The Art of Conferencing: Proposing, Presenting, and Politicking
Session 7.09 Professional Development Workshop
Appalachian Studies Association Conference, Saturday, March 28, 2:30 PM - 3:45 PM

Sponsored by:
Y’ALL (Young Appalachian Leaders and Learners)
The Education Committee
The Carl A. Ross Student Paper Award Selection Committee

Panelists:
Kathryn Engle, University of Kentucky, ksen223@u.uky.edu
Brittany Means, Appalachian State University, meansba@email.appstate.edu
Adam Sheffield, Appalachian State University, sheffieldad@appstate.edu
Emily Satterwhite, Virginia Tech, satterwhite@vt.edu
Barry T. Whittemore, University of North Georgia, Barry.Whittemore@ung.edu

Agenda:
I. Introductions and goals – Kathryn and Brittany
II. Proposing: abstracts, panel proposals, bios, brief CVs
III. Presenting
   A. Adam’s paper presentation, “The Silver Racer in Frank X. Walker's Isaac Murphy: I Dedicte This Ride”
   B. Responses to Adam's paper by the panelists
IV. Politicking
V. Q & A, discussion
Proposing: Writing Conference Proposals and Abstracts

I. Identify potential conferences (1-2 per year).
   A. Read CFPs (calls for papers). For big conferences, it’s ok to submit proposals to multiple calls.
   B. Look at calls made by scholars working to put together a panel. It’s always better to apply as a panel than to submit an individual paper. At big conferences, getting accepted to a “standing session” that is guaranteed to be on the program is safer than getting accepted to a “special session” to be submitted for consideration.

II. Think about whether you would like to compose your own panel. It is easier to gain acceptance for a panel.
   A. Your proposal should make clear a theme connecting all of the participants’ papers.
   B. Keep in mind what conference organizers look for in a panel:
      i. A mix of institutions: large and small, Research 1 and liberal arts, geographically varied.
      ii. A mix of panelists. They shouldn’t all have gone to the same grad school or work at the same institution.
      iii. A mix of ranks. There should be representation of both junior scholars (graduate students, post-docs, lecturers, and assistant professors) and senior scholars (associate and full professors).
      iv. A well written rationale that links the presentations to each other and to the conference theme.
   C. Don’t be afraid to invite a senior scholar whose work you respect to serve as a respondent to your panel, especially if you are fairly far along in your writing and feel s/he would be interested in the topic. Even if the scholar declines s/he may direct you to a less well-known scholar who does good work in the field.

III. The Abstract. Craft an abstract for a presentation that will allow you to hone writing you are prioritizing.
   A. An abstract is usually about 250 words. Use your own words. Emphasize your own ideas, not the work of others. Quote or paraphrase authorities sparingly, if you must. The abstract should:
      i. State the purpose of the research. Give your research questions and what’s motivating them. Why are the questions significant? What disciplinary assumptions do you challenge? What’s at stake?
      ii. Give a brief thumbnail of the relevant literature to orient your reader to the specific field and demonstrate your familiarity with the pertinent scholarship.
      iii. Give your sources and methods. What data or texts are you looking at and with what techniques?
      iv. State your findings and speculations regarding your findings. How do you contribute to the big picture?
   B. Make it clear you have written the abstract for this conference. If you base your abstract on a course paper or dissertation chapter, retool your description to fit the theme. Incorporate buzzwords from the CFP.
   C. Know your audience. Don’t tell them more or less than they need to know to understand your project.
   D. Ask someone to read your abstract. If your reader cannot understand a sentence immediately, rewrite it. Conference organizers read hundreds of abstracts. Do not make them work hard to understand yours.

IV. The “bio.” As a grad student, I once responded to a request for a biography with a fairly full overview of my life to date. Don’t do that. Provide 2-3 sentences that:
   A. Give your MA and PhD degree programs and institutions. If you have an academic position at another institution, you can mention it (e.g. instructor at Bluefield State).
   B. State the titles and venues of your most recent publications and/or forthcoming (accepted) publications, if any, up to two.

V. The “brief CV.” This often means a one page CV. I have also seen it specified as “no more than 400 words.”
   A. Include:
      i. Your name, your professional appointments, your education.
      ii. Your publications.
      iii. Awards and Honors.
      iv. Conference papers presented.
      v. Possibly your professional affiliations.
   B. You may need to be selective about the number of listings in one or more of the above categories, in which case you can indicate “(selected)” after the category heading.

VI. Etiquette.
   A. If you are responding to someone who is trying to put together a panel, consider writing in advance of submitting your proposal. Would the person be interested in x? This alerts him/her to mentally reserve you a spot rather than running with the first three proposals s/he receives, and it lets you know if the person really isn’t interested in bending the theme to fit your topic.
   B. Meet the deadline. Late submissions suggest poor planning and preparation and may be tossed out.
   C. Stick to word and page limits.
Presenting: Crafting and Delivering a Conference Paper

The basic format is:
1) tell your audience what you are going to tell them, 2) tell them, 3) then tell them what you just told them.

p.s. What you are going to tell them should NOT be something they can read elsewhere.

Preparing your paper for presentation
Rewrite your essay for the oral medium. It is almost impossible to be too obvious in an oral presentation. Cues like, “I have three points. First I will...,” which sound wooden in writing, are helpful when read aloud. Repetition is your friend. Pronouns are your enemies; be sure that the subject of each sentence is clear and place it at the beginning of the sentence. Turn complex sentences with dependent clauses into simple, declarative statements.

