

## SUGGESTIONS FOR PRESENTING YOUR PAPER AT THE CONVENTION

*Excerpted from LINDA K. KERBER, "Conference Rules, Part 2," The Chronicle of Higher Education, 21 March 2008: 1.*

**Rule No. 1: Observe time limits scrupulously.** The usual rule of thumb is that a typewritten page holds 250 words. It should take a minimum of two minutes to say 250 words out loud.

**Rule No. 2: Write for your real audience.** A paper written for the ears to hear must be substantially different from a paper written for the eyes to read. Go through your final draft, looking for dependent clauses. Turn complex sentences into simple, declarative statements. Use quotations and examples judiciously. Devote a sentence or two to explaining -- briefly -- the research base that sustains your arguments. A reader will see footnotes but listeners cannot. Establish your authority.

**Rule No. 3: Rehearse your talk.** Plan ahead so that you do not run out of breath. The first step is what I mentioned under Rule No. 2: writing clear, declarative sentences. The second, very important step is to read your paper out loud to yourself, listening to yourself speak and noticing when you run out of breath. Watch yourself in the mirror if you can stand it. Take a deep breath at the beginning of each long sentence or group of short sentences. If you do not have enough breath to finish a sentence strongly, break it up into smaller pieces. Read it out loud again. Then mark your copy to remind yourself when to take a deep breath. Now read your copy aloud to someone else

**Print out your paper in large type** (try 14-point or even 16-point) so that you do not need to squint to see it when you are standing at a podium. Find a room approximately the size of the room you will use at the conference. Position your friend at the back of the room. Stand at the front with a lectern and read the paper out loud. Your friend may also be able to comment on whether the argument sounds persuasive; sometimes in all the revising and cutting, one leaves out a significant piece of evidence or step in the argument. Now rehearse one last time, making sure that your performance is smooth: No tripping over pronunciations, no wrong intonation.

**Rule No. 4: Stop fidgeting.** The attention of your listeners should be on your words. **Avoid** anything that draws their attention away from your words. Among the classic distractions:

\* Your **hands, waving** around in the air. Except for an occasional gesture that you intend to make, hands are not part of your performance. They should be as invisible as possible, generally at your side or resting on the lectern.

\* Your **hands, fiddling** with paper clips or a pen. Never hold anything in your hands when you are speaking in public except when sliding a page of your talk out of the way. Note "sliding." See next paragraph.

\* The paper on which your words are written. Do not wave the paper around. Do not pick up each page of the paper and turn it over so that you end with a stack in the order in which you began. **Slide the pages across** so the audience won't see them and you end with a stack in reverse order. The advantage is that you also have two pages in front of you at all times and you can see where you are headed.

\* Your fingers. The only way to indicate a shift from your own words to quoted ones is by the tone of your voice, or by the simple word "said." Don't say, "quote unquote." **Never wiggle your fingers in the air** in an attempt to indicate quotation marks.

\* Your head. Normally at conferences, you **stand to read your paper**. The advantage of standing at a lectern is that you do not need to move your head much to read the paper and then look out at the audience.

**Rule No. 5: Check out the room in advance.**

**Rule No. 6: Save your improvisational skill for the question period**, when you will need it.

**Rule No. 7: Remember, you are among friends.** To give a conference paper is to make yourself vulnerable; it's the intellectual equivalent of stripping naked. You are taking your ideas out to strangers, so you are vulnerable to their criticism. Of course you are anxious; you would be foolish not to be.

So spend an hour before the panel quietly, alone, not talking. Look over your marked-up paper. And think about the panelists and the audience as your friends. After all, despite the competition of other panels and other things the listeners could be doing, they have chosen to come hear you. They are obviously people of good taste and judgment; they are your friends. You are enthusiastically looking forward to meeting them.

When you walk out into the room, the thought in your head must be how happy you are to be there, what fabulous people are sitting out in the audience. That holds whether there are five people or 500. The good vibes will be catching.

*Excerpted with the permission of Linda K. Kerber. Kerber is a professor of history and a lecturer in law at the University of Iowa, and recently finished a term as president of the American Historical Association,*