

Attending Professional Conferences: FAQ

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Where to go and when to go there

Q: What sessions should I go to? How do I decide?

A: After you register and get your tote bag full of advertising material and free crappy pens, take some time to find and **read through the conference program** (yes, all of it, not just the first day). Mark the sessions and speakers that sound interesting; highlight keywords, abstracts, and paper titles that catch your eye, or annotate with notes and memos to help figure out your overall attendance strategy. There will often be a “conference at a glance” page in the program that lists the short titles and room numbers of all the sessions during the week. Mark your first- and second-choice sessions in each time slot there for easy reference, and refer back to the more detailed descriptions and your notes on them if you forget why you were interested in something in the first place. Increasingly, conferences use apps that let you plan your schedule this way for easy reference—and cut down on the amount of paper you’re hauling around.

A few words of caution: **Don’t feel like you must be attending something every minute of every day**, especially if you find there’s nothing of particular interest on the program. It’s OK to take a longer lunch break on one day, or run back to your room for a catnap if you’re feeling overwhelmed and need to rest and recharge before the evening events. You might also skip a session you were only *meh* about in favor of having a great, productive discussion over coffee with a new contact.

You can even make your first choice for a time slot be a session that—gasp!—doesn’t relate directly to your research or career interests! Conferences are for broadening your professional knowledge base, not just deepening it, and sometimes (especially as you advance in your career and build expertise) the sessions that are right in your wheelhouse are just going to repeat information you already know. You might get more out of exploring an interesting new topic, or find you can connect dots between areas you previously thought were unrelated. Look out for phrases like “An Introduction to __,” “Understanding __,” or “__ for Dummies” in session titles if you want to avoid overly basic treatments of already-familiar topics; conversely, choose those sessions if you are looking to ease into a complex and unfamiliar subject area. Just like mixing salty and sweet can be surprisingly delicious, **mixing focused and obligatory sessions with more novel content can be intellectually stimulating** and help you get the greatest benefit from a conference.

Q: This session is not very good/not what I expected/running at the same time as another session I also want/need to attend. Is it OK to leave?

A: Generally, yes—but you must **be decent, strategic, and respectful about it**.

At conferences with lots of concurrent sessions, people may skip from one to another to catch individual speakers on multiple panels. They may also have meetings or other obligations (professional or biological) that necessitate ducking out of a session early. At other times, you may find you’ve misjudged the content, or discover that the abstract in the program isn’t representative of what the speakers are actually discussing! In all of those cases, bailing to check out your second choice instead of committing to one session for the whole time slot is an option you’ll naturally consider.

You can do this when you have to, but *only* when you have to—don’t plan to leapfrog within sessions for the entire conference. A) It will exhaust you, and B) it *is* rude when done to excess. C) You’ll also seriously miss out on content, as panel sessions are usually designed to address multiple aspects of a single topic,

creating a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. If you know you will have to dash, take an aisle seat near the door and **wait for a tactful opportunity to make your exit** as quietly as possible. Applause breaks and transitions between speakers are good; so is the moment when someone else is leaving. The same sneak-don't-barge rules apply for entering during the middle of a session.

Depending on the conference and your relationship to the panelists, you may want to offer the session chair or speakers whose presentations you missed by leaving early or arriving late an apology when you run into them in the halls later. Just don't make it all about you. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to be there for the whole session this morning; your talk sounded interesting, and I hope it was well received" is polite, and works; "I really, really wanted to stay for the whole thing, but one of my classmates was presenting at the exact same time in the session next door, and even though she's not talking about stuff that's in my area, and you guys were, I wanted to be there as, like, moral support for her, you know?" isn't, and doesn't. Put yourself in the presenter's shoes and use your best judgment about what's appropriate.

Who to talk to, how to talk to them, and when to talk

Q: I know I'm supposed to be networking at this thing. What is networking, exactly? How do I meet people with similar interests?

