

Glad Perplexity: Advice for Graduate Students and Other Beginning Scholars on Giving
Conference Papers in English and Comparative Literature

1. What Do I Say In My Paper?

A conference paper in the humanities should unfold a single complex idea. A single idea, yes; you only have 15 or 20 minutes, and in that space, even the most intellectually adept presenter can give space to a single idea. But it should be a single complex idea, not a single simple idea. ‘Simple’ and ‘single’ may mean the same thing in French, but—the wonders of our lexically layered language—they do not in English, and it is indeed possible for a single complex idea to be a non-contradiction. Clarity and simplicity are important in conference papers—it is not a medium in which you can ‘do it all’ or present levels of irony and signification that can occur in a written text or even a longer oral presentation, such as the 40-minute to an hour invited talk or keynote speech. But the 15- to 20-minute conference paper should not be *too* simple.

Repetition of an elementary interpretive maneuver can be dolorous. At a conference in a stunning mountain resort town, I heard a presentation by a recent graduate of a prominent liberal arts college who was beginning graduate work at a well-known state university. He had fastened upon a phrase, taken from a theorist very much in vogue, which he repeated several times in his talk and again in the question and answer period. Not only did he rely on this too much, but the phrase was not even indicative of the main thrust of the theorist he was citing. In his zeal for simplicity, the speaker had over-relied on his touchstone in such a way as to put all his eggs in one basket, or at the very least

one trope. Not only it is this tactically risky when the phrase, as in this case, does not work, even with a more appropriate touchstone this is rhetorically and cognitively unsatisfying. Conference papers should be about one idea, but that idea should be ramified, enriched, laden with potential and implication.

When William Wordsworth, in “Tintern Abbey”, discerned “many recognitions dim and faint,/ And somewhat of a sad perplexity”, (Wordsworth 92) he was in fact on the verge of an exultant breakthrough; he was renewing himself. He liked a bit of sad perplexity in his privileged moments, and perplexity, whether sad or glad, gives pleasure to the audiences of conference papers as well. Humanities audiences do not like to be *totally* perplexed. But a bit of curiosity-provoking bafflement can spur us on to thought and insight. A bit of blockage, a soupçon of resistance, adds tension, interest, even suspense. A single complex idea will at once be clear in its coherent articulation, yet satisfying in its perceptual thickness. Conundrum, friction, will also enable you to challenge reigning consensus in your field and yet do so in a slightly veiled way that will palliate any insult generated in the eminence sitting in the fourth row. A dash of perplexity is at once a way of establishing the depth of your own discourse and acknowledging the ramified presence of those that have preceded it.

In our field, conference papers read texts. This is true if they analyze *Aurora Leigh*, *Romola*, a comic strip, a medieval heraldic emblem, Stephen Colbert, the *Federalist Papers*, or Marie Antoinette’s dresses. If any of these appear in a humanities paper, they are texts, and they have to be read. Read as a literary text is read; if you do not know how to read a poem, you will not know how to read an article of clothing, even if you end up exclusively reading articles of clothing without reference to poems—which, in our field

in this day and age is wholly permissible. Often, conference presenters are warned against excessive quotation, regurgitating the text out loud. That is wise advice. But the converse of text-less-ness is also something to be avoided. A listener to a conference paper wants to hear a text being read. Sometimes it is very frustrating when a speaker presents an image of an artifact of visual or material culture on a handout, and fails to give all but a cursory mention of that artifact in their talk, being overly focused on historical or descriptive generalizations governing the artifact. In the humanities, you have to give a *reading* of the artifact: the scrutinized artifact becomes a text. Even with a more traditional text—a poem that everyone knows—it is important to give portions of it in your talk, though, preferably, brief citations that you can memorize and declaim without looking too much at the page.

First of all, everybody may *not* know the poem. The laudable expansion of the canon has meant that attention is more spread around, and, equally, formerly noncanonical texts that may be *au courant* in a certain sector of academia may be less so in other sectors represented at a conference. Secondly, what many cherish most about conferences is getting to see academics in action practicing upon texts. One gets to see, live, what we do in academia—we practice, and what our teaching, scholarship, and service all have in common, is that they are practice—a set of *res gestae*, things done. Without the text, there is no practice. We want to see the lawyer try a case. We want to see the doctor examine a patient. We want to see the pianist play a composition. We want to see the humanities scholar interpret a text. Indeed, textual interpretation, not rhetorical eloquence, is the mode of performance 'proper', in the Aristotelian sense, to a humanities scholar. This is not at all a demand for narrow text-centeredness or methodological

inertness; the scholar can explode circumvent, adore, idealize, muffle, travesty, trash, excavate, or do almost any conceivable transitive action to the text; and the text can be more or less anything; but it must be analyzed.

