Strategizing for (and at) Conferences – Some Quick Tips  
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Stage One: Conference Selection and Preparation

Selecting a Conference

- Seeking out opportunities: sign up for the Penn State CFP listserv (or just use their archive): [http://cfp.english.upenn.edu/cfp.html](http://cfp.english.upenn.edu/cfp.html)
- Shopping around: look for conferences with permanent sections or standing special topic sessions (e.g. Midwest Modern Language Association or College English Association) that suit your interests, your specialization, or your course work
- Sizing up the competition: is bigger really better?

Building a Network

- Finding fellow panelists: you've got the Web – use it! Discussion Boards, listserves, and your peers are your best resources for networking.
- Not for the timid: use past conference listings or publications to seek out others who share your interests, and let them know what you have in mind.
- Really not for the timid, but great if you can pull it off: reach out to more seasoned or established members of your field by asking them to serve as panel Chairs or respondents

Stage Two: Putting Your Thoughts in Writing

Preparing the Proposal

- Know the Conventions: be aware of how the conference organizes itself (e.g. workshops, roundtables, panels). Consider its major divisions and its perceived preferences, audiences. When possible, apply for inclusion in divisions that are less populated.
- Enter the Conversation: place your work in relation to that of others in order to situate your paper. Speak from the conversation about your topic, but distinguish your insights from those of others.
- Speak the Language: Balance out general and specific language about your paper. If you’re too vague, the reviewers may not know what you’ll show up with. If you’re too specific, you may not be able to deliver on what you’ve promised.
- Vary the Theme: Almost all conferences are organized around a theme, and most panels feel compelled to use it in their title and their proposals. Thus, a conference theme of “Revision” will yield thousands of proposals titles that begin with the word “Revising.” Distinguish your work by varying the theme – speaking to it, but not necessarily of it – particularly within the title.
- Know your limits: Don’t go over the word limit. Efficiency can save you from overcommitting (see bullet point 3), or from elimination.
Stage Three: Attending the Conference

Reading the Conference (with next year’s in mind….)

- Recognize key trends, themes, and patterns: keep a keen eye on your conference program and your conference-going peers. What topics and panel types seem to be the most engaging for audiences? The most well attended? What seem to be the “up and coming” issues that everyone is talking about? What’s dead on arrival? What topics or texts seem to be overdone, stale, or what panels sparsely attended?
- Attend keynote lectures and discussions: lots of speakers create a buzz that resonates throughout a conference. Lots of next year’s panels grow out of that buzz. And it will always give you something to talk about with others, if you’re attending a conference alone.
- Take advantage of networking forums (at your discretion): research forums and special interest groups are often great opportunities to branch out.
- Familiarize yourself with next year’s conference theme: anticipate what you might want to propose for the next round, in case you make good contacts this time around.

Stage Four: Reaping What You’ve Sown

Utilizing your Research

- Consider Publication: revise your work for a journal of your choice.
- Take Advantage of Distribution: many conferences now post selected papers, offer awards or honors for graduate presentations, or compile a set of the best contributions.
- Work from Revision: double-dipping is common practice among the scholarly set. Seek out opportunities to submit your work in revised form at other conferences.