Consider the audience. Instead of talking directly to scholars whose work you’ve been reading, think about how you would explain your study to someone in a different subfield of your discipline or a related discipline.

Be careful of criticizing other scholars. It is appropriate to discuss criticisms, but use a tone of respect and objectivity. Your footnotes may be sitting in the audience.

Visual aids. Make a note to yourself in your paper where you are going to use visual aids. For powerpoint presentations, use 6 or fewer lines of text per slide, with a minimum font of 24 for content to be read.

**Read the text aloud as you revise.** This will help you eliminate wordy sentences and awkward phrases and alert you if you have prepared too much material for the time allotted. Rehearse the talk so that you become comfortable giving it in tandem with any visuals and so that you can time yourself. Practicing in front of a friend is even better, since s/he can alert you if you are speaking too quickly or with too little energy.

How to focus and organize your presentation
Keep the essay focused. Choose just one idea. You want to make a clear, focused, and interesting argument that is backed up with a few interesting points of evidence, not give the entire content of your essay.

**Respect yourself and don’t waste your audience’s time.** Show us how you think about your subject and what you have to offer. Use the majority of your time to highlight your ideas based on your own research and thinking. If you have to give a little background, ok. But your audience did not come to hear a lit review! They came to hear you say something interesting that they couldn’t find out anywhere else except from you. Do not leave your own contributions until the last 3 minutes. Make your findings and ideas the center of attention. 
Don’t use lengthy quotes or quote too often. Your audience wants your ideas, not what you have gleaned from others. If it is absolutely necessary to include lengthy quotes, provide a handout of quotes to which you refer.

Start big. Where does the idea come from, how is it situated in your field, what motivates your questions? Briefly locate your question in a body of knowledge/literature. Make the significance of your argument clear.

Guide your audience to the richest areas of your work for Q&A. You can say things like, “I can’t go into ___ during the time we have here, but I would be happy to talk more about ____ during Q&A.”

End by coming back out to the big picture. What conclusions might be drawn, what consequences ought be considered, what should we be doing going forward, how have you contributed? Repeat the question you initially posed, and explain how you addressed the question and why the question is relevant. End with a statement of the larger implications of your question and findings. It’s always nice to alert your audience that you are starting to wind down by somehow indicating you are getting to your concluding remarks.

Etiquette
If there is a pre-conference deadline for sending a copy of your presentation to the respondent, meet it. Take advantage of this opportunity for someone to become familiar with your work and offer you feedback.

Meet length and time requirements. If you have 20 minutes, do not, repeat, do not go to your panel with a paper exceeding 10 pages (double spaced; 12 point font). Going over your time limit will not make you popular with the other speakers on your panel (or your audience). The general rule is two to two-and-a-half minutes per double-spaced, 12-point-font page, exclusive of citations.

During Q&A, take notes of questions and suggestions. You won’t remember them otherwise. Plus, it makes you look engaged and receptive. It’s ok to say you don’t know. The trick is not to sound defensive; say that that area is something you need to research, or that you’d like to take a look at those sources. Invite your interlocutor to speculate: “It sounds like you might have some ideas about that. Would you like to say more?”

Emily Satterwhite. Based on Claremont Graduate University Writing Center, http://www.cgu.edu/pages/864.asp
Politicking: Making the Most of Academic Conferences

I. Why go to conferences?
   A. To network.
      a. Meeting other scholars may increase the likelihood that: your journal submission will be sent out for review; your job application will receive more than a light skim; senior scholars will agree to review your book manuscript or your promotion and tenure file; you will notice whom NOT to recommend as a potential reviewer of your work.
      b. So talk to people, eat dinner with people, ask your professors, friends, and/or acquaintances to make introductions (and return the favor...).
      c. Serve on one committee for one annual conference.
   B. To improve your scholarship by
      a. “test driving” your arguments and get feedback on your work. You may receive comments or questions that help you improve your ideas, arguments, methodologies, and/or knowledge of useful resources.
      b. getting a sense of who is working on what sorts of projects in your field.
      c. having a deadline to produce a polished piece of writing.
   C. To improve your professional profile by
      a. alerting others to be on the lookout for your work.
      b. practicing your presentation of your scholarship in advance of going on the job market.
      c. publishing your paper in the conference proceedings.
   D. To meet with editors.
      a. If you are ready to pitch a book proposal to a publisher, email the correct acquisitions editor weeks in advance of the conference to assess his/her interest in your project and make an appointment to talk with him or her.
      b. Especially at a small conference like ASA, you might have a chance to talk with the editor of Appalachian Journal or Journal of Appalachian Studies to get a sense of her interest in publishing your paper.
   E. For the sake of comradeship and mentoring among peers and senior colleagues.

II. How many conferences ought one attend per year?
    Roughly, it’s good to go to a conference per year as a grad student, perhaps two per year in the year preceding going on the job market and in the year of going on the job market. As a post-doc or junior faculty member, two per year should be sufficient. More than three per year is probably a really bad idea.

III. How does one decide which conferences to attend? (Pros and cons of small conferences, large disciplinary conferences, the locations/costs of conferences, high vs. low acceptance rates, etc.)