A conference paper should provide a reading, not just a definition. The speaker should let us know where we are. In fact, one should not shy away from giving the composition date of a text or an elementary raw factoid just to remind the audience of its bearings. But the speaker should also take us somewhere with respect to the text—even if, as in many cases, we had not known that text before. To at once parade and interpret a text in one short interval is a challenge. Rising to this challenge is tantamount to the ability to do interpretive work in the humanities.

2. How Do I Deliver My Paper?

A conference paper should be strongly delivered; if the graduate student has not successfully presented a paper in a seminar course that has been well received, they should wait until attempting to give a talk outside their own institutional setting. But a concomitant challenge is to perform strongly in rhetorical terms yet have that performance be sufficiently transparent to convey the substance of your talk. A conference paper should be well delivered, with every attribute you have been told to activate while delivering a speech—speak steadily, maintain eye contact with the audience when possible, articulate cleanly. You should rehearse your paper once before you give it, not just to preview how you will sound enunciating it but to catch any typos that will distract you if you encounter them during your actual performance. But a conference in the humanities is, again, not an elocution contest.

Substance matters, and if your presentation conveys the substance it is successful even if you are not a particularly golden-tongued orator. People come to conferences for ideas. A conference is not *American Idol*, where the performers are supposed to give us compelling versions of songs we already know. We come to hear something new and stimulating, reasonably well delivered. In particular, you should not be ashamed to read your paper; that is what you are there to do, deliver *a paper*, in other words read from a printed text. You should look at the audience from time to time, but always remember you are delivering a paper. And your tone should be analytic and investigative, not rousing, hortatory, or excessively aiming to charm.

At another conference in another stunning mountain resort—an appeal of conferences are that they are the only way most of us ever visit such places—I arrived (having spent too much time checking my e-mail) slightly late for a major keynote speech of the conference, which was held under a large tent outside the main conference hotel. I secured an outdoor glass table about twenty feet away from the entrance to the tent. Here, I was unexpectedly plied, by a uniformed waitress, with lemonade and hors d'oeuvres (for which I was never given a bill) while I listened to the keynote speaker talk, her voice being very audible even though I was some distance away from the tent. The keynote speaker made a very vigorous assertion, using the adjectives 'sycophantic' and 'anachronistic'. The waitress turned to me and said, in a slightly performative variation of the down-home accent more or less characteristic of the region, "You know, I think she has consulted a thesaurus." That this remark was incredibly funny had nothing to do with 'sycophantic' and 'anachronistic' being pretentious words—they are fairly ordinary ones in an academic or even a nonacademic context. The hilarity related to how the

tspeaker's rone had gotten too hortatory, even for a keynote address. Conference audiences do not mind long, analytic sentences, read from a paper, that express complex arguments, as long as they are steadily and coherently articulated. You should not feel as if you have to sell the material over and above the inherent strength of its argument.

A conference paper is very different from a campus job talk, where you are not only presenting your research but your ability to, realistically in most cases, convey it to not especially prepared or outstandingly motivated undergraduates. At a conference, you are speaking to your peers. In act, a conference is a rare chance to broadcast your ideas on a frequency where you have the best chance of being comprehended. For once, you do not have to cut corners or popularize your work—you can be yourself in all your complexity! In this respect, the organizational cues that speakers often give the audience in order to structure their argument may or may not be appropriate in this specialized conference context.

The old speaker's adage—"tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, tell them what you have just told them" is excellent for a classroom presentation, or even if you are presenting something very specialized at a more general conference. But it can be counterproductive if applied to literally at a specialized conference talk. I remember a paper at a medieval conference where the speaker said: "In this paper, I will make five points about saints' lives," briefly enumerating the points. He then proceeded to make five detailed points about saints' lives, and then said "In this paper, I have just made five points about saints' lives" and again briefly enumerated them. In an odd way, this became, in an Austinian sense, more performative than constative, and if one does that one might as well do it with something that does not seem to aspire to be constative. In

other words, clarity can sometimes, rhetorically, become its own worst enemy, calling attention to itself. So can excessively precise enunciation. Speak with conviction, not too fast, but not too slowly either. If anything slightly too fast is preferable—it gives an impression of crispness and alertness, and if the talk is done too slowly the audience's attention wanders; slightly too fast prompts them to focus more. Similarly, be loud, but not too loud. Always end with a takeaway point that crowns your paper in a way not crudely summary but that epitomizes or catalyzes its core. And always say 'thank you' or the equivalent at the end—nothing is so painful as not quite knowing whether a paper has ended or not, and it creates nervousness that way well impede the substantive dialogue of the question and answer period.

