



PRESENTING YOUR RESEARCH

CONFERENCES, SYMPOSIUMS, POSTER PRESENTATIONS AND BEYOND

LUCINDA BECKER 



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC

Two

WHEN AND WHERE SHOULD I GIVE A PAPER?

There are two aspects to considering when to give a conference paper: chronological time and research time. Chronological time takes into account your workload, the time of year at which the conference is being held, the travelling involved in getting to the conference and the demands upon your time in the weeks leading up to the event. If you are a researcher rather than a professional, then research time will also be important. Research time would involve contemplating the intellectual prompts to action, such as where you are in your research endeavours, the opinion of your supervisor, and how ready you feel to emerge from your research hive and offer some of your findings to others.

Two answers often seem to emerge in response to the question of timing: either ‘I do not have the time’ (regardless of the actual circumstances) or ‘How hard can it be? Of course I have the time!’ (which is to ignore the commitment required for the task ahead). Neither of these is a realistic or accurate response, because it lacks any reflection upon the realities of the situation. What is more worrying is a researcher simply saying ‘Well, I have to do it so I will’, which is to dismiss, under pressure, the need to take into account either chronological or research time.

In deciding whether now is the right time to go ahead with a presentation of some sort, you might want to use this checklist:



CHECKLIST

- 1 Do I have something to present? This might be an essay or report which could be reworked, a draft chapter of a dissertation or thesis, or an idea or area of research which you feel would fit nicely into a presentation slot.

(Continued)

(Continued)

- 2 Is it genuinely reworkable? We will consider later the advantages and pitfalls of reworking extant material against the challenges of starting from scratch for a presentation.
- 3 Is there an event for which this material would be a good fit?
- 4 Does that event require a mode of delivery which suits me? This might be simply reading a paper aloud, or delivering a more dynamic presentation of your material, or being part of a discussion panel, or giving a poster presentation. All of these options, and their pros and cons, will be considered later.
- 5 Do I feel ready to give a presentation? For some scholars the answer to this feels like it will always be 'no', but you can work up to a full-blown conference presentation by tackling smaller challenges first, and this guide will help you in doing this.
- 6 Is this the right time in my research life?
- 7 Is this the right time in my career?
- 8 Will this conference work well for me in chronological time?

I will be unpicking all of these options with you in this guide, so you may well return to this checklist later.

The last question in the checklist is the one I would like to consider with you first because, unlike the other points, it does not relate to your development as a researcher and presenter, but rather is concerned with the practicalities of your day-to-day life. When you are considering a conference it is a good idea to ignore, in the first instance, all of the intellectual or professional prompts to attend, and simply focus for a moment on the practicalities. The easiest way to do this, for most people, is to produce a 'personalised timetable' of the months leading up to the conference which is tempting you. If you have no specific conference in mind, making a timetable will help you identify gaps in your activities when you could afford the time to attend a conference, and this might help you in your search for the best event for you.

How you construct your personalised timetable is up to you, but I have included an example here of the type of timetable which would work in this context. I am assuming throughout this period that normal everyday tasks are being carried out, but you could add other rows such as 'reading', 'planning', 'supervisions' and so forth so as to offer yourself even more detail as you make your decision.

We can look at this timetable in a little more detail, imagining that it is your timetable:

- **February:** The research paper may, or may not, cover material which is suitable for the conference, but it would give you the chance to test some of the material with an audience and hopefully boost your presentation confidence. Teaching would take up much of your time this month, so giving the paper

	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September
Research	Research seminar paper		Review panel		Draft Chapter 3 done			Supervisor meeting
Teaching	Full	Full					Summer School	Plan for new term
Earning Life				Two-week holiday		Job	Job	
Conference	Call for papers		Send synopsis/abstract		Plan		Write and prepare	Attend conference

would be your main research focus. However, you would still be able to keep an eye out for calls for papers, or be able to take a few minutes now and then to check online to see what is coming up. You notice a call for papers which suits you and your area of research, and choose to make this timetable.

