Rules
for presenting a paper
in public

Are you nervous?

Good. You should be. Anxiety tells you that you are taking this enterprise seriously and that your adrenalin is flowing. Without adrenalin you will be boring.

But too much anxiety will get in the way of what you have to do; too much adrenalin and you will not think straight.

The purpose of the Rules is to enable you to embrace your anxieties and put them to work for you, and, just as importantly, for the arguments you have to make and the stories you have to tell.

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Dorothy Kenyon, a great feminist and civil rights activist, who spent much of her time speaking in public, once observed that a public talk must always seem to be improvised, but it must never be improvised. If you want to hold your audience you must plan ahead, and plan very carefully.

1. Observe time limits scrupulously. The usual rule of thumb is that a typewritten page [old fashioned courier, 12 point type] holds 250 words. It should take a minimum of 2 minutes to say 250 words out loud. If you have 20 minutes to speak your paper, it can be no longer than 10-12 pages. Do not think you can cheat by fixing the font. Begin with a paper that is 10 pages long.

Another time limit is the date when the paper is to be delivered to the commentator. This is a courtesy that gives the commentator time to read and reflect on your paper. Your own selfish interest dictates that you want the most thoughtful comments you can get, not comments that have been hastily thrown together. You will be greatly embarrassed should an annoyed commentator begin by announcing, as some have done, that Paper X arrived only two days before the deadline so the audience should not expect much wisdom on the subject.

2. A paper written for the ears to hear must be substantially different from
This principle is undermined by the system now in general usage in which a conference paper is also given in advance to a commentator. The commentator will be the first to read it and will then stand up in public and criticize it. The temptation is to write for the commentator. Ignore that temptation.

Instead write for your real audience, the people who will be listening. Go through your final draft, looking skeptically for dependent clauses and complex sentences. Turn complex sentences into simple, declarative sentences. Although a sentence linked by semicolons, or a sentence constructed with one or more dependent clauses, may be perfectly clear on paper, it is very hard to understand when it floats out into the air. The listener cannot hang on to the subject until the object heaves into view three clauses later.

Use quotations and examples judiciously. Listeners have difficulty absorbing abstraction after abstraction; they need to be grounded in lived experience. Think about the ratio between example and argument as your paper develops.

Devote a sentence or two to explaining -- very briefly -- the research base that sustains your arguments. The reader will see footnotes but the listeners cannot. Establish your authority.

3.1 Corollary of #2: A paper written to be spoken out loud must be substantially different from a paper meant to be read silently.

Jay Fliegelman has discerned that the mysterious markings on some of Thomas Jefferson’s own copies of the Declaration of Independence are marked as though for a singer: indications of where the reader is to take a breath. The next time you are at a conference, notice how often a speaker runs out of breath before the end of a sentence, undermining the force of what they are trying to convey to the audience.

Plan ahead so that you do not run out of breath. The first step is item #2: turn your talk into clearly understood declarative sentences.
The second, very important step, is to **read your paper out loud to yourself**, listening to yourself speak, noticing when you run out of breath. Watch yourself in the mirror if you can stand it. **Take a deep breath at the beginning of each long sentence or group of short sentences.** (You will hear yourself breathe, but remember that your audience can’t hear it). If you do not have enough breath to finish strongly, break the sentence up into smaller sentences. Read out loud again.

Then **mark your reading copy** to remind you when you will take a deep breath. (If Thomas Jefferson could do this, so can you.) Try it again for yourself.

3.2 Now that you have a reading copy, **you must read it for someone else**. Find a friend before whom you do not fear looking like a fool.

Print out your paper in large type so that you do not need to squint to see it when you are standing at a podium (try 14 pt. or even 16 pt.) Find a room approximately the size of the room you’ll be using at the conference. Put your friend at the back of the room. Stand at the front with a lectern. Read the paper out loud.

