

# Reforming the Conference Presentation, or What We Can Learn from Hollywood

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In the movies, scholarly work is a contact sport. At a conference or during a public presentation, the scholar is always passionate and articulate. He proclaims radically new theses that cause the audience to shout out objections or gasp at his intellectual audacity. Then, he dashes off a masterful proof on the chalkboard or rips open a curtain to reveal a newly discovered dinosaur skeleton. Someone in the back of the lecture hall starts to clap, and soon all his assembled peers break out into raucous applause.

But that is Hollywood. You know the real-life version. The chair introduces the panelists, announces that they will each have 20 minutes to present their papers, and then turns the floor over to Prof. A, who immediately complains that 20 minutes will not suffice, so, with everyone's permission, she'll take 25. Prof. A reads her paper, in a tone approaching Gregorian plainchant, and then turns the podium over to Prof. B, who begins by lamenting the fact that he now has 5 minutes less than that apportioned to his esteemed colleague, so he will have to extend his presentation by just a few minutes, which ends up being 10. Next, Prof. C takes the floor, even more annoyed than her predecessors about the time issue, since she has been left with only 5 minutes. Her presentation runs on for 15 minutes past her originally allotted time, which puts the panel now half an hour behind schedule. The chair noisily tears up a sheet of paper, scribbles "Time, please" on one of the pieces, and slides it down the table toward Prof. C., while the audience members graciously pretend they don't notice four eminent scholars passing notes like schoolchildren. Ten minutes later, Prof. C yields

the floor to Prof. D, the designated discussant, who proceeds to give a précis, in only 30 minutes, of each of the presentations that the audience has just heard. In the end, about 20 minutes is left for discussion, and the first question from the floor is whether Prof. A would mind repeating her first point.

We have to do better than this. Most aspects of university life have changed radically over the last 50 years, from the student population to the interests of the professoriate. But at professional conferences and association meetings, we cling tenaciously to tradition—the 20-20-20-10 format, three or more oral presentations of, notionally, 20 minutes each, followed by the reflections of, again notionally, a 10-minute discussant—somehow believing that this is the most effective way of quickly presenting our research findings to our peers.

Dissatisfaction with the traditional format is not new, of course. As Roy Rosenzweig (2004) wrote in a recent issue of *Perspectives*, the newsletter of the American Historical Association (AHA), historians have often bemoaned "the absence of lively discussion" at the association's annual meeting—and the author was quoting a meeting report from the 1920s. The sentiment is regularly echoed today in most other disciplines, and thankfully the scholarly world has begun to respond, if only piecemeal, to these criticisms. For its 2006 convention, for example, the AHA put a premium on innovation. The call for papers explicitly encouraged roundtables, workshops, pre-circulation of papers, and other formats to help scholars move beyond the stultifying scenarios of the past. Similarly, the American Association for the Advancement of Science ([www.aaas.org](http://www.aaas.org)), in the call for participants for its 2006 annual meeting, openly stressed the need for "capable and articulate presenters who are representatives of the diversity of science and society." (Within the APSA, some divisions call openly for innovative panel designs, while others make no mention of format.)

These are welcome steps in the right direction, but most professional organizations—the biggest organizers of large-scale conferences and conventions—have yet to explore the full range of potential formats. Consider just a few:

## *Scholars in Conversation*

An interview can be a wonderful form of performance art, if the interviewee is interesting and the interviewer crafty. Imagine the academic equivalent of Charlie Rose or Terry Gross, someone who has well-prepared questions and is able to probe deeply and draw out a leading scholar on controversial issues. Or imagine a relative newcomer to the field, perhaps someone who has just published an important first book or a well-received article, doing a structured interview with one of the greats in the same research area. Such a format need not descend to a professorial version of *Inside the Actors Studio*. ("If you were a book, would you be clothbound or paperback?") It could instead encourage dialogue across scholarly fields and intellectual generations, and give a real sense of where our communities have come from and are going.

