

As you may already know, the Graduate Student Caucus is an affiliate of the Modern Language Association. As such, we have the privilege and honor to propose up to two panels for the convention. We are proud that, once again, both panels were accepted and you are welcome to learn more about it [here](#). This issue of *The Grad Caucus Chronicle* is dedicated to providing tips for a successful presentation. Whether you are presenting at the next MLA Convention in Chicago or at another venue, we have asked our followers and members to share their best pieces of advice. We hope you will appreciate and benefit from these guidelines, which are, most definitely, not set in stone. In fact, we strongly encourage your participation on Twitter and/or Facebook to tell us what you think, share other tips, or simply keep the discussion going about grad life and academia. So, here is a list of what they had to say, not in order of importance.

1. Make Eye Contact With Your Audience

When we asked our Twitter followers to send us tips on presenting at a conference, several quickly replied: “eye-contact” (@RebeccaShores; @pankisseskafka; @khkshimabukuro; @VersatilePhD). We understand that conferences can be a little scary for graduate students, insofar as they find themselves surrounded by “real” professors and other specialists of the same field. However, do keep your head up, look at your audience and be confident. This should allow you to truly engage with them and make the talking more interesting for everyone. And... it should help keep that tired or bored person at the back of the room awake!

2. Do NOT Write Your Paper at the Last Minute AND Always Rehearse

@WritingHaywood astutely points out that writing your paper the night before is not an option. Of course, it is normal to go over it again and again the day or even 10 minutes before, but you should only be making minor edits. It goes without saying that planning ahead will make your paper stronger. It gives you time to present it in your department and/or to receive feedback from your university mentor. Remember that you are representing that university and they would not appreciate you giving a bad impression. To that extent, do ask for feedback and modify your paper accordingly. Academia is about exchanging ideas and points of view. If you expose your work to a lot of opinions during the writing/preparation phase of the paper, you should be better prepared to face unknown faces at that conference! And of course, this also allows you to REHEARSE, as noted by @pankisseskafka, @ khkshimabukuro, and @J_C_Hayes. Do read your paper out loud, in front of the mirror, several times. As @ProfessorF74 says: “Practice so you can go off script.”

3. If Possible, Do Not Read Your Paper

If you took the time to work on your paper, shared with your department faculty and peers, and rehearsed, you should be able to present without reading. We all agree that this is a hard task and most of us are taught that we can simply read our contribution. Nevertheless, to be able to present without reading should be our ultimate goal. We need to feel comfortable with our material, so that eventually we can just look at our audience and talk to them about it. Of course, we are not telling you to present without a safety net! NOT AT ALL! Our followers remarked on the use of slides (if using powerpoints) or your own visual support with – as @VersatilePhD puts it – “one

page, major talking points, 26 pt font”, which you can use to “stay on track”, because “lots of white space ... [help you] keep eyes on audience, but ideas on track.” If you’re not yet feeling at ease with this method, just make sure that TIP #1 is your priority! Eyes on your Audience as much as possible!

4. Try a Joke

Although we haven’t tried this yet, @RebeccaShores says we should try to include at least one in our presentation. Clearly, this would help lighten the mood and make the presentation more enjoyable for everyone. Sure we are academics spending most of our time reading and writing, but we can be fun too... right? Maybe Rebecca can share some of her jokes so we know which ones work or don’t work.

5. Use Clear Slides

@JeffreyKeefer (whose contribution to the *Chronicle* can be found below in Issue #5) proved, once again, to be very helpful in this matter. For those of you planning to use PowerPoint or any other software, he suggests that you insert your name and twitter handle on each slide. Academia cannot move forward without being more media-oriented, and your twitter handle would allow people in the audience to retweet what you present, and/or continue the discussion with you later on. Using a computer also means that you must prepare for possible technical issues. To that extent, Jeffrey advises you to arrive early “to ensure your slides are loaded and work on the device in the room”. By the way, if you have a Macintosh device, you will most definitely need to bring your own AV adaptor! Finally, if you have a chance, “check out the room the day before the session in case you need to adapt anything.” As for the slides, @trishapaton reminds you to use a big font, so that the visual is not overwhelming, disorganized and unclear. Likewise, @clboyles advises you to “keep the content on slides to a minimum; use verbal presentation to enhance slides.” You do not want to be reading off your slides nor do you want your audience to pay too much time reading them as they might lose track of what you are saying.

6. Answer All Questions Honestly

Aren’t we all scared about the Question and Answer part of a presentation? Thankfully (maybe?), time-constraints usually make for a short Q&A, allowing people to ask each presenter one or two questions (at most). Listen carefully and don’t be afraid to ask them to repeat or clarify. Try to answer the best you can, and be honest if you do not know. It happens; we do not have all the answers, otherwise we wouldn’t be academics. When that happens, kindly thank your interlocutor, tell them that you hadn’t thought about it (that way or at all) and that you will most certainly look into it. In any case, be as clear and concise/precise as possible. If you don’t know do not ramble, just say so, and as @clboyles notes: “offer to find the answer and provide it through email”, because “it shows appreciation and respect for your audience while simultaneously acting as a networking opportunity.”

7. Present Your Findings Early On

@trishpaton explains that you should present your findings and conclusions early on, because “those are the interesting parts”. Indeed, make sure that your introduction – as short as it may be – grabs your audience’s attention. 15/20 minutes is not a lot of time, but it is enough to bore someone. If you have been at conferences before, you have seen the yawns, the tilting heads, the heavy eyelids. So, make your point early on, and tell everyone why your work is interesting and why they should listen. Along the same line, for @J_C_Hayes an “overly written” paper can be overwhelming too, and you should rather focus on “talking points to foster discussion.”

8. Do NOT Waste Time on Literature Review

We had not thought of this one, so thank you, @trishpaton for pointing out that you should not spend your time presenting the literature review on a topic. Once again, you do not have much time, and you must make the most of it by going straight to the heart of your argument, the interesting nucleus of your paper. We do not need to hear you enumerate a list of publications. That is something you can mention later on, in passing, or when you try to publish this paper (in footnotes, probably).

9. Follow the Time Rules

This is #9, but truly for us it is #1. BE ON TIME, always, always! Conventions follow a very strict schedule, and you do not want to be the glitch that upset the system. In most cases, you might not even get a chance to upset anything, as you simply won’t get to present. Sadly, you may have traveled across the country to attend, but it is your responsibility to be on time. This might mean that you should plan on an extra night at the hotel, or that you leave a few hours before your panel, but it is part of conference etiquette. You might want to try to contact the chair of the panel so that they can let other presenters go first, but this is rather unlikely. We, at the Graduate Student Caucus, will be strict about the time policy. The MLA is *the* most important conference, and we cannot afford our panels to fall apart because of late-comers. Should you be presenting with us, we hope that you understand it, and assure you that this is not unusual in any way. As for your presentations, @clboyles rightly reminds us all that the chair will be keeping time. Wherever you may be presenting, ask the chair how much time you have, and to let you know how much time you have left while you are presenting. @ProfessorF74 even suggests that, while you rehearse, you “aim for 3-4 minutes under and slow-down”. This way, even if you read a little faster because of stress, you should still be within your allotted time. Time management is certainly one of the most important ways to give a good impression.