Your friend should be able to follow the argument of the paper. Sections of the paper should be marked rhetorically. There is nothing wrong with simple clues like: AThree events contributed to the result. The first was....@

If you are following the rules about breathing, your friend should be able to hear you clearly. You should not run out of breath at the end of sentences, but if you do, your friend will not be able to hear you and will tell you after a paragraph or so.

Your friend will also be able to tell you whether you are talking too fast [or, in the rare case, too slowly, although few of us fall into that trap.] Your friend may also be able to comment on whether the argument sounds persuasive; sometimes in all the revising and cutting one leaves out a significant piece of evidence or step in the argument.

Note: none of these rules change if there is a microphone. All a microphone helps with is volume. It cannot give you breath.
If you are using technology overhead projections, slides, video clips practice your talk with them. Assume that if it is possible for technical equipment to malfunction, it will.

Now rehearse one last time, making sure that your performance is smooth: no tripping over the pronunciation of words, no wrong intonation of sentences.

4. What you do with your body while you are speaking.

When you are talking your paper the attention of your listeners should be on your words. ANYTHING that distracts from their attention to your words is to be avoided. Among the classic distractions:

By your own hands, waving around in the air. It is true that many of us normally use our hands to emphasize what we have to say. Some of us use our hands as accompaniment all the time. But conversation is different from performance. Except for occasional gestures that you intend to make, hands are not part of your performance. They should be as invisible as possible, generally at your side or resting on the lectern. If necessary, grab the lectern and cling to it and do not budge. If you have uncontrollable urges to put your hands in your pockets, sew up your pockets.

By your own hands, fiddling with paper clips. Fiddling with a pen. NEVER hold anything in your hands when you are speaking in public except when sliding a page. Note sliding. See next paragraph.

By the paper on which your words are written. Do not wave the paper around. Do not pick up the paper and turn it over so that you end with a stack in the order in which you began. Slide the pages across so that they are not seen by the audience and you end with a stack in reverse order with which you began. The advantage here is that you also have two pages in front of you at all times and you can see where you are headed.

The only way to indicate a shift from your own words to quoted ones is by the tone of your voice or by the simple word said as in Harry Truman said: ....@. NEVER say quote....unquote.@ NEVER click your hands in the air in a vain attempt to indicate quotation marks.
Normally at conferences, you should **stand to read your paper**. (Roundtable discussions often have different rules, requiring participants to sit at a table on the dais throughout. But even at a roundtable, you can use your influence to encourage people to stand at a lectern for their opening remarks]. The advantage of standing at a lectern is that you do not need to move your head much to read the paper and then to look out at the audience. The difference in movement is much greater when you are sitting down. (Try it). When you are sitting down and reading it is almost impossible to have eye contact with the audience unless you interrupt the flow of what you are saying.

When you are sitting down you cannot take as deep a breath, or project your voice as powerfully, as when you are standing. (Why do you think singers stand when they belt out an aria?)

**Check out the room in advance.** If there is no lectern, ask for one. If you are short be sure you can be seen over it, or ask for a box. Be polite but insistent. Plead nearsightedness. Go in search of one in a nearby room. Do not give up, even if it feels like you are making a pest of yourself.

**MAKE SURE THAT THERE IS WATER ON THE PODIUM.** It’s not a bad idea to bring your own bottle of water and plastic cup with you as insurance. [You will need a cup; you cannot **swig** from a bottle without distracting an audience.] If your are breathing properly you probably will not need water, but that’s impossible to predict and depends a great deal on the room conditions.

**IF YOU ARE USING TECHNOLOGY (e.g. A LAPTOP)** test it out in advance. If the room is being used at a session just before your talk, go there earlier. **Try things out first; do not assume that anything will work unless you have actually made it work!** If you are showing overheads, make sure you know where the light switches in the room are and how to control them. Make sure you are very comfortable with the equipment and are prepared to improvise should something go wrong.

**Remember:** if something can go wrong, it will go wrong.

if something does go wrong, the time spent making adjustments comes out of your total allocation. Moreover, watching you struggle creates an air of anxiety that infuses the room and distracts your audience, and makes you look
inept.