## *Structured Contention*

Formats of rule-guided debate can help sharpen our thought and create lively exchange. However, Lincoln-Douglas debates—two people at opposing podiums—are probably not the way to go, since they tend to shoe-horn complex issues into contrived, irreconcilable positions. However, one can imagine scenarios in which representatives of several major schools of thought engage one another from their own perspectives. Or perhaps proponents of one school could be asked to engage seriously with the views of the other by being tasked with defending, in good faith, an opposing side's position.

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## Conferences as Umbrellas

Conferences, conventions, and annual meetings could be refigured to become umbrellas for a whole range of different presentational styles, something that is close to the new model which the AHA introduced, tentatively, in 2006. The golden rule of conference-organizing should be to allow the medium to fit the message, that is, to recognize that scholars, even within single subdisciplines, are pursuing research whose content is better suited to some presentational formats than to others.

For example, some areas of research are graphics-heavy and might best be presented as a display. But here we have to think beyond the “poster sessions” that have proliferated over the past two decades, a weak attempt at presentational creativity which can make faculty—especially junior faculty—feel that they have been relegated to the high school science fair. Other areas of research demand that the audience have access to moving images. Why not have a room where clips or even entire films could be shown on an announced schedule? The same might be done with audio texts, in specially designated listening rooms. Other scholars might want to present imperfect works-in-progress, perhaps papers or even entire book manuscripts. One could imagine a preliminary referee process, run by the conference’s program committee, which would select a few pieces for active workshopping during the conference itself. This would turn a formal presentation into a real opportunity to hone a piece of work, taking advantage of a roomful of expertise and talking with an audience rather than at them.

In short, we need to put as much work into thinking about the kinds of presentations that will be made as we do about the standards for publication in refereed journals. Conferences ought to be more closely refereed—and, let’s be honest, probably smaller—affairs. Program committees should be explicit about the range of criteria—not only novelty of research, but also novelty of presentation—that will be applied in selecting which presentations will be given. We ought to think seriously about why we are presenting in the first place. To polish an article manuscript? To interact with other experts? To get noticed by a senior figure in the field? To get a grant from our home department that will cover the airfare to Hawaii? How we answer that question will in large part determine how we think about presentational format and style.

None of this is to suggest that we abandon 20-20-20-10 altogether. For

some kinds of research, the established format can serve an important set of purposes, allowing a group of panelists with similar research interests to present their findings as a group and to receive critiques from a single referee. But even here, we can do things better.

## Make Speaking Skills Matter

The criteria for the selection of panel presentations at major academic conferences must be revised. It would be bizarre for an entrant in a juried art exhibition to present an oil-on-canvas piece as evidence of her talents in performing a one-act monologue. But that is the typical scenario for academic conferences: We ask to see abstracts of the proposed panel papers in order to make a judgment on how well participants will be able to present their papers orally.

This system needs to be rethought. It would be too much to ask presenters to send along a video portfolio of recent public presentations, but there are clues that one can glean from a written response to a call for papers. Is the paper abstract written in a lively and engaging style? Does the applicant’s C.V. contain evidence of previous presentations as a featured speaker? Has the person won teaching awards or other distinctions that measure speaking performance?

At the very least, we should make it clear, as part of a call for papers, that the conference organizers take speaking skills seriously. At the conference itself, we might give prizes not only for the best papers but also for the best presentations—the ones that draw in an audience, are delivered in a lively but serious fashion, and make full use of the oral medium in presenting new research. And beyond the conference, we need to communicate to the next generation of scholars—via our graduate courses—that how you say what you have to say is a critical part of being a productive and respected academic.

## Keep to or, Even Better, Come in under Your Time

Really. If you must read your paper (but see the next section), make sure that the presentation fits into whatever time has been allotted. Most of us are, by profession, public speakers in addition to being writers and thinkers. It ought not to be a burden to condense our views into chunks smaller than the 50-minute lecture. And we should just get over the idea that concision is somehow an affront to our professional standing or a comment on how pathbreaking, trailblaz-

ing, or earth-shattering our new research actually is. It is simply a recognition that the medium of oral presentation is different from the written paper, with aesthetic properties that are not those that inhere in the written word.

