

Conference Presentations

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Conference presentations are a wonderful way for graduate students to begin their transition to professional historians. Writing and then presenting conference papers provides the opportunity to get feedback on ideas and research directions, refine thesis or dissertation chapters for publication, collaborate with both established historians and fellow graduate students, and begin to build a scholarly reputation, network, and curriculum vitae.

- Consider what type of conference is the best arena for your research.
- You might want to consider a lower-key, regional or local conference first to get your feet wet. Many history journals and newsletters list upcoming conferences, as does H-Net on its Academic Announcements Web page (www.h-net.msu.edu/announce/).
- Proposal deadlines for many of the major conferences fall more than a year in advance of the conference itself, so it is important to plan ahead.
- Once you have chosen the conference you would like to present at, find out whether the conference organizers prefer that you submit a full panel for consideration or if it is acceptable to submit a single paper.
- If you are organizing a panel, to find other panelists, talk with your advisors/colleagues, and if you are unable to find people this way, consider advertising your panel on online discussion lists such as H-SAWH, H-Women, or H-South. For its annual conference, the American Historical Association (www.historians.org) usually lists a collaboration site where people can go on and look for different topics people are bringing together for panel proposals.
- When your panel or individual paper is accepted, find out the typical length of papers and when the deadlines are (such as when your paper needs to be submitted to your chair/commentator, when it needs to be submitted to be considered for any awards, and the deadline for requesting any audiovisual equipment).
- Decide whether you plan to read your paper or talk from notes. If you plan to talk from notes, you will still need a written paper or detailed outline for the commentator to read.
- If you plan to give a Power Point presentation or use other audiovisual aids, be sure to bring along paper copies as hand-outs; you want to be prepared for any

technical difficulties. Be sure that you will be able to proceed confidently and thoroughly if for some reason you cannot use your audiovisual aids.

- There are several styles of conference papers, so you should try to find the style you are most comfortable with.
- The best conference presentations often begin with a story or vignette to grab the audience's attention. You can also use the vignette to introduce the main ideas of your paper.
- Try to limit your main points to no more than three, or you risk losing your audience's full attention.
- Always return to your main points at the conclusion of your paper to remind your audience of what is important about your work and to draw everything together.
- Be sure to submit your paper and curriculum vitae to the chair and commentator *on time*. It will make an important first impression to be prompt and well-organized. Also send your paper to the other panelists.
- If you decide to talk from notes, make sure to practice several times and time yourself to be sure you do not run over your allotted time.
- Even if you are reading the paper, practice reading it and timing it several times. At many conferences, the chair will cut you off if you run over time.
- The night before the presentation, get plenty of rest and practice your presentation at least twice.
- The day of the presentation, bring extra copies of your paper, something to write with, and something to drink.
- Good luck!

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