Do not give too much worry to slips of the tongue or muffling words. This happens all the time, to everybody. Generally, I would say any less than five audible slips is nothing major to worry about. Furthermore, de facto, slips of the tongue only count against ascribed cultural capital; in other words, if you are a keynote or invited speaker or some other sort of eminence, slips will make people wonder why you were invited, but with a graduate student it is the substance that counts, because there is, even with the most talented and promising graduate student, little professional stature to be potentially watered down by slips of the tongue. Yet even though in this way, you have nothing to lose, you should not be overawed by your graduate-student position. Merely by being there, you are one of the best in the world at an incredibly demanding profession. There is no need to act like an entrant, a petitioner, what Bourdieu calls an 'oblate'. You are a skilled learner and teacher, and you are there to teach something, and can teach something even to the most storied and eminent tenured colossus in your field.

Too often, graduate students labor to perfect a polished, flawless conference paper—there is no such animal. Conference papers are ideas in the rough, still being worked out. That is why the feedback from your fellow panel members and the audience is important in interpretive terms, beyond merely 'beauty-pageant' considerations. Even more urgently, it is why a paper that is overly 'finished', though shielding you from criticism, may be a defensive maneuver that ends up outsmarting yourself. There is no need for the graduate student to try to attain the marmoreal perfection of the heralded academic star; in truth, this perfection is abrasive, and not particularly communicative, when broadcast by the tenured academic stars, much less the graduate student. A little roughness means the paper is probing, dilating, engaged, not complacent.

So you should be confident in your presentation because it is no fluke you are there. Your talent and hard work has gotten you there, gotten you to a position where people want to hear what you say. A paper read from the page confidently and seamlessly is the ideal. Yet you do want moments of spontaneity in your talk. I would suggest that most of these moments be planned—in other words, that you have planned moments in the paper where you plant ad libs, passages where you raise your head and look directly at the audience, not at all at the paper. These will look spontaneous, but be in fact planned. This not only has the advantage of making sure you are fully in control of your moments of (alleged) spontaneity, but it also avoids the perils of untrammelled spontaneity. This can include the venial problem of tripping over your words, or a far more urgent danger, thinking of a point raised by a passage in your delivery text, making it spontaneously to the audience, and then realizing a page later that the same point is already in your delivery text. This is possibly the worst thing that can happen in a conference paper, and

planning spontaneity is a way to avoid it. An exception possibly is a summary opening sentence—when the deliverer of an MLA conference paper with a forbiddingly jargon-filled title gave the initiatory interjection “This paper is about Cicero”, she gave her audience a concrete referent to hold onto amid the oncoming abstractions.

Another place where spontaneity becomes an issue is audio-visual presentations. As a speaker myself, I have historically tried to avoid A/V, and in fact gave my first presentation involving such just a few months ago. Because of my fear of technology not working when I was on the podium, though, I had to spend a couple of days making sure every possible aspect of the technology would work. This was worth it, however, as the technology went flawlessly—but had I not micro-prepared it would not have. Others are more at ease with technology than I am, but I have seen many speakers’ A/V not function and thus left adrift, without a Plan B and, on occasion, on the verge of tears.. Please do plan for any catastrophe, try not to be too ruffled, and have another way to convey the substance of your talk. Also, a paper in which the A/V overwhelms the substance is in the same predicament as the one in which rhetorical presentation does so—it is not an effective conference paper.

The only unalloyed benefit of unplanned spontaneity is when you realize that your point echoes that of another person on your panel. Unless the panel is prearranged, it is most likely a somewhat heterogeneous grouping of papers that the conference organizers have lumped together from the proposals they have received to create a tenuous illusion of maximum coherence. You can render this illusion reality by noting points other people on the panel have made—or, more rarely, other speakers on other panels—and acknowledging places of similarity and contrasts. Though this takes some time from your

own paper and can have the danger of distracting you from the even keel of your delivery, used judiciously it can make the paper stronger by giving the panel more of a sense of purpose and thus making your paper matter more in context. (However, if the panel *is* prearranged, too much cross-reference might seem clubby, parochial, or elitist).

You should not try to explain all the questions posed by your paper in your paper. Construct suggestive, implicative passages that will prompt questions you can anticipate--that way you can control the question and answer period. What might seem like a flaw--an argument insufficiently extended, a point dangled but not realized--will set you up for a question and answer session in which you yourself can fill the supplementary space. If you put every reverberation of your paper you can anticipate in the delivery text, you may well be left flustered during question period.

