Presenting Conference Papers in the Humanities
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This page outlines some concerns specific to students presenting papers in the Humanities.

**Before your presentation**

Anticipate questions. Go to panels the day before your session to see what types of questions people ask, and to find out what the tone of the conference is.

Anticipate criticism. Bounce your ideas off a friend/colleague whom you know will be critical.

**Preparing your paper for presentation**

**Rewrite your essay for the oral medium.** Your audience will not have the luxury of reading the text of your essay. Include oral cues to assist the audience.

Transitions should be clear. It is almost impossible to be too obvious in an oral presentation. Obvious oral cues like, "I have three points. Number one will cover . . . ," which sound wooden in writing, are helpful when read aloud.

Use appropriate punctuation. Dashes, semi-colons, and parentheses will not be visible to the audience. If you quote text, pause and indicate the quote by saying "quote . . . . . end quote."

**Don't use lengthy quotes or quote too much material.** This is confusing and unproductive. Your audience wants your ideas, not what you have gleaned from others. Don't simply apply someone else's ideas to a different text. If it is absolutely necessary to include lengthy quotes, provide the audience with a handout of quotes to which you will be referring.

**Read the text aloud to yourself as you revise.** This will help you eliminate wordy sentences and awkward phrases.

**Be careful of criticism of other scholars.** It is appropriate to discuss criticisms, but use a tone of respect and objectivity. Your footnotes might be sitting in the audience!

**Focus**

Keep the essay focused! You only have time (usually 15-20 minutes) to present one idea.

**You will not be able to present everything you know about a subject.** Just choose one idea, interpretation, or reading. You do not need to provide all the background tracing how you reached this interpretation; present your point and back it up. You do not need to defend the validity of your idea. You also don't need to give a literature review. You want to make a clear,
focused, and interesting argument that is backed up with a few interesting points of
evidence, not give the entire content of your dissertation. Many conferences are intended for
"works in progress" and expect presenters to bring up engaging questions and offer suggestions
for future research, not give the final definitive word on a subject.

Consider the audience to whom you are speaking. Who would be most likely to attend this
conference? Don't summarize popular ideas—you do not want to insult the intelligence of your
audience. On the other hand, don't assume that a critic familiar to you is familiar to everyone
else. People interested in your subfield will likely be at your conference, but there is no
guarantee they will make it to your panel. Your audience may not be up to speed on the nuances
of your conversation, so instead of trying to talk directly to the scholars whose work you've
been reading, think about how you would explain your study to someone in a different subfield
of your discipline, or in a related discipline. Jargon and subfield debates can drag down the
momentum of your paper and alienate audience members who are not tapped into your vein of
study. Talking about your topic in a less in-group way will help audience members follow your
ideas more easily. And it will also make them feel comfortable about asking questions, and
more specific questions, about your research.

As you edit, remember Hemingway’s prescription to “kill your darlings.” This may mean
cutting out your favorite tangents or phrasings to make your paper more direct or cohesive, but
in the end it is better to have a more focused paper, than to have someone ask a question about a
digressive section you left in because you liked the phrasing.

Clarity

Don't use jargon; it is often imprecise. But if you use field-specific terms, make sure that you
know what they mean and give a brief definition if it is a term that has multiple uses or
interpretations in your field.

Find simple ways to discuss complex ideas. Use easily grasped metaphors and analogies.

Presentation

Meet length and time requirements. This is extremely important. If you have 20 minutes, do
not, repeat, do not go to your panel with a paper exceeding 10-11 (double spaced; 12 point font)
pages in length. Going over your time limit will not make you popular with the other speakers
on your panel (or your audience). The general rule is two minutes per double spaced, 12 point
font page, exclusive of citations. If your discipline uses footnote references, it is helpful to
transfer them to endnotes to make your paper easier to follow as you read.

Follow the conventions of your field and the conference. If presenters are expected to read
from a prepared text (often sent to a commentator or chair prior to the conference), stick to the
text. Make sure everyone on your panel has a copy of the version you will present. It is
acceptable to make changes after you submit the paper, but be sure you let the commentator or
chair know about the changes to your paper. Unless you are a very accomplished
extemporaneous speaker, it is extremely preferable to read from a prepared text rather than speaking from notes or an outline alone. This prevents you from leaving out important information (your thesis, for example), from wandering around, and from going over your time limit.

Bring a bibliography to reference when answering questions. Take notes of questions and suggestions that are important; you won't remember them otherwise. You also look engaged and receptive when you take notes of the audience's questions and suggestions. Don't be afraid to say you don't know the answer to a particular question. The trick is not to sound defensive, but to confidently say that that area is something you really need to research, or that you'd like to take a look at those sources, etc.

Show your audience that you are interested in the essay! Use vocal inflection and be engaging. Remember to relax!!

Visual aids: Make a note to yourself in your paper where you are going to use visual aids. Practice with your visual aids before you give your presentation.