Publishing and Scholarly Communication in the Humanities

CONFERENCES

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CONFERENCES GIVE scholars many opportunities for scholarly communication and networking. At conferences, scholars can disseminate their work; learn about what others in their fields are doing; take part in professional development activities; reconnect with former colleagues, such as graduate school compatriots or advisers; develop an idea or receive feedback on a work in progress; and connect with new collaborators or interlocutors. If you are an early-career scholar, think of conferences as an ongoing conversation that you are looking to join; you’ll want to seek out and connect with the people who can help you do that.

Conferences are only in part about the sessions you attend, and most experienced conference-goers will mix sessions with other types of activities, such as getting coffee with new or old colleagues, participating in professional development activities, and exploring the city where the conference is held. Attending a variety of sessions and events will help you avoid conference burnout and ensure that the conference is useful to you in multiple ways. Practicing appropriate self-care, such as getting enough sleep, drinking enough water, and eating regular meals, also contributes to a positive conference experience.

Ways to Participate in a Conference

Organizing a Panel

Organizing a panel can be a great way for you to make new connections, ensure that your topic gets its due at the conference, draw attention to a new development in the field, or include a conversation you feel is missing. However, organizing a panel does come with responsibilities, both to your panelists and to the people who attend the panel. Remember that your audience will experience the panel as a whole, rather than as a series of discrete, unconnected papers, so it’s useful to think about how it will be structured overall and what your goals are for the panel.

Before the conference

To find panelists, panel organizers rely on a mix of invitations to people they know and a general call for papers. Even if you have potential panelists in mind, you might reserve one or two spots for scholars who answer the call, to avoid having the panel be too insular. This is also the best stage at which to consider diversity. In addition to institutional diversity, which many conferences require, you should aim for diversity with respect to gender, race, and career stage, so that your panel reflects multiple perspectives on the topic.

If and when your panel is accepted, be sure to contact your panelists and confirm some details, such as the following:
How long panelists will have to speak. For papers, they generally have about fifteen minutes; at roundtables, they may have much less time, each panelist being responsible only for brief introductory remarks.

Whether anyone will need audiovisual equipment.

Whether papers will be circulated among the panelists—or sent to a respondent—before the panel.

How the discussion and Q&A portions of the panel will be structured: for instance, whether panelists will have the chance to respond to one another.

Although not strictly necessary, an organizing video conference or call with your panelists ahead of time can be useful, especially if they don’t already know one another.

During the conference

If your panel is not at the very beginning of the conference, consider asking your fellow panelists to join you for coffee or a meal, so you can all get to know one another ahead of time. If there isn’t time for this, a video conference can serve the same purpose. Make sure that everyone has what they need for their presentations. Remind panelists to always use the provided microphone, even if they think they don’t need it. This is an important issue of accessibility.

If you are moderating the panel, be sure to keep time and arrange a signal with your participants so they know if they are exceeding their allotted time. It is your job to make sure that the panel starts and ends on time.

Q&As have a reputation for being difficult to manage, and senior scholars in the room can dominate a discussion, often without meaning to. Be cognizant of whom you are calling on and of how much each of your panelists has spoken relative to the others. Sometimes it can be helpful to open the Q&A by asking those in the room who feel comfortable speaking early and often in professional contexts to hold their questions and let others go first. Some panelists will inevitably receive more questions than others, but if, for example, people are posing questions to the entire group and only the men on the panel are responding, a moderator might usefully intervene. Some moderators prefer to give everyone a minute or two to gather their thoughts before beginning the Q&A, much as you might give students in your classroom a moment to come up with questions after you’ve finished delivering a lecture or after reading a text together.

After the conference

Many organizers consider their duties done once the panel is over, but following up with your panelists with a brief thank-you note can help maintain the relationships you’ve developed. If there were particular synergies on the panel, fruitful collaborations might come out of follow-up correspondence.

Presenting at a Conference

Presenting at a conference often starts with the submission of an abstract. It can be tempting to submit an abstract based on a dissertation or book chapter that is already completed, but sometimes it is more useful to submit an idea at an earlier stage of development. Conferences can be good places to try out a new concept, and the built-in deadlines help push you to further develop a nascent idea.
When you write your conference paper, it’s important to write it so that it may be read aloud. Sentences that are long and complicated when read to oneself can be reread; however, long, complicated sentences that are heard cannot be reheard. Write your conference paper so that your listener can hear and retain the information; this will make it more memorable and will leave a better impression on the audience.

You can achieve a memorable and accessible conference presentation using a number of methods. Some of them may remind you of things you have done in the classroom, since conference presentations are, in a sense, a type of teaching. These methods include the following:

Using visual aids, such as PowerPoint or handouts. When using PowerPoint, be careful not to overcrowd slides with text. Leave yourself time to describe visual aids aloud, and always bring a few copies of large-print handouts for audience members who may need them.

Using informal language, including the first person, as well as shorter, less complex sentences.

Signposting your argument more carefully and explicitly than you might be used to doing in articles or essays written for publication. Such signposting might include an introduction with a road map to the paper’s argument, clearly articulated transitions, and repetition of your major points, including at the end of the paper. As listeners, we tend to remember the first thing and the last thing someone says.

Always using the provided microphone. Even if you project your voice well, using the microphone is an issue of accessibility for members of the audience.