3. When Do I Give My Paper?

The answer is not as simple as the time on the schedule. The biggest mistake conference-goers make is assuming their paper is an isolated, atomized presentation, with nothing else to do with the conference. Not at all—the paper only works to its utmost when intertwined with the fabric of the entire conference. So please, attend as much of the conference as possible. You are part of the conference just as a student in a seminar is part of the seminar—their role is to give a paper, but also to listen to many other students give their papers, to listen, and to at times give feedback.

At a four-day conference, it is acceptable to spend one afternoon seeing the sights or shopping, but the point of being at the conference is to be at the conference, not to take a

vacation. You are professionals; you like what you do; and you get more pleasure out of seeing other people practice your craft and speak about texts and issues important to you than seeing a historic building or a majestic waterfall. Wordsworth might have disagreed; but, if Wordsworth gave conference talks as part of his professional life and still disagreed, then, to adapt Browning's line about Shakespeare from "House", 'the less Wordsworth he'. (Original poem in Browning 995)

This is not just about collegiality but, very temporarily, something verging on teamwork. In fact a conference is somewhat like an all-star game in sports—everyone there is good at what they do, they will never be together again in quite the same conjunction, but for the short time they are together, their goal is to both individually and collectively excel. But this is not just about being a good colleague; it also pertains to the actual process of 'giving a paper'. Your conference paper does not begin when you come to the podium, nor does it end when you leave it. When you first arrive at the conference, you begin to pre-give the paper, and you post-give the paper often until you leave. This does not mean everything to do at the conference is a part of giving your paper. But, inevitably, you talk about the paper you are going to give—at lunches, dinners, coffee breaks, cocktail receptions.

Obviously you do not want to give the substance of your material before you talk—it will spoil the suspense and also it will diminish your own sense of the uniqueness of your delivery when you give the talk. But it would be nice to have say a 25-word précis that is not your paper—in fact, no part of which appears in the actual paper—but which previews your paper and prepares the way for an audience to understand it. (Another short statement to have on hand is the brief biography with which the chair of your panel

who will introduce you—this should be pre-formulated and typed). You are also pre-giving your paper in another way: if you are not the first speaker at the conference, you can listen to others' presentation, see what they do right and wrong, and try to build these observations into how you handle yourself at the podium.

Similarly, even after the formal question and answer session has ended, you might want to keep a few trailing comments for people coming up to you and talking about your paper—in that way, you continue to give the conference paper after your session has long since yielded to another one. Do not forget that the paper is the occasion of your being at the conference. Yes, you are there to make yourself generally more visible in the profession. But you are there in the first instance to give your paper, just as you are in a classroom on a given day to teach the text assigned to the class that day, not necessarily to be generally brilliant. As a final postlude, remember to encourage your audience to e-mail you and give your e-mail address on your business card or conference handout.

Conferences are places where academics often studying the same subject matter but schooled in different ways of approaching it congregate. These different ways of approaching the material may not just be ideological or theoretical correlates. They can be contrasting departmental traditions or emphases contingent upon the idiosyncrasies of certain long-tenured faculty members or the tug of departmental lore and circumstance. In this respect, conferences are like the great late-medieval trade fairs, where not only wares but cultural assumptions were exchanged and bartered—like the Field of the Cloth of Gold so memorably evoked at the beginning of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*. In giving a conference paper, you are not just representing your graduate department; you are exemplifying it. You are offering an anthropological specimen that will contrast with

other departmental cultures so exemplified. This is a reason not to worry too much that you are somehow not like the others. It is also an injunction to nobly represent your institution, and to comprehend how other conference-goers are not just individuals but institutional exemplars or epitomes. You are at a conference not just to network but to learn--learn about other academic contexts and also to simply be exposed to new substantive approaches *that have grown out of a different professional and institutional context.*

The experiential position of the speaker of “Tintern Abbey”—layered, skeptical, detached, at times even confused, but also ready and willing to give and receive inspiration—may well be a cognitive model for the graduate student giving a conference paper in the humanities. Giving a conference paper is not just giving a twenty-minute talk. It is pursuing a line of argument and threading that line across a robust interpretive round of discovery, which can well echo Wordsworth’s “pleasing thoughts. That in this moment there is life and food /For future years.” (Wordsworth 92)¹

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NOTES

¹ . Please note that in the anecdotes of individual conference papers surface identifying details have been changed to protect the anonymity of the individuals concerned.

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