


On My Way Out – Advice to Young Scholars I: Presenting a Paper in an International (and National) Conference

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Written by

I first published this piece in an Editorial for the benefit of *I.CON* readers, but in the light of my recent experience at the ASIL Annual Meeting and in view of the forthcoming ESIL Annual Conference, *EJIL* readers might also find it of interest.

I have most certainly reached the final phase of my academic and professional career and as I look back I want to offer, for what it is worth, some do's and don'ts on different topics to younger scholars in the early phases of theirs. A lot of what I may say will appear to many as a statement of the obvious – but if it so appears, ask yourself why so many experienced and seasoned academics still fall into the trap.

So you have all been there – I must have 'been there' literally hundreds of times in the last 40 years. You are at some international conference. The most common format for presenting a paper is in a 'panel'. Most typically there will be four panelists. Imagine you are one of them, maybe number four. There might be two 'discussants' or 'commentators'. Again, most typically, each panelist will be allocated 15 to 20 minutes. The commentators are allocated 10 minutes each. If all goes according to plan, one hour and 20 minutes are allocated to the speakers. There is then a planned discussion; on a good day 25 minutes are allocated. In this, the most common of plans, a session beginning at, say, 9.00 is meant to last until 10.45, after which there is a coffee break of 15 minutes and then the next session is meant to begin. There is usually a 'moderator' or 'chairperson', or, if you are in Europe, a 'president' of the session.

Except that it never (ever) goes according to plan; here is what most commonly happens. The session often does not start on time. People are still shuffling in; the previous session finished late; the moderator's introduction (which often consists of reading a Wikipedia-based bio of each of the 'distinguished panelists') goes on a little bit longer than planned. Now finally the first speaker gets the floor. You glance sideways across the table, your heart sinks. He or she has a sheaf that seems to be at least 20 pages long. In fact, she has the precious, original, paradigm-shifting paper she has written for the conference. How, you think to yourself, will the speaker get through all of that in her 15 minutes. (You are right; she will not). Your heart sinks even further. The speaker just said that he will try to be brief. That 'try' is ominous. It sounds great in Italian: '*Cercherò di essere telegrafico*'. More like stagecoach than telegraph you are thinking to yourself. She introduces the paper, she gets going. You

note, again glancing sideways, that on each page some paragraphs are highlighted in yellow. Hope – those will be the text that will actually be presented? Disappointment – she just goes more slowly, giving added emphasis to the highlighted text. It is now five minutes from termination time. The moderator passes a piece of paper: five minutes! The speaker glances up with astonishment. He is only a third of the way into the paper. Not even at that paradigm-shifting theorem yet. He begins to speak faster; he is looking at the pages and skipping one or two. The 15 minutes are up. We are about halfway through the paper. The other panelists are not listening. They are busy reviewing their own papers and in growing frustration: you do not need to be a calculus expert to understand the ramifications for your time slot. Anticipating the moderator, the speaker turns to him or her and asks? Can I have five more minutes? In my entire career I only remember a handful of times when the moderator said: ‘No.’ I would remember. It was me. Usually the moderator mumbles a ‘Yes, but only five.’ They come and go. At this point the speaker is speaking even faster, skipping even more pages, and apologizing that, actually, the most important point cannot be elaborated. If he is using Power point? You know that feeling: finally, this is the last slide and oops, yet another one. Then the slide with Conclusions pops up, but it is three pages long. You’re in luck if the charade ends in 25 minutes. Only 10 minutes ‘injury time’, what’s the big deal? – she exceeded the allocated time by a mere 66 per cent. The speaker smiles sheepishly, makes an apology. Sometimes the apologies are priceless: ‘I am sorry I have to end now, but my time is up’ (Hey, it was up 10 minutes ago) as if the thing the audience would want most of all is another 15 minutes.

It’s a dead loss for everyone. A paper delivered in such a manner is worse than ineffective. The moderator and other panelists are sore; the audience had either too much or too little. The main point is obscure or obscured by the delivery. Speaker 2 takes the floor – for a repeat performance. Now your heart is at about knee height. If only speaker 3 will be brief. The moderator reminds the speakers of the need to be brief. Finally it is your turn. And, *Mirabile dictu*: You do the same!

By the time the turn of the commentator comes around coffee is on the mind of most. The commentators will, if lucky, only have received the papers the night before. But even if they had received them a week before it’s so often, ‘I’m not going to spend *my* precious conference time on his paper.’ So we get into the ‘John-spoke-about-the-elephant-the-largest-animal; I-will-complete-the-analysis-by-speaking-about-the-fly-the-smallest-animal’ trick. By this point the moderator is consulting his playbook: Will it be: ‘I am sorry we have no time for discussion’ (sigh of relief); or ‘I am sorry we can only take a few questions’ (which often are not questions but rambling statements).

The next session starts not five minutes late, but 15 to 20, and so the musical chairs continue.