**Advantages of following rules 1, 2, 3, 4**

- You will not run out of time.
- You will not have to improvise while you are performing your paper. There is almost nothing that creates more anxiety than the sickening sense that the chair of the panel is about to hand you a note that says **2 more minutes please** when you have 5 pages to go. Of course you will then be anxious!
- With time under control, and enough oxygen in your system, and a lectern to lean on, you will be able to make eye contact with your audience. They will see that you are relaxed; you will be able to see whether they are with you. You can improvise (but only a little bit!) because you know you are surrounded by the structure you have created. You will not run out of breath, so your sentences and your arguments will end forcefully.

Generally it is not wise to improvise during the paper presentation. The better you know what you are going to say, the less dependent you will be on your written text, and the more your planned talk will give the impression of informality and improvisation. (See Kenyon Principle, page 1). The more you improvise during the formal paper, the greater the dangers of rambling and going off on tangents. Save your improvisatory energy for the question period, when you will need it.

If you have kept time under control, you should not get the dreaded **2 minute warning** or, if you do, you will get it when you only have 4 minutes to go. Be prepared for a **2 minute warning**; sometimes you may get it through no fault of your own (for example, if one of the earlier speakers on the panel ran over their time, or if the entire panel got started late.)

At that point, you must cut to the chase. If you have ever played a musical instrument, think about sightreading with a group of musicians, or accompanying a singer, in which you can omit any number of notes so long as you keep the beat steady and the major chords on time, you will have a good sense of what to do. At the two minute warning, you cut to your topic sentences and then your concluding well-crafted last sentence or two, and STOP.
You will feel in control of the situation. As indeed you will be.

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THE RULES should also be deployed for JOB TALKS. The situation is slightly different, and you should bear the differences in mind.

In a job talk you will normally have a little more time: 35 minutes, perhaps, instead of 20. But you will need some of that extra time to place your paper in context and to explain to an audience whose members may not be in your field why your project matters, why your project is important, and where it fits into historiographical debate. (At a conference the audience may need less of this because they’ve pre-selected themselves by coming to the conference. An Americanist is unlikely to encounter a medievalist at an American Studies conference, but he or she is likely to encounter a medievalist at a job talk.)

Treat the time limits just as seriously at a job talk as you do at a conference; the world is full of stories of candidates who exhausted the patience of their listeners instead of whetting their appetite for more.

Be prepared to respond to questions about teaching as well as about research.

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At the beginning of the second act of Hair® the cast comes on the stage naked. In some productions they run down the aisles, close to the audience, without any clothes on. During the original production, a reporter asked one of the actors how they brought themselves to do that: they were not, after all, burlesque actors or strip tease dancers. The actor’s response was that during the intermission they spent some time thinking the people out there are our friends. They love us. I love them. They are terrific folks. It’s o.k. to take your clothes off with your friends like in a locker room. No problem.

Giving a conference paper is to make oneself vulnerable; it’s the intellectual equivalent of stripping naked. You are taking your ideas out to strangers, you are vulnerable to their criticism. Of course you are anxious; you’d be foolish not to be anxious.
So spend an hour before the panel quietly, alone, not talking. Look over your marked up paper. And think about the panelists and the audience as your friends. After all, despite the competition of other panels, other things they could be doing at that moment, they have chosen to come to hear you. They are obviously people of good taste and judgment; they are your friends. You are enthusiastically looking forward to meeting them.

Yes, in the aftermath they may judge you, but put that aside. At the outset, they have come in good faith, and you owe them a welcome in good faith. They are entitled to your welcome. If you are frozen with anxiety, that=s neither fair nor courteous to the people who have come to hear what you have to convey.

When you walk out into that room, the thought in your head must be how happy you are to be there, what fabulous people are sitting out there in the audience. That holds whether there are 5 people or 500. The good vibes will be catching.

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