

CONFERENCE SURVIVAL GUIDE - THE DOS AND DON'TS

One of the best perks of doing research is being able to attend conferences around the world, especially if they are held in idyllic locations. As a postgraduate student or early career researcher, you are often encouraged to attend conferences to receive feedback on your work, share ideas with peers, practice your science communication skills and promote your research. It may seem daunting having to present in front of a group of experts in your field and you may have a number of excuses why you should not attend one – not enough time, not enough data or that you don't know anyone. But think of all the new people you can meet, new ideas you may generate and how much fun you can have at the conference dinner, where plenary speakers let their hair down and party like it's 1999.

Here are a few tips on how to get the most from your conference attendance:

1. Choosing the right conference

Do:

- Attend a conference where you have the opportunity to present your work, either as a poster or an oral presentation. That way you feel like an active participant rather than just a spectator.
- Choose a conference that is more focused on your area of research. This might make networking less daunting.
- Location, location, location! Choosing a destination such as Barcelona or LA for a conference is always a good excuse to escape the Australian winter.

Don't:

- Choose a conference that nobody has ever heard about before. There is a worrying, increasing trend of fake conferences and you don't want to be short-changed.
- Choose a conference based on location alone or only because it is a convenient time of the year to go.

2. Apply for Funding

Conferences can be expensive so it is always a good idea to seek for funding support.

Do:

- Apply for departmental or university travel fellowships. Keep an eye on the application deadlines so you don't miss the opportunity to apply.
- Become a member of a professional society like the Australian Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology (ASBMB), which has fellowships to assist recipients to attend overseas conferences. Bear in mind that for a lot of the awards you need to be a member of the society for a period of time before being eligible to apply.



Sightseeing in Berlin, Germany, after attending the 40th FEBS Congress in July 2015. I was very fortunate to receive funding to attend the meeting from the ASBMB Fred Collins Award.

Don't:

- Expect your supervisor to cover all the costs. Your supervisor may have some funding set aside to allow students to attend conferences but this should not be an expectation.

3. Registration Process

Do:

- Register before the early bird registration closes (typically three months before the conference kicks off). Booking in advance not only keeps your registration price lower, but will also keep your travel and accommodation costs lower.
- Have your abstract ready far enough in advance to allow your supervisor and collaborators to review it well before the deadline.

Don't:

- Miss the early bird deadline. A lot of the time the early bird deadline coincides with the oral presentation deadline so you don't want to miss the opportunity to be considered for an oral presentation by not making the deadline.
- Write your abstract at the last minute. Being considered for a presentation usually comes down to a well-written abstract.

4. Conference Preparation

Do:

- Keep up with the literature, so you have an idea what to expect.
- Read the conference abstracts and select any talks or poster presentations you want to attend. Typically the final schedule for a conference will be posted about a month in advance. Pick out presentations that sound interesting and create a schedule for each day.
- Read about the plenary speakers. You may have the opportunity to speak to them and you would sound very impressive if you could bring up some of their published work or it may help you ask better questions.
- Prepare, prepare, ~~freak-out~~, prepare for your presentation. It is always a good idea to have a rehearsal in front of your lab group and have them think of possible questions you may get.

Don't:

- Plan a busy schedule. A conference program may be overwhelming, particularly if you attend a large conference with plenary lectures, parallel sessions and multiple poster sessions. Try to find a balance between attending interesting presentations and leaving some free time in your schedule to rest and network.
- Overstress about your presentation. Rehearse but don't obsess. When you become so stressed that you can't stop thinking about it every day leading up to the conference, it is time to stop.

5. Attending a Session

Enthusiasm is usually at its highest at the start of the conference but that can quickly go away when you attend an uninteresting session.

Do:

- Take a pen and notepad with you at all times.
- Plan to stay for all presentations in a session. Some presentations may be easier to understand than others but you never know what you may learn.
- Think of questions to ask. Even if you do not have the courage to ask them, it may help you stay alert. You may also have the opportunity to ask the questions later during a break.

Don't:

- Fall asleep. If you are feeling tired before the start of a session, sit near an exit so you can quietly sneak out when tiredness gets the best out of you.

6. Network, Network, Network!

Do:

- Sell yourself. You may be finishing your PhD or looking for a new postdoc position. Meeting members of other labs may help you make a more informed decision about your next career move. Listen to what research other people are doing and think about what you would like to learn/do in your next position.
- Have informal discussions with people who attended your presentation. They may come up with useful feedback and it is a good opportunity to strengthen your connections.
- Have a chat to speakers; they may be your future employer.
- Get involved in social activities. Although it may be tempting to just hang out with people you already know, try to interact with new people. Go to dinner or a drink with your new contacts outside the conference venue. Even if you are shy by nature, try your best to meet and talk to as many people as possible, whether they be students, postdocs or professors. You'll likely find that most people are quite friendly and willing to engage.

Don't:

- Spend all your free time getting free stuff from the industry booths. Although it may seem like a good idea getting free pens, USB sticks etc, remember that most of these end up in the back of your wardrobe and only get found again when you are moving.
- Burn yourself out. Although it may not seem like it, listening to endless talks and networking can be very tiring. Make the time to relax.

When you return from your conference, before going back to your everyday routine, spend some time going through the program and have a look at your notes. Have a think about how you can put some of the ideas you got into action. It is also important to solidify the contacts you made by sending a follow up email.

I hope these tips can make your next conference experience more enjoyable. Remember to just relax and have fun. You will be surrounded by people who are just as excited about science as you are. Lastly, take the time to do some sightseeing in your free time. You will most likely be in an exciting location so do a bit of travelling if you can. Mixing work with pleasure is one of the pros of being a research scientist after all!

The Student's Page is coordinated by Dr Tatiana Soares da Costa, who is an NHMRC Early Career Fellow at the La Trobe Institute for Molecular Science (T.SoareshdaCosta@latrobe.edu.au).