

BEST PRACTICE GUIDE

MAKING THE MOST OF CONFERENCES

Going to an academic conference is an exciting opportunity to promote your research, hear about new ideas and make new connections. It's also a major investment of time and travel – so a little planning and forethought can help ensure you get the best long-term benefits for your work and build your circle of peers and potential collaborators.

Before you register

Set clear goals: What are you hoping to achieve by attending the conference - networking, feedback on your work, exploring job opportunities or discovering new research directions? Do your homework and make sure this is the right conference where you will achieve your aims. Consider the conference's target audience - is it an academic association conference or is it attended by a broader audience such as policymakers, practitioners or other stakeholders?

Consider opportunities to participate: Are there any opportunities for you to actively participate at the conference? You might consider submitting a poster or offering to speak or convene a panel – either with people whose work you already know or those who are new to you.

Before the conference

Research the attendees and programme: Identify key people you'd like to meet and pre-arrange meetings if possible. Be aware that speakers will be busy and in demand. Review the conference programme and identify sessions that align with your interests but don't just focus on your own field - some of the most valuable insights can come from adjacent disciplines. Plan your schedule but leave room for spontaneous discoveries.

Prepare your elevator pitch: Be ready to summarise your research clearly and concisely in 60 seconds. Cover these four points:

- What's the problem you're addressing?
- What is your solution?
- Why is your research important / why is your research of interest to other people?
- What do you hope to achieve through your research?

Organise business cards or digital contact information: It may seem old-school, but business cards are still widely used. Alternatively, have a LinkedIn or website QR code ready.

Use social media: If you are on social media, post in advance to let people know you will be attending – particularly if you are participating. Make a note of the conference hashtag and follow the people and organisations you know will be there and who may repost you.

Consider taking printed material with you: If you are attending specifically to promote a paper or other output, preparing a leaflet with some key information and a scannable QR code can be an effective way to spread the word and make a lasting impression.

If you are presenting

Presenting at an academic conference is a key opportunity to showcase your work, get feedback and build your reputation. Here's some practical advice to make the most of whether you're giving a talk, a poster presentation or part of a panel.

Know your audience: Tailor the level of detail and technical depth to whether your audience is general, interdisciplinary or highly specialised.

Create a clear narrative: Clearly structure your presentation with a narrative arc that takes the audience on a journey from problem to solution. Start with motivation - why should anyone care about your research? Present your key findings early rather than building suspense, since academic audiences want to know where you're headed. Use the "rule of three" for main points, as people struggle to retain more than that from a single presentation. Avoid the "info-dump" - clarity wins over complexity. Don't forget to acknowledge your team and your funders. Give your contact details (and social media handles) at both the beginning and end.

Practice aloud: Rehearse out loud, time yourself, adjust pacing and simulate the setting. Practice with peers for feedback. The more you rehearse, the calmer you'll feel.

Engage visually: Slides should support, not distract. Use graphs, images and concise text. Keep it clean and uncluttered. One idea per slide is ideal. Your audience should be listening to you, not reading dense text.

The bigger picture Your presentation is part of a larger conversation in your field. Connect your work to broader themes and acknowledge how it builds on others' contributions. End with clear takeaways and suggest future directions - this often sparks the most interesting discussions.

Prepare for questions: Anticipate difficult questions and practice concise, confident responses. If you don't know the answer, say so honestly and offer to follow up.

Invite conversation: Prepare questions to ask the audience or prompts to spark dialogue. A presentation can be a conversation starter, not just a monologue.

Check tech requirements: Bring multiple formats (PDF, PPT, USB drive, cloud backup) and test your slides on the venue's equipment if possible.

Upload your presentation: Add slides to a repository such as SlideShare or your Academia.edu page and add a DOI. You don't need to tell anyone it's live until you start talking, but it means that people can read and share your slides – and they may post about it during the session.

Be confident: Open with a strong, clear, engaging hook or motivating question. Speak clearly and slowly. Even if you're nervous, avoid rushing. Use pauses and emphasise key points. Make eye contact and engage the room - don't just read your slides.

Stick to the time limit: Respect the audience and other presenters. Going over time is a major faux pas.

Collect feedback: Use audience questions and comments to improve your work or clarify communication.

Follow up on contacts: If someone showed real interest, email them a thank you or further reading link.

Reflect: Take time to consider what went well and what you might improve on next time.

At the conference

Actively engage: Take notes not just on content but on presentation techniques that work well. Ask thoughtful questions during Q&A sessions – especially in smaller workshops or poster sessions. This helps you engage with the material and makes you visible to other attendees. Take time at the end of sessions to say how much you enjoyed a presentation. Hopefully this will lead to a follow up conversation.

Be curious, not just critical: Ask questions not to poke holes but to genuinely explore. This opens doors to collaboration and understanding.

Make good use of social media: Share your thoughts on the presentations you find interesting and follow people whose talks inspired you. This is a great way of ensuring the conference findings reach people who couldn't actually attend, and the organisers will appreciate it.

Network effectively: Say hello to people you already know but use the opportunity as much as possible to meet new people. The real value often happens in hallways, coffee breaks and at social events. Don't be afraid to introduce yourself to people whose work you admire. When someone mentions interesting research, ask follow-up questions and express genuine curiosity. If you're introverted, set small goals like meeting two new people each day rather than trying to work the entire room. Follow them on social media or connect on LinkedIn. The goal isn't to collect as many business cards as possible, but to build meaningful connections and gain fresh perspectives on your research. Focus on quality interactions over quantity, and remember that academic conferences are marathons, not sprints.

After the conference

Follow up quickly: Add the people you met to your contact list with a note about where you met them. Send a brief email or message that mentions something specific from your interaction at the conference to help them remember you. Do any actions you said you would, such as sending a paper or putting people in touch. Put time and effort into maintaining and engaging with your network, as this can lead to new opportunities and collaborations in future.

Share your knowledge: Summarise key takeaways and how they apply to your work. Share your presentation and what you have learned with your colleagues – either write a 'back-to-office' note highlighting interesting people and ideas, give a brief presentation of what you learned (particularly if several people from your team attended), or write a post for your departmental or project blog.

Thank the conference organisers: Share with them any written outputs, such as a blog post or reflections on what you learned. This may be of benefit if you are interested in participating at further conferences or events.

Reflect and learn: Think about what went well and what you might do differently next time. Keep track of interesting ideas and potential research directions that emerged from your conversations. Incorporate useful feedback, consider new collaborations, and keep in touch with new contacts.