

# Academic Conferences: Distinguishing Yourself as a Scholar

## What is an academic conference?

Academic conferences are scholarly gatherings of students and/or educators from one or more institutions who meet to share their latest research in a particular area of study within a shared field or from a variety of disciplines. A conference typically features a keynote speaker of some special distinction who delivers a thoughtful, often entertaining lecture to the entire body attending the event, followed by individual oral presentations (lasting 10 - 30 minutes, including discussion) and poster presentations on specific topics. Numerous presentations may be offered simultaneously in separate rooms at the venue, requiring the conference attendee to select among them. Conferences may last for one or more days and attract participants and attendees from institutions locally, regionally, or nationally. Conferences may be held annually, more frequently, or as special one-time events.

## What kinds of presentations are made at conferences?

Conference presentations can take a variety of forms; typically, a multi-discipline conference will largely consist of **short talks** (10 - 30 minutes, including discussion) delivered by one or more presenters. Other presentations may take the form of **demonstrations** (showing how something is done, but not offering the participants the opportunity to do what is demonstrated), **workshops** (showing how something is done and giving participants the opportunity to practice a new skill), **mock debates** (participants select a position from two or more available and are provided with talking points that may be used in the debate), **roundtable** or **panel discussions** (often moderated and consisting of responses to questions posed by the moderator or by conference attendees), and **poster presentations** (research is presented in poster form; the presenter joins other poster presenters for a "poster session" during which attendees move from one display to another, viewing the work and informally discussing the research with the individual presenters).

## Why should I present at a conference?

There are many reasons! First, attendance and participation at conferences provide valuable learning and teaching experiences, help presenters develop their public speaking skills, and help to enhance confidence in one's expertise. The friendly exchange of ideas helps to further research, solve problems, make discoveries, and to develop intellectual and professional relationships. Second, conference participation is regarded by the academic community as evidence that the student or educator is dedicated to her/his field and its continued development. As such, the students' and instructors' home institutions benefit by their conference participation, as well: recognition for outstanding conference presentations attracts more enrollment and quality teachers to the institution where the research was conducted. Third, and on a practical note, conference participation adds significantly to students' transfer, scholarship, and employment potential. The distinction of having presented at one or more conferences speaks well for students who are competing for admission to the most highly selective transfer and graduate schools, programs of study (including medicine, business, engineering, and law), and for competitive scholarship awards. (Some conferences, in fact, offer scholarships to presenters at the conclusion of the conference.) Students will list their conference experience and awards on their applications, and may discuss them at length in their personal statements.

### **How do I prepare for selection by a conference?**

There are several things that students can do to improve their chances of selection for a conference:

- Find out in advance when and where conferences will be held, what the total expense of attending a conference will be if you are selected to present (and whether you are required to pay all or some of those expenses, or if your institution will cover a portion of them), and what the deadline and criteria are for submitting presentation proposals
- Keep conferencing in mind as you complete research assignments for your classes; ask your instructors for their suggestions about how you can make your research paper or project “conference quality”
- Once you’ve received your grade for a completed research assignment, meet with your instructor to edit the paper again or fine-tune the project in preparation for a conference proposal (usually an abstract)
- Enlist your instructor as a mentor and obtain her/his help in preparing your abstract for submission to the conference committee
- Follow conference submission instructions to the letter and meet the necessary deadlines

### **What do I do once I’ve been selected for a conference?**

Confirm your intent to participate at the conference by registering or by notifying your institution that you wish to accept the invitation to present so that they can take care of any necessary details required on their end.

Review your conference proposal and begin preparing a presentation that will deliver what has been approved and accepted by the conference committee.

For some, one of the most difficult aspects of preparing a presentation is paring down weeks - even months - of research into just a few minutes. Here are a couple of ideas to help you do so: If your research considered a narrow topic, begin to distill your findings or analysis to its most significant points and develop a short talk about those, while providing some brief context. If your research looked at a broader topic and touched on several important ideas, choose one idea and focus on developing a talk about that, while providing some brief mentions of the other ideas your research included.

### **Who can help me practice my conference presentation?**

Your instructor may be an excellent choice, especially if s/he has conference experience her/himself. No one knows your research as well as you and your instructor. As someone knowledgeable about your topic, your instructor can certainly assist you in editing your presentation for content and accuracy. However, because some research is extremely specialized (and conferences may not be), your presentation may need to be rehearsed in front of an audience who may not know a lot about your topic. The feedback you receive will tell you whether any specialized language needs to be explained or changed, or if a presentation about a complex topic needs to include some background or context.

**What will conference day be like?**

Conferences are high-energy events that most students find exhilarating! The excitement of meeting others from schools near and far away, exchanging stories about classroom or research experiences, joining colleagues in discussions, and the resulting flood of ideas that (Conference Day, cont.)

invariably occurs during and after the conference are typical. Conferences begin with a check-in procedure at which attendees receive a conference program and other materials. Refreshments are often available during this time. Occasionally, there may be a poster session offered prior to the first general assembly of those attending the conference. Next, a welcome program will officially begin the proceedings, followed by adjournment to the first session(s) of presentations. The day usually continues with a lunch break during which conference attendees may be on their own, or may be invited to attend a luncheon and keynote address by a distinguished speaker. Following lunch, there may be additional presentations and poster sessions, group activities (such as a workshop), or meetings. Depending on the duration of the conference, there may be a dinner break, additional keynote speakers, additional presentations, receptions and/or awards ceremonies. The conference ends with remarks by the conference coordinators and may include an indication of when and where the group's next conference will be held.

**What happens after a conference?**

Ideally, conference attendees return to their home institutions and share their conference experiences with colleagues, classmates, and fellow researchers. This may be done in the form of a conference report (written, oral, or video). Presenters may wish to contact some of their new acquaintances from the conference, and to continue their exchange of ideas for new or continuing research. Conference coordinators may also offer presenters the opportunity to have expanded versions of their abstracts or conference papers published. Be sure to find out the details for these submissions.

**Where and how should I list my conference experience(s)?**

Your conference experiences may be listed on applications for transfer, employment, and scholarships, as well as on your resumé or C.V. (Curriculum Vitae -- a type of academic resumé). These notations should include the name of the group sponsoring the conference, the year of your presentation, its title, *and the names of any others in your presentation group, if any*. You may also wish to acknowledge your conference mentor. If you received an award for your presentation (e.g., "Outstanding Abstract" or a scholarship), be sure to note this. (You may also wish to list the award again in a section for "Honors and Achievements.") Place your most recent conference experiences at the top of these lists and work down chronologically to the oldest.

**How can I learn more about honors conferences?**

See the "Honors Events" page on the OCC Honors Program website: [www.occhonors.org](http://www.occhonors.org), or contact our office! [hpro@occ.cccd.edu](mailto:hpro@occ.cccd.edu) / 714.432.5641 / Watson Hall 287

**Academic Conferences: Your Opportunity to Distinguish Yourself as a Scholar!**