A: The first step is to **meet people in general**: Go to things. Talk to strangers. Ask those people what they are interested in when you meet them. It's very simple—and simple ≠ easy—but keep doing it and it will get easier. Make the most of the direct interaction opportunities you get at a conference. Striking up a conversation with the person behind you in the check-in line or talking to whoever's next to you at the lunch table can be very effective networking. Attending someone's panel presentation, sneaking up to snatch one of their business cards off the table while they're talking to someone else after the Q&A and running away without introducing yourself, and then emailing them when you get home from the conference to say you liked their talk and ask them for an internship? That is *not* effective networking.

If you're attending with lots of people from your school or work, avoid clinging to or clustering up with them. If you're in a group, try to arrange yourselves in an open horseshoe rather than a closed circle, so new folks can approach and join your conversation. Make space and say hello. This recent Wall Street Journal piece on body language and reading a room has useful information in it for noobs and seasoned conference-goers alike: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-smartest-ways-to-network-at-a-party-1442249499> (Note: This content may be behind a paywall for non-subscribers; apologies to those who can't access it. If you're one of those people, try this piece from Forbes on assertive body language: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/work-in-progress/2014/11/17/body-language-rules-to-help-you-command-a-room/> and this one on working a room: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/deborahjacobs/2012/02/29/how-to-work-a-room-like-you-own-the-place/>.)

Also essential: **being able to articulate what your own research and professional interests are**, concisely and directly. Your elevator speech can vary with your audience, and doesn't have to be something you recite verbatim every time, but you should go into every professional conference with a basic self-description that you are as comfortable rattling off as you are saying your own name (first *and* last, please!). It should be about two sentences. Practice this alone in your hotel room before the receptions and social hours if you have to. If you dither over the question of who you are and what you're into, hem and haw, or give an answer that's incredibly vague or impenetrably esoteric, you will bring the conversation to a screeching halt. If you answer this question gracefully and effectively, on the other hand, the people you talk to will not only enjoy the conversation that follows, but will also be able to connect you to others with similar interests as word gets around that you're interested in [topic X] or [career track Y].

Last but not least, when attending the sessions, committee meetings, and workshops that are aligned with your interests, pay attention not only to the speakers, but also to **who's in the audience and who's asking questions**. Seek them out and talk to them, too! You already have common ground, thanks to your shared experience as audience members. You may discover even more in conversation.

Q: I'm just a student, so I should stay quiet during the Q&A time and defer to people who are older and understand this stuff better, right?

A: You're not going to be a student for very long. If this is your best excuse for not pushing yourself to do something scary, start thinking of new ones now! When you graduate from your program and start taking the speaker's podium yourself, you'll quickly learn that one of the most gratifying results of public speaking is having an audience that really connects with your presentation and engages you in substantive discussion. You'll also learn that students in an audience do not have neon arrows floating over their heads that read "STUDENT: KNOWS NOTHING. FEEL FREE TO IGNORE." You'll also learn that special brand of disappointment that can only be felt by panelist when crickets chirp after the moderator says "Does anyone have any questions for our presenters?"

If you're a student, your job is to learn. A good way to do that is by listening to and asking questions of knowledgeable people. Another of your jobs is to reflect on what you're hearing, analyze it, assess it, and synthesize it with other information to deepen what you know. **Think hard about what you're hearing during every session, take reflective notes, and if you come up with a good question while someone is talking, write it down to ask them when the time comes.**

Even if you don't ask a question yourself, listen critically to those who do. Audience questions and panelists' responses to them are a really important part of the session. Juicy stuff comes up in Q&As! You will also see for yourself that **students are just as capable of coming up with good (or bad) questions as anyone else in the room**. In fact, wanting to make a positive impression during this tiny little performance may help you avoid classic bad Q&A moves made by self-assured (but not self-aware) senior colleagues. Make sure the question you draft in your notes and psych yourself up to ask is *not* on this list: <http://the-toast.net/2015/05/01/every-question-in-every-qa-session-ever/>

Q: Should I be tweeting about all of this?