- **March:** Here your month is also busy with teaching, and you would probably have the added workload of marking, so although you ponder the conference now and then, and perhaps make a few notes of what you might include in your synopsis, you would plan to do nothing more than that.
- **April:** Although your review panel appearance would take up much of your intellectual ‘head space’, you know that you need to get your synopsis or abstract for the conference sent off this month, so as to meet the deadline. Planning in advance like this allows you to make considered decisions about using the resources available to you, such as the academics on your review panel. You could take the opportunity to show them your synopsis or abstract for the conference and ask for their opinion, both of your idea for a paper and about whether that particular conference would be a good one to choose to showcase your work. You might, quite understandably, feel a little hesitant about sharing your conference plans at an event when you already feel under scrutiny, but it would be worth it. It is only by sharing your plans for dissemination that you can get the advice and feedback that you need; indeed, this is true of every form of dissemination of research.
- **May:** You would be pleased that you planned to this level of detail when May arrives. There are just routine research activities to carry out, perhaps some ‘tidying up’ of your research material, and then it is two glorious weeks of holiday. Of course, like most academics you would struggle not to take your academic mind on holiday with you, and you are bound to think about the challenge of the conference from time to time, but it is far enough away that you would, hopefully, take a proper break. Your research would be all the better for it.
- **June:** We all know that a rest helps productivity, so you would feel ready on your return to tackle the biggest month in the timetable. You have challenged yourself to complete a draft chapter of your thesis or dissertation, and you are also aiming to plan the conference paper. This is fortuitous timing in that you can arrange to see your supervisor to work through the draft chapter and the conference plan at the same meeting, but this is ‘crunch month’ as far as the conference is concerned. Writing up the paper is going to be a challenge, of course, but planning it out is often more demanding, so be ready for this in your timetable.
- **July:** As you would be busy earning money this month, it has been left free for you to focus on that, rather than distracting you or adding stress to your life by trying also to write a conference paper. If you have any leeway over your hours, you would probably try to work longer hours in July than in August, so as to give yourself a little extra time in August to write the paper, but this would not be a major factor in your decision making.
- **August:** This seems like a hugely busy month, and it is, with a week-long summer school at which you are teaching, and your vacation job, and writing up the conference paper. This is all perfectly possible, and you would not need

to pull out of any of these commitments, but because you have planned so far in advance you might have been able to organise your research activities in such a way that this is fairly much a month away from new areas of research; your focus is outward facing throughout the month.

- **September:** The reason why 'write and prepare' rather than just 'write' was noted in August is that you need to make time not just to write the paper and/or prepare your presentation, but also to rehearse and revise it. By doing this well before the conference, you will be in a position this month simply to have one or two last-minute rehearsals before the event. These will reassure you that you have a convincing argument to make, and will present it well, without taking up too much of your time. You know that the new academic year is going to bring new teaching challenges; you also have a major meeting with your supervisor to plan the next stage in your research; the family celebration for your birthday will be a pleasure but also a drain on time. Thank goodness you planned this well!

I have produced an artificial timetable here, where the conference just happens to fall at the right stage of the year, but the principles remain the same regardless of your own circumstances: plan at least six months ahead, if you can, and spread the workload of the conference if possible. Of course, we have all heard of scholars who enjoy the adrenalin rush of writing their paper on the train on the way to the conference; you have probably even heard colleagues tell you that they are happy to improvise on the conference platform and prepare just a few brief notes. These are splendid anecdotes, but for most of us that simply would not work.

You will have different details in your timetable, and you may choose to have additional columns, but if you can it would make sense to try to follow the pattern of this timetable with regard to the conference. You will notice that, of the eight months covered here, there are five months in which activity relating to the conference is taking place, and three fallow months, in which the researcher has the chance to take a break from the conference preparation. Naturally, this will not mean taking a break from thinking about the conference, and that is largely the point of the fallow months. When you are not actually planning, writing or rehearsing, you are, inevitably, thinking about the event from time to time. This is often super-productive time: the moment in the shower when you suddenly think of a brilliant opening gambit; the lazy train journey during which you get a better feeling for the overall shape of your conference contribution; the moments before sleep when you recall a photograph which would be the perfect image to illustrate one of your points. If you possibly can, allow this spread of time in your planning: it usually pays dividends.

