not locked into a topic because you presented it. Because graduate students take a variety of courses, they may produce quality papers on diverse topics. Showing diversity in conference paper presentations is actually advantageous for future job searches because it shows institutions that you have broad interests.

Don’t present the same paper at more than one conference. However, if you present at a graduate student conference and then revise your paper based on the feedback you receive, it would be acceptable to present it again at a professional conference.

What does the actual presentation entail?

In literature and culture it is common to read a paper. Although you are reading, you should be at the same time engaging with your audience, making eye contact, smiling, minding your tone of voice (don’t be monotonous). There is skill involved in reading a paper. Insert strategic pauses to emphasize a point. You could possibly take a break from reading to improvise, but be careful that you do not run out of time.

Tailor your paper to the time allotted: typically about 20 minutes. (Generally, two minutes = one page, typed, and double spaced). The conference paper should be about 8-10 pages.

Make your paper suitable for an audience. Take into account what level of expertise the audience has in your area of research and tailor your language accordingly. Academic prose can be deadly, instead make language somewhat more informal, using contractions and shorter sentences for example.

Keep in mind that once your time (20 min.) is up, you are done, regardless of whether you have finished. It is disrespectful to go over your allotted time because in doing so you are taking time from the other presenters.

Instead of reading from a paper, you may choose to speak from a handout or a PowerPoint. If you use PowerPoint, have backup. Prepare in such a way that if your electronic presentation does not work, you will be ok.

With PowerPoint, limit it to concepts, dates, visual images, etc. Do not overload with text.

If you have a handout, do not have it exactly the same as the PowerPoint.

Save your PowerPoint in two places, and check it beforehand to make sure it works. Possibly bring your own laptop.

Make the end of your presentation clear by saying: "Thank you very much"

Practice your presentation aloud. PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!

Other tips regarding the presentation:

Jokes / being glib: do it if it's relevant, depends on your personality, the venue, the audience, etc. Don't over do it!

Be prepared on what parts of your presentation you can cut out in the event that you are short of time.

Quotes: change your register to make them livelier.

Be aware of your physical presence; be mindful of your personal ticks, such as touching / flipping hair, etc.

You should attend all the papers in the session you are assigned to. It's really rude / disruptive to leave your session.

In terms of arriving at and leaving other sessions, be mindful of how your leaving will affect the presenter. It can be demoralizing for a presenter if there is a mass exodus during their presentation.

Dress codes: It depends. During the winter, at MLA for example, people tend to dress formally. On the other hand, during the summer in Europe, people dress more informally.

How do I best prepare for the Question – Answer section?

Do a lot of studying beforehand (like when you are preparing to teach a class)
Make sure you are up to date with the literature related to your main points
Know definitions, etc.

Take a pen and paper with you when you present so that you can write down the questions, comments, and other feedback you receive during the Q&A

If you can't answer a question, say: "That's a great question. I hadn't thought about that, I'll have to look more into it"

If someone asks you a left-field question, say: "I'm sorry, but I don't see the relationship to my research / work" or "Can you restate the question"

During moments of tension or differences of interpretation, remain collegial, don't lose your composure.

Often times faculty are easier on / more supportive of graduate student presenters. For example, by not asking them tough questions or making corrections during the Q&A time, but instead approaching the student after to do so.