A: **Sure!** (Unless, of course, you're asked not to by a speaker, session moderator, or audience member, in which case you should respect the request for social media silence.) Tweeting and following along with the conference and session hashtags can help you develop a professional voice, share and reflect on presentation content, and (almost) be in two or more places at once. Good live-tweeting is sincerely appreciated by colleagues and followers who can't be there for the conference in person, too. If you're especially good at it, **conference tweeting can help raise your profile** and generate new followers in the professional community—great if you're at a conference that's a little outside your discipline, or one you're attending for the first time. Basic rules of professionalism, netiquette, and twittiquette always apply. See the Chronicle of Higher Education's ProfHacker blog for more conference tweeting guidelines: <http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/ten-tips-for-tweeting-at-conferences/54281>

Other tools and survival strategies

Q: Should I bring business cards?

A: **Yes.** Try to avoid being the person who concludes a professional encounter by scribbling your email address on a cocktail napkin with the cruddy ballpoint pen from the bottom of your conference tote bag. If your school or employer does not provide these, and you can spare the cash, spending about \$25 on Moo, Vistaprint, or a similar site will get you a boxful of nice-looking cards—enough to last you through

grad school. If money is tight, or you're creatively gifted, consider making your own (some neat ideas here: <http://jayce-o.blogspot.com/2013/09/diy-business-cards-design-your-own-business-card.html>). It's more than worth it for the polished impression personal cards create and for the contacts they help you make and maintain. As props, they're useful ways to initiate an interaction with a speaker whose work you're interested in: "I really liked your talk, do you have a card? Oh, thanks; here's one of mine. I'm [your elevator speech here], so what you said about [explicitly connect their ideas and your interests here]." BOOM. You just networked.

Your cards should include the basic contact information that person, or anyone else, would need to follow up with you professionally after the conference: Your name, a phone number, an email address. If you put anything further on there, think first about **how it will play in other settings**. It may take longer than you think to get through a box of 250 of these things, during which you may stop being a "Master's Degree Student in Archival Studies" or whatever. Consider using a more general term like "Archivist" or "Information Professional," if that's where you're headed (unless you're in a field where you need specific credentials to use a title, like "Police Officer" or "Lawyer"!). Add social media handles, URLs for blogs or personal sites, etc., only if what you say (or have said) in those venues is consistently work-appropriate.

Speaking of which, now—*before* the conference, *before* you hit the job market—is a good time to **Google yourself and make sure you know how you look online**. Bring your LinkedIn profile up to date; re-evaluate those wacky profile pics; consider creating separate accounts for personal and professional use on social media. Sure, you've had the same email address since college, but do you really want a prospective boss to email you at, say, `demon_sultan@possiblesexualinnuendo.com`?

Q: What should I wear?

A: Professional association meetings are full of colleagues who might be working with you, applying to the same jobs as you after graduation, or hiring you. **Dress to make a positive impression** on all of them, *whatever that means to you*. I realize fashion do's and don'ts can be bewildering. This advice isn't about being trendy, wearing a tie, or reinforcing conservative norms and binary constructs of gender through rules like "women should wear skirt suits, not pantsuits." (I don't even know why anyone would think *that's* an appropriate rule, because it's ridiculous, but it's out there.) It's about presenting yourself to your professional community in ways that will make you **feel comfortable, authentic, and empowered**. Your choice of dress should permit you and your capabilities to be the primary, if not sole, focus of attention. Don't go broke building a work wardrobe; thrift shops sell nice blazers too.

With that in mind: Dress just a little fancier than normal for the meet-and-greet receptions, official dinners/lunches, or on days when you're presenting research or accepting an award. Pack clothes that travel well, and/or make liberal use of the iron in your hotel room (or your friends' hotel rooms, if you're crashing on someone's couch). Carry a stain stick in case of coffee spills or mealtime snafus. Layers are really nice to have in over-air-conditioned meeting rooms. **All of your clothes should be clean, and should fit you; none of your undergarments should be showing.**

Accessories should preferably not jangle, clink, or otherwise distract from speakers. **Your phone counts as an accessory. Keep it fully silent at all times.** If you're taking notes on a laptop, type quietly. Be considerate of others; sit in the back row if you have tall hair or a hat that might block someone's view.

