

Making the Most of Conference Presentations

9 March 2015 GEO Professionalization Session

Panelists:

PhD Candidate and GEO Conference Co-Chair Elise Auvil

Associate Professor Jessica Enoch

Professor Orrin Wang

PhD Candidate Katie Stanutz

PhD Candidate Porter Olsen

Ideas that were emphasized by multiple presenters:

- The GEO conference provides a great opportunity for practicing conference presentations, especially for those early in their studies and/or nervous about giving presentations. Everyone in our program should participate both as a presenter and an attendee.
- Find out which conferences are the “major” ones in your research areas, and try to attend and present at those to demonstrate your interest and competence in that field. If you don’t, it may look like a gap in your c.v. (Example: A rhet/comp candidate who has not presented at CCCC will raise a red flag.)
- Be careful not to devote too much time/energy/attention to conferencing. Presenting at conferences can be time consuming and expensive. Use conferences as a way to propel yourself toward finishing the program rather than allowing them to slow down your progress to degree.
- The best and most productive conference presentations come from work you’ve already done: research you’ve conducted, papers you’ve already written, and so on. Presenting from existing work that you’ll continue developing takes less time and helps you make the most out of the feedback you receive.
- A productive trajectory is to take a seminar paper or section of dissertation chapter, present it at a conference to see how your ideas are received, and then use the feedback you get to improve the chapter or turn it into an article to be published.
- Conferences offer opportunities for vertical networking (meeting lead scholars in the field), but can be equally or even more productive if you use them for horizontal networking (meeting graduate student peers, others working in your focus areas, etc.).
- Compose your paper for a listening audience, not a reading audience. Make sure your main argument and supporting claims are clearly stated. Don’t use jargon or give too many examples for a listening audience to follow.
- Prepare, prepare, prepare! Practicing your paper in advance also helps you become more familiar with your content, make sure it will be easy for a listening audience to follow, and will fit in the allotted time.
- If the norm at your conference is to read a paper, read your paper! There are ways to make it engaging to listen to, but often papers that are “talked through” are hard to follow.
- Don’t go over the time allotted. Staying within the allotted time reflects well on you by showing that you are well prepared and you respect your fellow panelists.
- When confronted with difficult questions in the Q&A, don’t take it personally. A good natured reaction goes a long way and can diffuse a possibly antagonistic situation. Don’t be afraid to say things like “Thank you for that comment, I’ll have to consider that moving forward” or “I hadn’t thought about that before, but I’d be happy to hear more about it after the talk.”

Elise Auvil:

-This year’s GEO Conference is Saturday, March 28.

-Shared the conference flyer. Program information available here:

<http://departuresconference.weebly.com/>

- The GEO conference offers a great chance to get presentation experience under your belt, start professionalizing early in your studies, and support your fellow students.
- The GEO conference offers a very supportive atmosphere; it is somewhat low key, and is attended mostly by other graduate students, but you will still get helpful practice and feedback.
- It offers a chance for horizontal networking because it's attended by students at other universities and from other departments on campus.
- The plenary speakers are doing important work and showcase more polished presentation skills. This year: Amanda Bailey and Christina Walter from our department, Robert McRuer from GWU.
- Free food all day!

Jess Enoch:

- see accompanying handout
- Different conferences are now incorporating different kinds of participation. See handout for examples of "non-traditional" presentations.
- Look into fellowships/scholarships offered by the conferences themselves to assist with funding.
- Consider proposing a panel, rather than just submitting an abstract for a paper. This helps you think about how your work relates to others, gives you a horizontal networking opportunity, offers a chance to reach out to peers at other institutions. If panel is approved, requesting that an established figure in the field can act as chair of the panel or respondent is a way of guaranteeing that they hear your work.
- Writing a good abstract: Identify the scholarly conversation you're entering, make your argument, explain how your argument contributes to the conversation. It's important to explain how your paper will relate to the conference theme, but you don't need to cater the entire thing around the theme.
- Think of a conference presentation as a mini job talk: a chance to prepare for the highest stakes presentations you will make.
- It's a good idea to bring a few hard copies of your paper for people who ask for them (for reference or accessibility purposes).
- Pay attention to how others act as audience members. Learn to ask good questions, interact with panelists, etc.
- Conferences give you the opportunity to see how you do outside your own department, see your friends from other programs/universities, practice your professional development, and can even lead to requests for presenters to apply for particular job openings.
- Conferences also give you a chance to listen in on what is going on in your field and in related fields. You'll hear about things you might have otherwise missed, be able to recognize developing trends of thought/inquiry, and so on.

