

Written Style vs. Oral Style

When preparing text of a conference presentation (especially one you will read aloud):

DO	DON'T
Focus on results rather than methods; novelty over reiteration	Use lengthy quotes or quote too often
Keep sentences short, clear, and concise	Use jargon unless is absolutely necessary and you are aware your audience understands it
Remember that punctuation like semicolons, dashes, or parentheses don't work orally	Use formal definitions when functional ones will suffice <i>(e.g., "The nostril is one of two channels in the nose" vs. "The nostril regulates air intake and filters dust and bacteria particles.")</i>
Use cuts strategically <i>(e.g., "In the longer version of this paper, I have several more examples of how the author uses figurative language to achieve this type of uncanny effect.")</i>	Use the same word to denote different things <i>(e.g., "The one on the right is right" vs. "The one on the right is correct.")</i>
Overuse metalanguage <i>(e.g., "Here is the most important idea in this talk; I cannot emphasize this point enough")</i>	Use different words when one will do <i>(e.g., "The author's argument can be summarized in two words: eat meat. But this writer's thesis is flawed." vs. "The author's argument can be summarized in two words: eat meat. But this author's argument is flawed.")</i>
Write transitions that seem clear and almost too obvious <i>(e.g., "Now that I've finished describing where I found these archival materials, I will summarize for you the three main features they all shared.")</i>	Use abstract/general words when concrete nouns are more accurate <i>(e.g., grammar vs. punctuation, dessert vs. ice cream)</i>
Use words that refer to people and human relationships <i>(e.g., "Mothers are problematically lacking from Shakespeare's last plays vs. The absence of mothers from Shakespeare's latter plays is problematic.")</i>	Use certain types of metalanguage that work well on paper, but not orally <i>(e.g., "the former" "the latter" "respectively")</i>
Use personal pronouns to help the audience identify with your talk <i>(e.g., "Today I will talk about a topic that is important too all of us: childhood obesity vs. Childhood obesity is the topic of this paper.")</i>	Use exceptions <i>(e.g., Everyone but adults must vacate the pool vs. Adults may remain in the pool.)</i>
Use colloquial words to make your prose sound more conversational <i>(e.g., "Let's get started" vs. "It is now time to begin.")</i>	Use long strings of nouns <i>(e.g., "Assembly line factory employee protocol training" vs. "Protocol training for factory employees who work on assembly lines")</i>
Repeat words and phrases to emphasize their importance <i>(e.g., Dickens was an author; Dickens was a traveler; Dickens was a moralist.)</i>	Make long lists without subjects <i>(e.g., "Obama's tax bill will cut your gas bill in half; make us more energy independent; cut greenhouse gas emissions; and add another 500,000 jobs" vs. It will make us more energy independent. It will cut greenhouse gas emissions...")</i>



Activity: *These two paragraphs contain similar content, but exist at separate ends of the written/oral style continuum. Read them both and decide which you would prefer listening to, especially if there were no visual aids to help you process the content. For the “oral style” example, what are the strategies the writer uses to capture her audience’s attention? Which strategies seem like ones you would consider adopting? Which seem like they might be too different than the norm in your field? Some of our thoughts and more general tips for reading papers at conferences are on the following page.*

WRITTEN STYLE

Academic conferences are important venues where graduate students might introduce themselves to the scholarly community. Presenting a paper at a conference is a key way of doing so. This paper argues that successful conference papers need to be clear and conversational in order to properly engage an audience. Ways of making papers clear include focusing on a single idea, avoiding the use of jargon, and having a logically-structured, well-signposted argument. Making papers conversational entails using colloquial, personal language, telling stories, and illustrating concepts via examples. Together, a clear and conversational style will assist in the execution of a successful conference experience, enabling graduate students to assert themselves as prominent in the future of their respective disciplines and within the academy as well. With regard to the latter, the development and delivery of clear and conversational conference papers will also help spread ideas beyond the boundaries of a delimited, expert audience, helping students succeed outside of academia as well.

ORAL STYLE

Like many of you in this audience are doing right now, graduate students attend and present papers at academic conferences to introduce themselves to academics outside their home institutions. Today, I will argue that grad students, especially, must adopt a clear and conversational style when presenting papers. By clear style, I am referring to three key attributes: One, conference papers should focus on a single idea. Two, papers should be free of any unnecessary jargon. Let me say that again – student presenters should avoid jargon at all costs! Three, papers should be organized and provide listeners with rhetorical tools to navigate their progress and structure. Likewise, I am also referring to three conversational attributes: One, colloquial language using strong, clear subjects and plenty of first and second-person language. Two, stories. In other words, narrative examples with clear beginnings and endings. Three, plenty of concrete examples that ground any abstract concepts in concrete evidence. So why must graduate students present conference papers with such attributes? A clear and conversational conference paper accomplishes two things for grad student presenters: First, grad students who speak clearly and conversationally appear more assertive. They are more likely to be seen as key players in their research field. Second, such grad students can spread ideas to non-expert audiences. They hold the potential to communicate important ideas beyond their research field. Therefore, graduate students presenting clear and conversational papers are more likely to achieve success both inside and outside academia.

COMMENTARY ON THE TWO PASSAGES

Though the examples show that written style is more concise and may actually seem easier to read to yourself, the oral style passage would be easier to remember presuming you were hearing it without a written accompaniment. There are, however, a few things this oral version does that might be a bit too conversational for an academic conference (depending on the norms of your field and audience you are speaking to). First, the direct second person address to the audience at the paper's beginning might be off putting to some audiences. However, if using second person is something you can imagine doing, do so. It's one of the fastest ways to break down the imaginary wall between you and your audience. Next, the oral version may rely a touch too heavily on numeric lists. Though lists are helpful to listeners, having three in one paragraph could make it difficult to understand which is most important. Finally, the sentence that begins, "Let me say that again" and ends with an exclamation mark is clearly the oral style passage's most colloquial sentence. Nonetheless, repeating salient points is an excellent way to assure that your audience will both hear them and recognize their importance. So if you can't imagine yourself saying something quite this casual, consider a repetition beginning with "In other words" or "To put it differently."

More generally, academic conference presenters shouldn't conflate a style that is easy to hear and process with simplicity of content. Indeed, if your work is technically or theoretically complex, your audience will appreciate it all the more if you make it easy for them to listen to. Here are few more tips for preparing to read a paper at a conference:

- Make a dedicated reading copy that has:
 - A larger, easy to read font
 - Page breaks at natural times to pause
 - Numbers and your name on every page
 - Annotations that will remind you what to emphasize
- Use your dedicated reading copy to practice reading aloud
 - Helps with timing (general rule 2 minutes for every one 12pt font double-spaced page)
 - Helps identify wordy expressions or words that are difficult to pronounce orally
- Always conclude by thanking your audience