A personalised timetable such as this would take you through the months leading up to the conference. A word here about the week of the conference might be useful. Another checklist for you to consider:



CHECKLIST

During the week of the presentation event:

- 1 Do not give your paper to anyone else for them to check it for you – any feedback you get now will probably be too late to be useful and could sap your confidence.
- 2 Make sure that you have made back-ups for any visual material you are producing – data projectors can fail, for example.
- 3 Eat well and get to bed early on the penultimate night before the event – this is the night's sleep which will really make a difference to how you cope.
- 4 If you are asked to take on any additional work (more teaching, a new research activity, a team event), ask for a few days to think about it – you might miss a good opportunity if you simply say 'no' because you are under immediate pressure.
- 5 Check and double check the timing, the journey, the accommodation – all of the practicalities of the event – a week before the conference, to avoid any last-minute panics or problems on the day.
- 6 Plan your rehearsal schedule well. The main rehearsals will have happened the month before – restrict yourself to just one or two brief runs through this week.

I have covered aspects of your chronological time, but research time is also important. Listen to the promptings of those around you, and of your own research, to tell you when you should take the step towards presenting at a conference. You will probably already be aware that academic networking and raising your profile could both be useful in terms of your career goals (more on academic networking later in this guide), but your supervisor or mentor might not want to push against what seems to be a closed door. If you have never shown any interest in presenting your research, or if you have ever shared your doubts or fears about doing this, your supervisor/mentor might be loath to push you too hard. If you have made a commitment in your own mind to presenting your research in some way (and buying this book suggests that you have), then let your supervisor/mentor, and anyone else who could help, know that this is your position. At the very least it will allow them to keep you up to date with conferences they have heard about, or colloquia/symposia that they regularly attend.

The quiet promptings of your research can be difficult to discern. If you have embarked on a long-term project it is only natural that your focus will be on the final product (the thesis, project report or dissertation, for example). This can lead to you assuming that none of your work is ready for dissemination until this final stage, even though it might be. An audit of your work every few months makes sense here. Just taking an hour out of your

everyday activities to see whether any of your work could be hived off and worked up into a paper or presentation could lead to surprising results. I will be asking you to consider later the types of material which might work for a conference contribution, but at this stage it is worth mentioning that a conference paper is not always (and, some would argue, not ever) the same as a thesis/dissertation chapter or section of a report. Audit your material not with an eye to its final published or submitted shape, but in smaller portions, any of which might work well as a conference offering.

I have been talking so far about papers and/or presentations, and later in this guide I will be discussing the different forms of conference presentation that are available to you, but before we move on I would like to consider, in broad terms, the types of conference which are open to you. It is often the case that a new researcher or young professional will leap at the first chance to present which offers itself. This is sometimes the result of fear ('I must just jump in and have a go at this') but it is more often a natural tendency to see the title of a conference and ignore the *mode* of the conference. Taking a moment now to consider this will allow you to make the best possible choice.

If we are to assume (and we can safely assume here) that there will be many conferences over the course of time which could fit your area of expertise, then we can focus on other important factors. When you see a 'call for papers', which might come to you either as an online alert or email, or from spotting a notice, you will naturally consider first the topic areas of the conference, but remember also that this is effectively a sales pitch for the event. The organisers are trying to persuade some scholars to give papers and other scholars to attend the conference. In making a decision you will want to find out a little more, before you commit, such as:

- Who is organising the event?
- What is it being called?
- What is the likely composition of the audience?
- Where is it being held?
- Who is funding it?
- Are the speakers' expenses being paid?
- Are there plans to publish the contributions?
- Are copies of the papers to be distributed in advance?
- What format will the event use?