So, I exaggerated a bit. It is not always like that, or not quite as bad. But how far from the truth is my description even in smaller so-called 'colloquia', not mega-conferences, where the purpose is real academic engagement and not just networking and bragging rights to have been on a panel – helpful in getting faculty funding for the conference? What I never stop to marvel at is how ubiquitous these presentational sins – the proper word – are; as common as the common cold, and practised even by experienced academics and seasoned intellectual tourists (for this is what many of the conferences are).

A lot of the responsibility falls on the organizers who, with their eyes wide shut, over pack the programme and engage in unrealistic time planning. With some colleagues I am drafting a Best Practice Code for the organization of workshops, seminars, colloquia, and mega-conferences.

But here are a few ideas, plain common sense, on how you can avoid some of these mistakes and make the best of your presentation in these circumstances.

1. You have invested time, labour, thought in researching, writing and editing your paper. It is an important paper. It is also important for your career – you would like people to read it, to be aware of your work, to be, yes, impressed. You want it to become part of the literature. And, you would genuinely like to discuss it with others, to get feedback. The conference and the panel to which you were invited could be important vehicles if you approach them thoughtfully, professionally.
2. The most important advice is to think of your paper and of the presentation of your paper as two discrete and separate exercises, each of which requires a different intellectual effort. The paper can be, and oft should be, nuanced, subtle, allow for contestation and exception. Demonstrate impeccable research, erudition, et cetera. You can be more expansive: 10K words? 15K? Maybe even 20K. The presentation should *not* be thought of as simply an abbreviated version of the paper. It is not unlike the challenge that an appellate litigator faces: a 100-page brief, but only 20 minutes for oral argument. It is even tougher. It is likely that the judges will have read the brief before the oral hearing. In the mega-conference the chances that people will have read your paper are non-existent. They often do not receive it (assuming you sent it in on time). This is the case even in colloquia and workshops. Many who should have, would not have read it; many will have 'read' it, meaning a quick scan. So unless you know that you are presenting before an audience that is veritably sure to have read your piece, think of your presentation as an invitation to read, or to read carefully. And for those who may have read it, as a guide to what you think are the most important points, the central theses.

3. When I ask authors whom we publish in *EJIL* or *CON* to shorten their piece, at times by 25 per cent or more, they groan. They have fallen in love with their text. It is like cutting into the living flesh. Everything and every thing is so important. In preparing your presentation, fall out of love with your paper. Be Orwellian: all parts are equal but some are more equal than others. Ask yourself: If someone in the audience were asked by a colleague after your presentation, ‘so what did she have to say?’ What would you like them to answer? Whatever that is should be the core of your presentation. You must invest intellectual effort into the dispiriting exercise of deciding two things: What am I going to pick of my wonderful paper as the core of my presentation and what would be the most effective way in the time allotted to communicate such? The result is not a summary of the paper – ineffective – but a different paper, with no aperitif, no hors d’oeuvres, no soup or first course and no dessert. Maybe a coffee at the end. But the main course alone: delicious. If you insist that the whole is important, there are ways of getting there too. One I have seen used effectively and used myself is the ‘Decalogue’ method. 10 points, 10 propositions, which will walk the audience through the paper. So there is sequence, there is development, there is momentum, but remember, even here it is not the full meal: it is a *Menu degustation* – even if only a bit of each course, if well planned, it can be a very satisfying meal.
4. Which brings us to time management: here you should take your cue from politicians. It has been my fortune and misfortune to participate in quite a few meetings of politicians at the highest level, ministers and the like. When at home, they go on forever. When in the company of their opposite numbers from other countries the time-keeping is impressive. How do they achieve that? Their text is spelled out. Their experienced staff knows the optimal speed of delivery. They know how many words take how many minutes, including the pauses for emphasis, for laughter and the like. Sometimes the speaking notes will say: ‘slow down!’ They are pros. And chez nous? How can it be that someone asked to present in 20 minutes comes with a slide show that will clearly take 35 minutes? Is it bad faith? In my experience, not really. He or she looks at it, or looks at their text and simply, optimistically, carelessly misjudges the time it will take. I am not suggesting that you come with a teleprompter and a team of handlers. But I am suggesting that you first and foremost get to know yourself. Then practise your presentation, time it, pay attention to the effectiveness and communicative dimensions (not only to content), and then present. I have a role model: Bob Keohane. A wonderful scholar and the most professional of academics I have encountered. If the deadline is a week before the event, his paper will be on time. If he has 20 minutes, he will present for 20, not 25. And he takes care to be clear and effective. He never tries to do in a presentation what can only be done in a paper. I have often disagreed with him. I have never misunderstood him. If asked by another: ‘What did Keohane say?’, I can summarize it effectively. It is his merit.

The conference organization might be woeful in its time management. The moderator might be no more effective than a traffic policeman in Delhi or Cairo – or for that matter the Bronx. But your presentation can be a point of light: powerful in what it says, how it says it, and an effective teaser for the audience to seek out your paper and want to read the full version.

Next instalment: Successful moderation of a workshop, panel, colloquium.