

The Conference Manifesto

BY CHRISTY WAMPOLE MAY 4, 2015

We are weary of academic conferences.

We are humanists who recognize very little humanity in the conference format and content.

We have sat patiently and politely through talks read line by line in a monotone voice by a speaker who doesn't look up once, wondering why we couldn't have read the paper ourselves in advance with a much greater level of absorption.

We have tried to ignore the lack of a thesis or even one interesting sentence in a 20-minute talk.

Our jaws have hung in disbelief as a speaker tries to squeeze a 30-minute talk into a 20-minute slot by reading too fast to be understood.

We have been one of two attendees at a panel.

We have suffered in silence while someone, for the duration of their talk, simply lists the appearances of a certain theme in a novel.

Our faces have twitched as our colleagues pretend they've understood a speaker's academese.

We have listened for the first five minutes of the talk, just long enough to seize upon a word around which we'll construct a pseudo-question in the Q. and A.

We have asked a panelist if they could "talk a little bit more about that" or "unpack this a little more" or "tease that out some."

We have listened as colleagues ask questions related to their own research but that have no relevance to anyone but themselves.

We have passed or received notes during a particularly painful session that read "Kill me now."

We have created a taxonomy in our minds of the various conference types: the contrarian, the entertainer, the wall flower, the theory head, the name dropper, the conformist, the adviser carbon-copy, the philosophy dude.

We have filled our notebooks with doodles and answered unimportant emails during a panel as we sat in the audience.

We've picked at our fingernails and counted the empty chairs in the room.

At national conferences, we have attended only our own talk and spent the rest of the weekend at the pool bar, where more can be learned about the liberal arts somehow.

We have had the idea to patent a conference bingo game in which the players in the audience receive cards printed with a grid of various conference vocabulary words to be collected during the panels — "subsemantic," "dialectic," "normativity," "mythopoetic," the adjectivization of a philosopher's name (Meillassouxian, Cixousian), "post-"anything.

We have daydreamed that, à la vaudeville, a giant cane would emerge from the wings and pull away the droning speaker from the lectern.

We have wondered, “If this is what the humanities have become, should they continue to exist?”



CreditDavid Burnett/Contact Press Images

Academic conferences are a habit from the past, embraced by the administrativity 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? What has caused us to organize these things year after year without questioning their basis? Is there another way to reformat the conference or do away with it altogether, replacing it with something more intellectually, professionally and socially satisfying for everyone? What are our real motivations for organizing a conference? For attending one? To burnish our résumés? To network? To get a sense of the current work being done in our fields?

If, as many scholars confess in private, it is an easy way to see all of one’s friends conveniently or to meet new colleagues, should the conference then be replaced by a less formalized gathering? What about a three-day long *salon philosophique* format? Or large working groups? A speed-dating scenario or a hiking retreat? Why should a graduate student pay hundreds of dollars — often from their own pocket — to fly to a conference, get a hotel room, and give a talk to an audience of three, two of those being friends who heard the practice talk the night before in said hotel room? If everyone is content with the conference as a legitimate custom, why do post-conference sentiments typically range from disappointment to total rage, always expressed in hushed tones?

We understand that this is a sensitive topic. Conferences feel necessary, but their purpose is unclear. They have great potential to help revitalize the humanities, but have not yet lived up to this potential. We understand that we do not speak on behalf of everyone. Some scholars love conferences. They love

the ritual as described above. However, we recognize a growing impatience with conferencing among many scholars, evident in their eye-rolling and sighs and post-conference grumbling, and we thus now lay it on the table as a topic of discussion.

We don't expect the conference system to change any time soon. In the meantime, we humbly submit the following contract, which you may distribute in advance to speakers at your next conference. Acceptance to the conference could be contingent upon the speaker reading and signing an agreement to meet the following criteria in their talks:

- 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.

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