Orrin Wang

- Don't conference just to conference: conferences can be thrilling, so don't let that thrill distract you from the main benchmarks of your program.
- Present from what you have already written. This makes for better papers, saves time, and prevents you from getting sidetracked as a student. If you are planning to turn the paper into a publishable article or dissertation chapter, the feedback you get will be more useful.
- Make sure the paper itself demonstrates solid, thorough research that adequately demonstrates your capabilities as a scholar.
- Smaller conferences are good for getting your feet wet, but don't spend a lot of time/money on presenting at them or expect them to serve as particularly impressive lines on your CV.
- Avoid powerpoint unless you're really good at it. Powerpoint is a skill. It should be incorporated into the rhythm of your paper; if it distracts from your rhythm or distracts the audience, it is very counter productive.

- Use your classroom as a place to practice some of the skills that you'll need for conference presentations.
- Consider planning in advance what paragraphs/sections of your paper you will cut if you are short on time. This will save you from scrambling during the panel.

Katie Stanutz:

- Plan ahead! After researching the major conferences in your field, look at when their CFPs go out and when abstracts are due. You often have to plan over a year in advance to participate.
- Streamline your argument. A listening audience responds well to papers that clearly identify the argument at the beginning, provide a roadmap for the major claims of the paper, and don't try to incorporate too many examples or too much jargon.
- Think about how you would like an audience member to describe your paper in 2-3 sentences afterward. As Ted Leinwand has advised students, it's best if others can succinctly state what they liked about your paper when speaking to other conference attendees.
- Consider reading your paper to a peer beforehand. Especially if this person is outside your particular field, their feedback can help you determine how clearly you are making your case.
- If you're using visuals for your presentation, make sure you know well in advance what technology will be available, what you need to bring, etc. This varies widely depending on the conference.
- Go outside your comfort zone at the conference. Go to panels outside your field, interact with people you don't know, ask questions during Q&A. Remember that everyone feels a little awkward at these things, or can at least remember feeling that way.

Porter Olsen:

- Re-emphasizes that powerpoint is a skill. Particularly in Digital Humanities presentations, though, it is expected that you can show proficiency in this skill. Practicing the talk in advance is particularly important in DH, since you need to be familiar with your slides and papers are "talked" more often than they are read.
- For powerpoint: Don't use blank bullet lists. Don't use walls of text. Don't provide images or charts that are too complex. Remember that there is a finite amount of information that people can reasonably be expected to absorb from each slide.
- If you're using a powerpoint to share a quote, read it aloud. You don't want what you're saying to have to compete for attention with what's on the screen. Don't turn around and face the screen when you're reading it.
- Consider using images as signposts to walk the audience through the talk and show them that your understanding of the topic is multi-dimensional.
- For prezi: Don't use the spinning feature. Zooming feature is more tolerable, but you still want to make sure it's streamlined and easy for audience members to follow.

Topics covered in Q&A:

- Be prepared for questions that ask you to make connections between your paper and your co-panelists' papers. It can be hard to pay attention to their full papers, especially if you're nervous, but try to listen to at least enough to get a feel for what their argument is. You might ask co-panelists for an abstract of their papers in advance so you can be thinking about this. If the conference is several days long, you might seek out your co-panelists ahead of time and introduce yourself.
- Don't be upset if you don't get any questions; don't take it as a reflection on your paper. Sometimes people will approach you later of you will get a follow-up email from an audience member; you never how long the paper's life might be.

Jess Enoch
GEO Conference Presentations
March 2015

Major Conferences in Rhetoric and Composition: Conference on College Composition and Communication, NCTE, Rhetoric Society of America, Feminisms and Rhetorics, Computers and Writing, WPA Conference, Watson Conference

Types of Conference Participation:

- Formal presentations
- Workshops
- Research Network Forums
- Seminars

Conference Proposals

- Putting together panels
- Abstracts
- Seminar Papers

Conference Presentation Tips:

- Talk or Read?
- Practice and time yourself (be a good panelist)
- Compose for a listening audience, not a reading audience
- PowerPoint/handout (accessibility)
- Handling difficult questions
- Nerves

Benefits

- Learning something new; listening in to conversations you don't know about; seeing new trends in the field
- Learning what a good presentation looks like, what good questions (and good responses) sound like
- Networking
- Cultivating your professional identity