

Graduate students: Your first conference?

Conferences are a wonderful way for graduate students to learn about academia and WPSA has long had a reputation as welcoming! Below are a few tips in Q&A format that can help you make the best of your experience.

SUBMITTING THE PROPOSAL

How do I get on the conference program?

The WPSA website has the key information about the submission process.

Examine the preregistration form so that you know what information you will need when you sit down to submit. First and foremost, however, you need a substantive idea articulated in a succinct abstract with an effective title. Do think about the timeline between submission and the conference presentation to make sure you can “deliver” on at least some of the promises made in the abstract (even if much changes as you “write up” your research).

How should I decide on which two sections to submit my paper proposal?

Consult the WPSA website – Listing of Section Chairs and Topics. The sections, arranged alphabetically, all have descriptions of their content areas that section chairs may tweak yearly to reflect the conference theme. Although you likely have a general sense of where your paper might fit based on the standard poli sci subfields, the sections are more specific and often innovative in how they bring topics together. So explore the possibilities!

Should I volunteer to serve as a discussant or chair of a panel?

No. Neither of these roles is appropriate for graduate students so it is best not to volunteer. Chairs must assert their authority in order to keep presenters to their allotted time. Discussants critique others’ work. Neither position is ideal for someone anticipating going on the job market. In rare cases, you might be contacted by a senior faculty member organizing a panel to serve in these roles if you have particular expertise or would be chairing a discussion among other graduate students.

Does WPSA provide any funding to attend the conference?

Unfortunately, no. Consult your department's graduate director about department and institutional funds available for this purpose as well as relevant deadlines and eligibility requirements. Sometimes, it is possible to apply to several sources. Inform yourself of funding sources and plan ahead!

PRIOR TO THE CONFERENCE

How should I get ready for the conference?

Peruse the online program. To make the most of your time at the conference, it makes sense to explore the program in advance to plan out your time. Although plans may change, this would allow you to know when you might have free time to meet someone, chat about a project, or explore the books that are for sale. Preregister at wpsanet.org

How much time will I have to present my paper?

Contact the chair of the panel to find out the precise answer to this question. The chair's role is to allocate time across the paper presenters, discussant(s), and audience, so a little arithmetic can provide a general guideline (105 minute panel session divided among these groups). Most chairs will allocate more time to the discussants than presenters; some will condense the time to presenters and discussants to get the audience involved sooner. The minimum time for your paper presentation is likely 10 minutes although 15-20 minutes is also possible.

How should I get ready for my panel presentation?

Practice! It is strongly recommend that prior to coming to a conference that you schedule a practice run-through with members of your department. That will give you a chance to be more comfortable in making your presentation and it may provide some good feedback. And you will have a much better sense of what you can reasonably communicate in 10-20 minutes. You will find, though, that the WPSA meetings are very supportive so don't worry if things do not go off as perfectly as you had hoped.

What is the latest I can send in my paper? To whom should I send it?

WPSA will send reminders for due dates. However, it is best to consult directly with the panel chair and, especially, the discussant about this matter. Discussants plan out their time and may have particular deadlines for when they want the papers. Most discussants will refuse to discuss papers that arrive during the conference and some have much earlier deadlines!

What if I need to withdraw from the conference?

Inform inform inform. If a family emergency occurs or if funding is not forthcoming, you may find that you are unable to attend the conference. As soon as you know, it is important to inform your panel chair, discussant, panel members, and section chair that you will not be able present your work. Although scholars understand that “life happens,” professional courtesy is important and is something that people remember.

Where should I stay during the conference?

Begin with the conference hotel. WPSA always encourages members to stay at the conference hotel. The association is able to get the meeting room space for free only if a sufficient number of members stay at the hotel. If it has to pay for the meeting rooms, then the registration costs would go up considerably for everyone. For graduate students on a limited budget, it may make financial sense to stay elsewhere, but you are encouraged to stay at the conference hotel if possible. *Planning ahead to find roommates is a key way to bring costs down!* Of course, it can also be more interesting to stay at the conference hotel because of the comings and goings of friends and colleagues.

DURING THE CONFERENCE

What should I bring to my presentation?

Yourself! First, it is always smart to double check your room location. Sometimes room locations change; hotel floor plans can be confusing so you might even want to physically visit the room. Second, almost all rooms are set up with projectors and screens, but you will need to bring your own laptop if you want to make a powerpoint presentation. Third, it may be useful to bring hard copies of key charts, tables or points that you wish to emphasize as part of your presentation. While many presenters use powerpoint, it is not required. If your choice is working on a powerpoint or fine-tuning the presentation, it is a good idea to favor the latter. You might want to bring a few copies of your paper if someone requests a copy and business cards if you have them.

How should I dress?

Business casual. WPSA is more informal than many conferences, but it never hurts to “look the part” especially if you anticipate going on the job market soon. Do bring layers as conference rooms can be either too hot or too cold.

How do I get to know people?

Do not spend too much time in your room alone. WPSA has numerous receptions beginning Thursday evening as well as the main reception on Friday evening. These receptions are often where groups of faculty meet to decide where to go to dinner and you might snag such an invitation. Additionally, there is often a special event especially for graduate students. The receptions are listed online and in the Special Event section of the program. Graduate students are welcome at all events—receptions, panels, special talks, and the WPSA business meeting. And don’t forget to visit the book display.

Is there a job fair at the WPSA?

No. The WPSA does not have an official job fair. However, some colleges and universities will schedule job interviews on their own.

Are there any other things I should know?

Consult knowledgeable faculty. In particular, keep in touch with your panel chair. This is a professional event and you should act professionally. As with any event, do turn off your cell phone during the panel presentations!

AFTER THE CONFERENCE

Is my paper ready to submit after the conference?

Perhaps, but not likely. Take the comments of the discussant and rewrite the paper. And then get more feedback from other graduate students and your committee members and supervisory chair. Journal articles, even when sole authored, have been “massaged” by many hands prior to publication.

Should I send follow-up emails to people I’ve met?

If you have made a substantive connection, yes. Think about the people who are likely to remember you or who have gone out of their way to be welcoming or of assistance to you. A thank-you email to your discussant makes sense. Ongoing communication with those who share your interests also can be fruitful. Use common sense as you develop your scholarly networks.