It's OK to change into more casual clothes when you're headed offsite for socializing in the evenings; this can help demarcate the "work" and "play" time, and everyone's dogs are barking by the time happy hour rolls around. Just remember that whoever you go out with at night will probably be back in work mode the next day, and try to **keep your conduct professional** even when you're all in jeans and t-shirts.

Whatever clothes you choose, **good personal hygiene is always a must**, and will be appreciated in those standing-room-only sessions where you're packed in together at the back of a stuffy space, or seated close enough to the speaker to see that he must have had a spinach salad for lunch. Avoid heavy perfume, aftershave, or scented lotions, which can be off-putting in those same situations; keep mints handy, especially if you're a smoker. A travel toothbrush can also be very reassuring to have in your tote bag.

Q: *Do I shake hands or do I hug?*

A: As with dress and self-presentation, this is more about figuring out **what's appropriate and comfortable for you and those around you**, and observes the boundaries of the professional setting, than it is about following a set of absolute rules. A lot of business etiquette clickbait tackles this question. There's also this Onion-esque headline from the excellent Ask a Manager blog (which you should already be reading for answers to questions on professional life)—“Our Employee Won't Stop Hugging People”: <http://www.askamanager.org/2012/09/our-employee-wont-stop-hugging-people.html>

Basically, they all say to **consider the circumstances; please please please don't make it weird; and when in doubt, don't hug**. But if you're really feeling it, and it seems OK to be human with this person, you may go ahead and get a little shmoozy.

To all of this I would add a personal plea for making sure that, if you're going to be shaking a lot of hands, your handshake is halfway decent. This is part of your first-impression package, along with what you're wearing, how you're smelling, and what you say in your elevator speech. **Here's advice on how to shake hands**, along with some common pitfalls to avoid: <http://lifehacker.com/avoid-these-five-mistakes-and-never-give-a-bad-handshak-1178784076>

Q: *What if something crazy/awkward/dangerous/great/confusing comes up during the conference and I don't know how to handle it? Who can I go to for help?*

A: **If there's an emergency, call 911 first and get help**. You can sort everything else out later. It's a good idea to have the address of the conference hotel or convention center stored somewhere handy—in your notebook or your phone—and to know what room you're in at any given time, where the emergency exits are, etc. It's also important to **be safe in unfamiliar cities**. Conferences make it easy to travel in groups, but they can also entail drinking and whatnot with strangers, so don't be caught off guard. Stay aware of your surroundings, keep your phone charged, and wherever you go, have a plan for getting home safely.

Many conferences now have codes of conduct (CoCs) that specify their expectations for things like attendees' behavior and presentation content. CoCs lay out organizational values, and underscore the professional tone of the event. These are nice policies to have, because they make it clear what counts as misbehavior and won't be tolerated. The very best of them describe exactly what you can do and who you can turn to if something untoward happens. The CoC will usually appear in a prominent place in the conference program, so if something comes up, check to see if the CoC covers the situation you're in. If not, you should still be able consult those contacts for timely, discreet, and supportive assistance.

Another common feature of conferences is **mentoring programs for first-time attendees** or those new to the organization. Mentors can help with questions you're afraid might be naive or embarrassing, or share community wisdom. Sometimes a little backstory can explain a lot: odd dynamics, disproportionate responses, comments that could be read more than one way. If the mentors *themselves* are the problem, that's something the conference organizers should know—again, refer to the CoC for folks you can talk to.

Always remember that you can check in with peers, colleagues, or mentors back home, too. Just because you're out of town doesn't mean you have to be out of touch. A reality check or pep talk from someone who knows you can be really helpful when you're feeling out of your element!