

What Is the Purpose of the Conference?

by Jeanette Romkema

“We are weary of academic conferences.”

That’s how Christy Wampole starts her article [The Conference Manifesto](#) in The New York Times (posted May 4th 2015). Indeed, I can relate to that. In fact, it is getting increasingly challenging for me to go to conferences at all, for fear of experiencing undesired levels of stress and frustration.

Then I read:

“Academic conferences are a habit from the past, embraced by the administriversity as a way to showcase knowledge and to increase productivity in the form of published conference proceedings. We have been complicit. Until now.... We believe it is time to ask ourselves: What is the purpose of the conference?”

That’s when Wampole’s article really got good. She then continued by offering the following 10 statements for workshop presenters to agree to – a sort of contract to sign. If we can’t change the entire conference planning, at least we can start with the workshops. I love it!

- 1. I understand that the conference paper should do something that an article cannot. Since it involves direct, real-time contact with other humans, the speaker should make use of this relatively rare and thus precious opportunity to interact meaningfully with other scholars.*
- 2. I will not read my paper line by line in a monotone without looking at the audience. I needn’t necessarily abide by some entertainment imperative, with jokes, anecdotes or flashy slides, but I will strive to maintain a certain compassion toward my captive audience.*
- 3. I understand that a list is not a talk. I will not simply list appearances of a theme in a given corpus.*
- 4. I will have a thesis, and if I don’t, I will at least have a reason that my talk should exist.*
- 5. I will keep direct citations to a minimum, not relying on them to fill up time. I understand that audience members shudder at lengthy blocks of text in the PowerPoint or on the handout.*

6. *In the Q. and A., I will not ask an irrelevant question for the sake of being seen asking a question. If my question is hyperspecific and meaningless to anyone but myself, I will approach the speaker after the talk with my query.*
7. *I will not make a statement and then put a question mark at the end to make it sound like a question.*
8. *If I ask an actual question, I will a) not take more than a minute or so to ask it, and b) ask it politely even if I disagree with the speaker.*
9. *I respect the time of my colleagues who've come to hear me speak. I will do my best to be as clear and succinct as possible, and make their attendance worthwhile.*
10. *I understand that if I disregard these recommendations, I might be complicit in the death of the humanities.*

Thank you Christy Wampole. Where's the contract I need to sign – I'm in!