

# American Historical Association

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## Conference Rules

### Everything You Need to Know about Presenting a Scholarly Paper in Public

By **Linda K. Kerber**

*Editor's Note: The following essay originally appeared in the "First Person" column of the Careers section of the Chronicle of Higher Education of March 21, 2008. In view of the helpful advice contained in it that would be of use to our readers, we are reprinting the essay in Perspectives on History, with the kind permission of the author and by the courtesy of the Chronicle. A second essay, which offers advice to panel chairs on introducing speakers and moderating a session, will be reprinted in a subsequent issue of Perspectives on History.*

Are you nervous? Good. You should be. Anxiety means you are taking the enterprise seriously and your adrenaline is flowing. Without adrenaline you will be a boring speaker. But too much anxiety will get in the way of what you have to do; too much adrenaline, and you will not think straight.

The purpose of the following rules on presenting a paper at a scholarly conference is to enable you to embrace your anxieties and put them to work—both for you and, just as important, for the arguments you have to make and the stories you have to tell.

Dorothy Kenyon, a great feminist and civil-rights activist who spent much of her time speaking in public, once observed that a public talk must "always seem to be improvised, but it must never be improvised." If you want to hold your audience, you must plan ahead, and plan carefully.

**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. If you have 20 minutes to speak, your paper can be no longer than 10 to 12 pages. Begin with a paper that is 10 pages long.

Another time limit is the date on which you are supposed to deliver the paper to the scholar who will comment on it at the conference. Sending in that paper on time is a courtesy that gives the commentator time to read and reflect on your paper. Your own selfish interest dictates that you want the most thoughtful comments you can get, not comments that have been thrown together. You will be greatly embarrassed should an annoyed commentator begin by announcing, as some have done, that the paper arrived too late to formulate any substantive thoughts about it.

**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.

That principle is undermined by the practice of giving the paper in advance to a commentator, who

will be the first to read it and will then stand up in public and criticize it. The temptation is to write for the commentator. Ignore that temptation.

Instead write for the people who will be listening. Go through your final draft, looking for dependent clauses. Turn complex sentences into simple, declarative statements. Although a sentence linked by semicolons, or constructed with one or more dependent clauses, may be perfectly clear on paper, it is very hard to understand when it floats into the air. The listener cannot hang on to the subject until the object heaves into view three clauses later.

Use quotations and examples judiciously. Listeners have difficulty absorbing abstraction after abstraction; they need to be grounded in lived experience. Think about the ratio between example and argument as your paper develops.

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. Jay Fliegelman, the late Stanford University literary scholar, discerned that some of Thomas Jefferson's own copies of the Declaration of Independence are mysteriously marked as though for a singer, with indications of where the reader is to take a breath. The next time you are at a conference, notice how often speakers run out of breath before the end of a sentence, undermining the force of what they are trying to convey.

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. (You will hear yourself breathe, but remember that your audience won't.) 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. If Thomas Jefferson could do that, so can you.

Now read your copy aloud to someone else. Find a friend before whom you do not fear looking like a fool.

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.

If you are following the rules about breathing, your friend should be able to hear you clearly. Your friend will also be able to tell you whether you are talking too fast — or, in the rare case, too slowly. 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.

Note: None of those rules change if you are speaking into a microphone. All a microphone helps with is volume. It cannot give you breath.

Now rehearse one last time, making sure that your performance is smooth: No tripping over pronunciations, no wrong intonation.

If you are using technology—overhead projections, slides, video clips—practice your talk with it.

**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. It is true that many of us normally use our hands to emphasize what we have to say. Some of us use our hands as accompaniment all the time. But conversation is different from performance. 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. If necessary, grab the lectern and cling to it and do not budge. If you have uncontrollable urges to put your hands in your pockets, sew up your pockets.

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. The difference in movement is much greater when you are sitting down. (Try it.) When you are reading a paper aloud from a sitting position, it is almost impossible to have eye contact with the audience unless you interrupt the flow of what you are saying. You cannot take as deep a breath or project your voice as powerfully, as when you are standing. (Why do you think opera singers stand when they belt out an aria?)

**Rule No. 5:** Check out the room in advance. If there is no lectern, ask for one. If you are short, be sure you can be seen over it, or ask for a box. Be polite but insistent. Plead nearsightedness. Go in search of one in a nearby room. Do not give up, even if it feels like you are making a pest of yourself.

Make sure there is water at the podium. It's not a bad idea to bring your own bottle of water and plastic cup as insurance. (You will need a cup; you cannot "swig" from a bottle without distracting an audience.) If you are breathing properly you probably will not need water, but that's impossible to predict and depends a great deal on the room.

Test the technology you plan to use in the room ahead of time. Make sure you are comfortable with using it and are prepared to improvise should something go wrong, as it often will. If it does, the time

spent making adjustments comes out of your total allocation. Moreover, watching you struggle creates an air of anxiety that infuses the room, distracts your audience, and makes you look inept.

**Rule No. 6:** Don't improvise too much. The better you know what you are going to say, the less dependent you will be on your written text, and the more your planned talk will give the impression of informality and improvisation. (See Kenyon Principle, above.) The more you improvise during a formal paper, the greater the dangers of rambling. Save your improvisational skill for the question period, when you will need it.

Be prepared for a "two-minute warning" from the moderator. Sometimes you may get it earlier than you expected through no fault of your own (for example, if one of the earlier speakers ran over time or if the entire panel got started late). At that point, you must cut to the chase. If you have ever played a musical instrument, think about sight-reading with a group of musicians, or accompanying a singer, in which you can omit any number of notes so long as you keep the beat steady and the major chords on time. At the two-minute warning, cut to your topic sentences and then to your well-crafted conclusion. Then stop.

**Rule No. 7:** Remember, you are among friends. At the beginning of the second act of *Hair*, the cast members come on the stage naked. In some productions, they run down the aisles, close to the audience. During the original production, a reporter asked the actors how they brought themselves to do that. One actor's response was that during the intermission they spent some time thinking "the people out there are our friends. They love us. I love them. They are terrific folks. It's OK to take your clothes off with your friends — like in a locker room. No problem."

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.

Yes, in the aftermath, they may judge you, but put that aside. At the outset, they have come in good faith, and you owe them a welcome in good faith. They are entitled to your welcome. If you are frozen with anxiety, that's neither fair nor courteous to the people who have come to hear what you have to say.

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.

*—Linda K. Kerber, professor of history and lecturer in law at the University of Iowa, was president of the AHA in 2006.*

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