Advice to a Young Tradesman
(on giving a conference paper)

As you have desired it of me, I write the following hints, which have been of service to me, and may, if observed, be so to you.

**Remember**, a conference paper is an *oral* presentation, to be *heard*, not read, by your audience. As such, it is not a fit time for the recitation of much data, long quotations, or columns of figures. Treat information as discreet objects, and bring only so many as may be carried in your pocket, and, with convenience, displayed upon the podium before you.

**Remember**, to favor the narrative over the analytical, the argumentative over the discursive, the representative over the encyclopedic. These are the tools of the speaker. Your auditors thus will grasp the essence of what you claim, and they will follow you subsequently into the written text to secure such details and explications as were passed over lightly in the first instance.

**Remember**, to speak boldly, enunciate clearly, and engage your auditors directly, using your whole personality and not whispering shyly, like a child, into your coat sleeve. Too meek a presence will draw the attention of your auditors toward your performance (your discomfort, even) and away from your message, which is the whole purpose. On the other hand, an overly dramatic, effusive, or bombastic presentation fares no better.

**Remember**, the goal of a conference paper is to start a conversation, not to finish one. To provoke the desired response among your auditors, it is better to stimulate their curiosity, or to challenge their prejudices, than to dazzle them with fine declamations and flights of polished rhetoric.

**Remember**, a conference paper must contain a very high proportion of *concept* for every pound of *content*. In this regard it is the reverse of an article intended for print circulation. Your paper should launch your most important claims, lightly ballasted with evidence, enough to set them upright in the water (so to speak), but not so much as to belabor your auditors with the unloading of your little ships.

**Remember**, to test, in a conference paper, your most contestable arguments: it is about these that you must hear the opinions of others, and it is about these that others are likely to have opinions. Obvious truths, repeated with whatever confidence and assurance in public, generate little interest. It is when dissonance or novelty falls upon their ears that auditors take notice.

**Remember**, to lift up, among your claims, those best calculated to impress the *generalist*, who may recognize the importance of your topic but who does not share your investment nor your interest in shouldering a large new burden of information. “Must I adjust what I know about this?” is the question on the mind of your typical listener.
Remember, that highly specialized or arcane knowledge is best shared among the very few individuals to whom such discourse is entirely familiar. That such persons will constitute your audience at a voluntary public gathering, such as an academic conference, is most unlikely.

Remember, to honor the time constraints laid down by the conference schedule. Trespass not upon on time allotted to other presenters and commentators. Only a boor engrosses the whole of a public encounter, and you do not wish to be remembered for a boor.

Remember, you will learn from presenting a conference paper only if you hear comments from respondents or the audience. If your presentation leaves no time for these responses, you have gained but little indeed.

Remember, if you whet the appetite of your auditors they will seek you out for more. As a guest at table is entertained with tantalizing morsels and thus drawn into the meal, so an audience is piqued with light but flavorful offerings that promise greater things to come. On the other hand, he who has been stuffed forcefully, no matter how tasty the menu, feels inevitably the impulse to purge.

Attend to these simple observations, and you shall find that your scholarship is well received, your contribution is respected, and your fame is nourished by your conference presentations. One who follows these advices cannot become notorious for it and often gathers reputation instead for being virtuous, forthright, and charming.

An Old Tradesman