



Writing and Publishing Scientific Papers

A Primer for the
Non-English Speaker

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27. How to Write a Conference Proceedings Paper

A conference proceedings paper is a very common kind of publication. However, its usefulness requires scrutiny. Therefore, your first important question, on receiving an invitation to contribute to the proceedings of a conference you have attended, should not be “how to write a conference proceedings paper?” The real question is: should you write a conference proceedings paper at all?

Often, a conflict exists: a conference proceedings paper is not usually a primary publication. Therefore, you earn little publication benefit from publishing such a paper. Still, travel support is often linked to presenting material at a conference (and rightly so: if no one presented anything, everyone would be expecting others to fill the conference with content), and once much of the work is done, what harm comes from turning this into a conference proceedings paper?

Additionally, there may be pressure of a different type and magnitude to publish your contribution in the conference proceedings. This pressure may come from your university supervisor: she expects you to perform at “her” conference, and of course, to submit your contribution to the proceedings. Alternatively, your own university might be organising the conference, and what is more natural than to submit your contributions to the proceedings? Doing otherwise may seem a betrayal of your own workplace. Thus, a refusal is not always an option, even if, at heart, you would like to do so.

The problems with conference proceedings are multiple. The purpose, it seems, of a volume of conference proceedings is not really to inform the outside world about the results presented at the meeting. All too often, the proceedings volume is a kind of monument to the conference,

evidence for the funders or organisers that the conference took place. So, frequently, its main purpose is not to publish new scientific discoveries.

Additionally, this monument is constructed on a shoestring: the leftover money from the conference. This is almost never enough to engage a professional editor or printer. Therefore, the editors (often the conference organisers) step in to provide this service. They may serve the real interest of the meeting perfectly in this respect — and the significance of a conference is, in the eyes of an outsider, positively correlated with the size of the proceedings volume. A big book equals a big, important conference. Of course, everyone claims this is not so — yet the logic somehow survives. Unfortunately, there are several undesirable consequences.

The first is “soft” peer review. As a general perception, the participants, by paying to attend at the conference, have somehow bought the right for their contribution, presented at the conference, to be included in the proceedings volume. As this is still part of the scientific literature, the editors try to provide comments on every manuscript. The aim of this review, however, is not to select the best contributions offered. The editors try to help the authors to improve their manuscript but rejection is rarely on the horizon. Exceptions exist, but acceptance is commonplace in the world of conferences; therefore, the peer review is rather “soft”.

The second hindrance is the page limit on individual contributions. Funds are always tight, and everyone expects to be included. Thus, the total number of pages available has to be evenly divided — more or less. Consequently, a conference proceedings paper always has severe limits: the length of text, number of figures, tables, and references are typically restricted. The overall limit can vary between five and 15 pages. It is rarely more, which virtually precludes a full primary publication — there is never enough space to substantively present the material and methods, for example. Do not spoil your chances of such a publication by trying to include all your primary data in a volume of conference proceedings.

Thirdly, the usual lack of money precludes the engagement of a professional editorial service. Editing, typesetting, etc. are usually done by amateurs. You cannot rely on them in the way you can expect a professional editorial and printing service from a journal. Be *very* careful

and conscientious, especially with the proofreading. You are your own quality controller.

The general structure of the conference proceedings paper follows that of the primary paper. Frequently, though, the summary/abstract is not included, because that was originally published in the conference book of abstracts. Otherwise, the structure follows that of the primary scientific paper: there is an introduction, material and methods, results, and a discussion. The material and methods must be short — there is no space to present all of the necessary details. Try to point to other publications that provide more detail, rather than describing them here. The results also need to be short, and to the point. There is not a lot of space for discussion, either. Try to concentrate on the results. Above all, remember that this is rarely a valid primary publication, and do not publish your full set of results. Always retain the (copy)right to publish it later as a valid, primary publication. For reasons mentioned above, this will not be very difficult — conference proceedings papers are usually short, and do not allow you to present all the necessary detail.

I should add that, in several fields (for example, engineering), regular and well-attended conferences publish the full, written material in regular proceedings *before* the conference starts. However, this mechanism usually has the characteristics of peer-reviewed journals: authors must submit the full, written version of their planned contributions beforehand, which are evaluated by experts and accepted or not. These can be treated as full primary papers.