Each of these factors may affect your decision as to whether or not to contribute to a conference, and I will be returning to them during the course of this book, but for now I will give a brief overview of why each of these factors could be important to you in the earliest stages of your planning.

Who is organising the event?

Conferences might be organised by postgraduate researchers, in which case they may primarily appeal to other postgraduate researchers as speakers (although this is not always the case). This would offer you a supportive atmosphere, but might not feel that different from a research seminar in your own institution. If it is being held elsewhere you could make useful contacts in your field; if it is being held in your own institution it would still count as useful practice and it would help you to network with academics beyond your immediate supervisory team.

Of course, it would be perfectly possible for you to arrange your own conference. This sounds like rather a lofty ambition, perhaps, but there are often good support systems in place (both practical and financial) to help those scholars who would like to arrange a conference, and naturally it would boost your prestige to have done such a thing.

What is it being called?

Various names are used for collective academic events. Symposia and colloquia (symposium and colloquium in the singular) may have academics giving papers, or may rely on 'round-table' discussions, or panel presentations. They are intended, usually, to be a little less rigid and formal than a full conference. If it is a conference, you would need to check on how the organisers expect material to be presented (more on that later in this guide). If the event is being termed a 'poster conference' you can be sure that creating a poster will be part of the event for most participants, but you might just check on that: sometimes they also have a few speakers without posters. If you are expected to give a poster, you would need to check whether it is simply a poster for viewing, or whether you will be standing beside it answering questions, or perhaps be required to give a brief presentation on your poster. If you are asked to give a paper at a 'research seminar' you would naturally assume that this is a relatively informal gathering, but it is still worth checking the other points on the list, just to confirm that it will be as casual you expect it to be.

What is the likely composition of the audience?

The size of the audience need not sway you unduly. It sounds far more terrifying to give a paper to an audience of 60 than to a group of six, yet

most experienced presenters will confirm that the reverse is actually true. Of course, if it is an international conference with 500 in the audience you have the right to feel a little more nervous, but again it should not put you off. What is far more relevant to your decision making is the composition of the audience, and you can work this out, to some extent, by the breadth of the topic areas to be covered and the tone of the publicity. If it is a broad conference area, or a niche area which is just a little outside your field, you would expect to receive a broad range of questions, some of which might be quite challenging as non-experts try to assess your research position. A conference whose organisers clearly intend for it to be the 'gold standard' in its field, with high-profile speakers announced with the call for papers, for example, may be more demanding in terms of dovetailing your material to particular themed areas. A conference which falls exactly into your specialism is going to be valuable in terms of your research network.

Where is it being held?

Naturally you will take into account practicalities such as whether the conference is in your own country or abroad, but you might also like to think about your future plans in the context of location. If you know that you would relish the chance to work in your field at a particular university or other organisation, then you might want to present a paper there regardless of the inconvenience and/or expense. It is also worth asking around or putting up a notice if you are considering a conference at some distance from home: lift shares are common enough to make it worth your while to do this.

It is possible that the event at which you are thinking of presenting is not 'being held' in any traditional sense at all: webinars are a possibility. What webinars lack in terms of flexibility they can make up for in terms of accessibility, so if you are working in a remote geographic area this might be an avenue worth pursuing.

Are there confirmed speakers already?

If there are no named speakers at the time that the call for papers goes out, this need not put you off. Named speakers whose work you admire will always be an attraction, of course, but not having speakers advertised in advance can be a deliberate attempt on the part of the organisers to be as broadly welcoming to speakers and topic areas as possible.

Are the speakers' expenses being paid?

Practice here varies hugely, depending on who is funding the conference, where it is in the world and the traditions (and financial position) of the hosting organisation. If you need to be paid as a speaker in order to be there, ask about this early on. If the organisers are not paying expenses, but you are very keen to go, see if your own institution could help. Many organisations have a 'travel fund' or 'research dissemination fund' or something similar, which will contribute towards travel costs for those of their number who are delivering papers.

