

Making the most of a conference

Introduction

Academic conferences and meetings are an important part of building a scientific career. They are an opportunity to learn from others, showcase your own work and form networks. Making the most out of conferences is a key skill to develop.

This guide is based on an NIH training session 'Attending Your First Scientific Meeting'. The NIH created the session as they understand that developing conference and meeting skills are a vital part of someone's progression as a researcher. Although the training session focused on the 'first scientific meeting' the information and guidance is useful for everyone.

This guide uses the word 'conference' to refer to all academic events, including meetings, symposia, conventions, workshops and seminars.

Start thinking the right way

A key aspect of making the most of a conference is understanding your role from the beginning. And this means knowing that you are there to participate. It is important to think of your time at a conference as an essential part of your job or studies, not time off from your 'real' work. Remember, participating does not only mean presenting.

Knowing what to expect

You can help yourself by properly preparing and having realistic expectations. Take a look at these areas of preparation and how they may help you.

Preparation activity	How it can help
Confirm the size of the meeting or conference	You can understand how likely you are to be able to talk to a speaker
Learn about the culture of the event. E.g. is it formal or informal?	You can make sure you dress appropriately
Check who is presenting and attending	You can be aware of who you may be able to meet
Understand what is expected of you	For example, find when and where you submit your presentation, so there are no delays on the day
Get first-hand information from someone who has attended before	They may be able to give you practical tips that you wouldn't find on the website
Ask a mentor or colleague if they know anyone who is also attending the event	They can make an emailed introduction in advance

Detailed planning

Make sure to read the program and abstracts in advance. This will help you plan your days so you don't miss key presentations. It also helps you answer other participants' questions about the schedule, a great way to sound knowledgeable and make connections!

Read the abstracts of the presentations you will attend. This will help you better understand the information and data being delivered and make the experience more valuable. Reading the abstracts in advance can also help you prepare interesting questions for the speakers.

Making the right impression

How you behave and present yourself is important in today's scientific and academic worlds. You will be remembered not only for your research, but also the impression you make. When you are at a conference you want to show that you are professional, enthusiastic, curious and aware.

If you are presenting, you can help build the right impression by practicing your presentation several times in advance so that you can deliver it smoothly, confidently and within the time limit.

Take care to follow the etiquette guidelines below to ensure you are remembered well. Making a bad impression may hurt your future chances of useful connections, potential collaborations, interesting jobs and vital funding.

Etiquette – in sessions

A quick way to make a bad impression is being a disrespectful audience member. Remember the points below to make sure you are not remembered for your lack of respect.

- During presentations, be quiet and listen.
- Discuss the presentation with your neighbor but only after it is finished.
- Do not use the Q&A to just talk about your own work. Make sure you have a relevant question.
- Do not speak negatively of another person's work during the Q&A.
- Do not answer your phone.
- Look interested; don't play games or answer emails.

Etiquette – interacting

Conferences are not only about presentations, you will also interact with people in more social situations; these might include the welcome reception and organized tourist activities. Interacting with other scientists is an opportunity to make a good impression that could help you in the future. Follow the points below to make sure you maximize your chances of making a good impression.

- Be respectful; do not interrupt or ignore people.
- Don't monopolize someone's time; be aware they may have other people to talk to.
- Remember building friendships is part of networking; don't focus only on scientific dialogue.
- Remember casual does not mean out of control.
- Do not try to assert yourself as an expert, unless you really are.

Make notes

You will not remember everything! You should make notes on all relevant presentations, posters and conversations. Take photos of any relevant data or findings, even if you don't fully understand them, you can discuss them later with colleagues.

Having a record of when you heard someone speak or when you spoke to them (and what you spoke about) provides you with an opening line for further communication. Remember to write down full names and contact details of people you would like to follow up with. Don't rely on Googling people later; it can be surprising how many people have similar names!

After the conference

Once you are back home find time to talk with your mentor, colleagues or research group about what you learned. Not only is a good way to share useful information it also helps you organize your notes and thoughts about your experience.

Also make sure to follow up with friends and contacts you made. How you do this will depend on the seniority of the person, their use of different platforms and the type of connection you made. The examples below will be appropriate in different situations.

- Send a LinkedIn request, this is suitable for most people but not everyone is signed up.
- Connect on ResearchGate, this is especially useful if you work in similar fields.
- Send an email, especially if you have a question or want to follow up on something.
- Follow them on Twitter, especially if they mentioned they tweet about their research.
- Send a friend request on Facebook, if you met socially and got along well.

Note on profiles

If you are going to use any of the social media platforms to make connections with people you met, first make sure your profile is looking good!

For LinkedIn and ResearchGate

- make sure your information is up to date and accurate
- choose a clear, work-appropriate photo
- ask someone to check the text for you to avoid language mistakes and typos.

For Facebook and Twitter

- check everything you have previously posted is professionally appropriate
- delete any embarrassing or offensive content
- consider using 'lists' on Facebook, so you can choose who sees what
- consider having two profiles one for friends and one for work.

More information

This guide is based on information in www.training.nih.gov/assets/Transcript_Meeting_Webinar.pdf

You can also find more tips and information on these pages:

- Read tips from a graduate student here:
www.unl.edu/gradstudies/current/news/step-step-approach-attending-conferences
- These tips on how to make a good first impression are from the business world but are still helpful:
www.howtofascinate.com/how-to-make-a-brilliant-first-impression-at-a-conference
- Advice from a bioscientist can be found here:
bitesizebio.com/23712/making-a-good-impression-how-to-successfully-network-at-a-conference
- Tips on how to write a good academic LinkedIn profile can be found here:
www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-boost-your-academic-linkedin-profile-laura-sivula

If you have any questions about this guide or would like to suggest other topics for our Learning Center please email mahidol.tropmed@gmail.com.

Published April 2017