## Read, Maybe, but Don’t Recite

Disciplines and subfields differ on the acceptability of reading papers verbatim, from wholly unacceptable to par for the course. In research areas in which language itself is critical, hewing closely to a prepared text may be a vital part of research presentation. In others, where presenting the totality of research findings is more important, scholars have more freedom.

But there’s reading and then there’s reading. It is one thing to bury one’s head in the text, and another to make regular eye contact with the audience, use voice inflections, and, as far as possible, camouflage the fact that one is giving a public reading, not a public talk. I have seen more than a few scripted deliveries in which the presenter was so tied to the text that he actually read the section headings before moving on to a new part of the paper. The radio personality Paul Harvey can get away with that—“Page two!”—but academics really shouldn’t.

## Overtures and Showstoppers

Any composer in musical theater knows that the schlocky pieces can be buried in the middle, but that the opener and closer have to be big. The same rule applies to 20-20-20-10 panels: The chair and the discussant should do their jobs properly. The chair must be a real leader, someone who will not simply introduce the panelists and slink back in her chair for the next two hours. She has to take charge of the proceedings and make sure that the trains run on time. Ensuring the latter means doing more than passing notes, however. If a panel member has gone over the allotted time, simply say so. A firm but respectful intervention—“Excuse me, but could you summarize your arguments, since we are running out of time?”—is preferable to the weird convention of handwritten slips being passed, silently but conspicuously, down the table. During the question period, the chair must recognize speakers from the floor and direct interventions to the appropriate panelist. A really good chair will go even farther and help shape the discussion, using his prerogative as the presiding voice to steer the proceedings in fruitful directions.

The discussant's job is not to go paper by paper and offer individual critiques. That can be done once the conference is finished, say, in an email to each participant. The discussant ought to discuss: to pull out the themes common to all the papers, focus on points of disagreement, offer new thoughts spawned by the research that has just been presented, and help the audience understand why all the papers just delivered were part of the same panel in the first place. The discussant's main role is to catalyze the discussion; the chair's role is to manage what ought to be the ensuing chain reaction. Working together, both can help make the Q-and-A period a genuinely interactive experience, not just a press conference.

### **Creativity Starts with the Printed Program**

Many program committees spend about half a second thinking about the format of the printed conference program. Again, the drill is well-known:

There is a word from the organization's president to get the wagons moving, a vast flatland of panel and presenter listings takes up the unspecial middle, while 50 pages of publishers' ads loom on the far side of the colorless plain.

There are other ways. For example, the Association for the Study of Nationalities, a prominent ethnic studies organization, recently engaged in a radical rethinking of what the conference program could do. The program for the association's 10th anniversary convention, held in 2005, included short, 500-word articles by several scholars on the state of the field of ethnicity and nationalism studies, the activities of allied associations, and major new collaborative research projects, each accompanied by a photo of the author. The listing of panels was also graphically interesting; film panels, for instance, included stills from the films to be shown. The program's back matter included not only publishers' announcements, but also several novel and interesting features: a bibliography of recent books and articles by the association's members, a listing of recent

dissertations in the field, and a *Harper's*-style breakdown of the convention in figures—the number of papers presented, the number of non-U.S.-based presenters, the number of graduate student participants. The program was something one would really keep, not just toss in the trashcan on the way out the hotel room door. And it was cheap: The lay-out was designed, in part, by a volunteer crew of talented students and the printing and binding done in Canada.

Similar formats—and even more radical ones—are not hard to imagine, suitably tweaked and geared to the specific needs of different fields and disciplines. The point is that programs can be more, and do more, than simply list panels and offer a revenue stream, via ad space, for a scholarly association. They can help send the message that the organizers have thought seriously about the relationship between format and content, and that scholarly meetings are places where the quality of communication is as important as its object. After all, style—even for political scientists—is much too important to be left to the aesthetes.

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### **Reference**

Rosenzweig, Roy. 2004. "Should the AHA Annual Meeting be Changed? AHA Members and Council Say 'Yes!'" *Perspectives* (September). Available at: [www.historians.org/Perspectives/Issues/2004/0409/0409aha1.cfm](http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/Issues/2004/0409/0409aha1.cfm). (Accessed on April 22, 2005.)