Are there plans to publish the contributions?

This could be the make or break decision moment for you. A publication as a result of a conference contribution is a gift to any academic. Sometimes conference organisers will have arranged in advance to bring out a special issue of a journal as a result of the conference, and plan to include every conference paper in there. Sometimes a book deal will have been made to produce a collected edition comprising selected conference papers. You might also hear that one of the delegates at the conference is planning something similar. Whilst you will not want to turn down a perfect call for papers just because there are no publication plans, if you were deciding between two conferences, this might be a key deciding factor.

Are copies of the papers to be distributed in advance?

This might seem like a minor detail four months ahead of the event, but four weeks before the conference, when you are being chased for a copy of your paper so that it can be circulated in advance to delegates, you might rue the day you agreed to this. As long as you have planned everything out, as I suggested earlier, this will not be a problem, but it is well worth checking at the outset whether this is a requirement. If it is, you will also want to ask about delivery: are delegates simply going to be asking questions about your paper, which they have all read in advance, or will you still be required to give the paper in some way at the event? Neither of these need be a problem, but you do need to know in advance.

What format will the event use?

Again, this information is not automatically included in a call for papers, but the format might play a role in your decision making. If, for example, you want to contribute to a conference but feel that a full-blown paper is beyond the reach of your time or your material at the moment, then a conference which includes panel or round-table discussions might be for you; if you want to be involved so as to gain some experience, but feel that a 'speaking part' is not for you yet, then a poster conference might be your best option. Before you dismiss a conference from your plans, it makes sense to consider the variety of ways in which the conference system can benefit you at each stage of your progression.

Working through the variables like this will, I hope, have given you a clearer sense of your options in terms of the standard forms of event at which you might present. Before we leave this area, however, we should consider other, less obvious avenues. If you are hoping to gain more confidence in public speaking before embarking on conferences, or if you would like to disseminate your research as widely as possible, there are other options open to you, such as:

- workshops
- toolbox talks
- public talks.

Workshops: these are usually thought of as teaching and learning events, rather than principally for disseminating research, but they can serve this purpose. If your area of expertise falls into a field which might be of more general interest, either to other academics or to a wider group of people, you might want to think about workshops as an option. They will give you some practice in standing up and talking about your research, but will not carry with them the formality of a conference paper; they allow others to question your research outcomes, but in a supportive environment; they require you to think on your feet, but in a way that is fluid and not too constraining.

If this idea appeals to you as, perhaps, a step on the road to a conference paper, contact those who might be interested in helping you to arrange such an event (your HR department, or the skills training section of your organisation, or managers of departments). Alternatively, check online with broad search terms around your area of expertise to see if there are already events happening elsewhere to which you could contribute as a workshop leader.

Toolbox talks: this term is sometimes used to describe lunchtime events during which members of an organisation can talk about their work,

or their research into an area of work. If you are being funded by an employer for your research you may be obliged to give these talks as part of your funding package; if you are working as a professional they could be an optional part of your work life; if you are carrying out research which is not related to your working life, significant benefits can result from toolbox talks on your 'other life'.

Toolbox talks are not necessarily informal, but they are usually quite brief. They give you the chance to practise all of the presentation techniques you would use at a conference, but in a less daunting situation. Such is the popularity of these talks within professional circles that they are increasingly being used within academia, too, with research students joining with their supervisors/mentors and other academics to share experience and ideas around areas of mutual interest.

Public talks: these may sound like the opposite of a good way to ease yourself into the limelight, but in fact they can be very productive. Their availability to you might be limited, depending upon your area of expertise, but it is a good idea to take some time every now and then to look around you and see what is happening in the world outside your university or immediate workplace. Science and literary festivals abound nowadays, and most local societies regularly invite guest speakers to their meetings, so be creative and think about how you might 'break the ice' on introducing your material to the wider world in this way.