Making your paper or presentation accessible to others before or after the panel through your personal website or a subject or institutional repository, such as the MLA-supported CORE. This allows audience members to refer to the written text in case, for instance, they missed something you said, and it provides access to those who aren’t able to attend in person.

Asking a friend or colleague to listen to you run through a paper can help you ascertain whether you’ve achieved your goal of clarity. This does, however, require that you write the paper before you board your flight to the conference.

It is also not mandatory that you read a paper aloud at a conference. You could also speak more extemporaneously from notes. Conference-goers are, in fact, often pleasantly surprised when a presenter chooses not to read. If you do forgo reading your paper, you may be even more inclined to use a visual aid, such as PowerPoint. In this case, make certain that your technology is in good working order—and have a backup plan in case something goes wrong. You must also remain aware of how long you’ve been speaking. It is easier to go over your allotted time if you are not reading a paper, and that will do you no favors with either the panel organizers or your fellow presenters!

Working Groups or Seminars

Some conferences in the humanities have started offering alternatives to the traditional conference panel in the form of multiday working groups or seminars that allow scholars to engage in a more sustained and substantial way with one another’s work. Attending a working group or seminar allows you to broaden and deepen your scholarly network, often while receiving substantive feedback on your work. Although they require more time and energy than traditional panels require, working groups and seminars also offer a greater chance of long-term payoff in the form of collaborations and professional relationships.


**Virtual Conferences**

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 saw a sharp rise in the number of virtual conferences. Although virtual conferences don’t require travel, they do require other types of preparation. Be sure to familiarize yourself with the technological requirements for the conference you’re attending. To mitigate potential chaos, organizers may want all panelists to attend a preconference session to familiarize themselves with the platform they’ll be using.

Moderators may also need to plan a session more carefully for a virtual conference. Since it is harder to communicate on the fly with others in a virtual format, you’ll want to carefully consider the panel’s organization, including how and when questions will be asked, who will monitor the chat, and who will manage breakout rooms, polls, or other virtual tools during the session itself. If you’re organizing the session, communicate regularly with your panelists to make sure they are also up-to-date on the panel’s organization. Bear in mind that some panelists will be more comfortable with the virtual format than others are.

As an attendee at a virtual conference, you may need to be extra diligent in planning which sessions you want to attend and block those times out on your calendar (beware time-zone errors!). Carving out time to attend sessions and giving them your full attention can be harder with virtual conferences, since you are likely to have a lot more competition for your time and attention when you’re at home. It is perhaps even more important under these circumstances to be intentional about your conference attendance in order to get the most you can out of it.

**Networking at a Conference**

Too often, scholars see conferences as primarily a way to add a line to their CVs; however, conferences are most effective and perhaps even most enjoyable when they are treated as an opportunity to make new personal connections and maintain existing ones—in other words, to network. Networking is often viewed with suspicion as something superficial and transactional, but when done properly, networking is simply building and maintaining relationships with people you have things in common with. Conferences should bring you into contact with people who can help you—and whom you can help—either now or in the future.

Networking should not be treated as divorced from the scholarly work we all do. Networking lets more people learn about your work and enriches your work through the contributions of and connections with other people. Networking is not about competition; it is about community. You do not have to be brilliant and impressive every single minute in order to network well at conferences. Indeed, someone who seems constantly preoccupied with their own brilliance can be off-putting to others. You’ll be far better served by expressing genuine curiosity and interest in other people and their work.

Here is a list of places where networking is done at conferences. It should not be considered comprehensive:

- Before panels, among fellow panelists
- During panels, particularly the Q&A section
- After panels, when audience members seek out particular panelists
- In the hallway between panels
On the conference Twitter or other social media platforms
At the hotel bar or coffee shop
During excursions or outings
At receptions
In the exhibit hall
During meals organized around shared interests

If this list seems intimidating, remember that most people enjoy talking about their work with interested, thoughtful interlocutors.

If you are new to networking at conferences, or even if you aren’t, preparation can help you feel more comfortable and have more fruitful interactions. Note ahead of time any social events you want to attend, and email acquaintances or colleagues with whom you’d like to connect. Having a brief, pithy description of your own work handy is helpful, but so is having a few questions for the other person. These might include the following:

How has your conference been so far?
Thank you for your paper on [TOPIC]. Can you tell me a bit about your thought process behind [SUBTOPIC]?
Your work had a huge influence on me / my book / my dissertation. I have a particular problem I’d like to chat about, if you have time for coffee at some point during the conference. Or perhaps I could follow up with you by email?

In addition to being a place to pick up books, sometimes at a deep discount, the exhibit hall at a major conference is an important place to network. It allows you to get a sense of the titles a press publishes at a glance and to chat with the staff members at the booth. If you have a project that you are looking to pitch, you can contact editors ahead of time to set up a meeting. You can (and should!) follow up with editors or staff members that you meet in the exhibit hall or who express interest in your work based on your presentations.

One final note about networking: reliability and follow-through are key. Being reliable is one of the best ways to capitalize on a connection you made at a conference. If you say you are going to follow up with someone, find an effective way to remind yourself to do so. Business cards tossed loose into a convention tote can easily get lost or be forgotten. Instead, you might send yourself an email with a few details about what you wanted to speak to a particular person about, or set a calendar reminder to send them an email once the conference is over. If you’re not sure how to follow up, saying thank you or expressing interest and enthusiasm are always good places to start. Gratitude and enthusiasm are the most important tools in a networker’s toolbox.