

Attending Professional Meetings Successfully

An Instruction Manual



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ATTENDING PROFESSIONAL MEETINGS

I. OVERVIEW

This brief manual provides information about various aspects of professional meetings. It was originally prepared for the Annual Meeting of the *Society for Neuroscience*; however, much of the material is relevant to most professional meetings. We hope that the information contained in this document will assist you in making your attendance at meetings as rewarding as possible.

Why Attend a Professional Meeting?

Professional meetings are a gathering of individuals with related professional interests, often from across the country and even around the world. Such meetings may range from a few hundred participants to 30,000 or more, as in the case of the *Society for Neuroscience Meeting*. There are many benefits to attending a professional meeting, including the following:

- learn about new developments in your area of research
Many people present their latest results at professional meetings. Because it can be a year or two before such work appears in print, such a meeting provides a mechanism to gain the most current information about the field.
- broaden your knowledge of the field
National meetings provide a way to learn about different areas of research, often via general lectures by prominent scientists.
- get experience making presentations
At most professional meetings there are opportunities present a “poster” or a short talk.
- get feedback on your work
Several dozen to several hundred people will see your presentation and many may provide feedback on your work.
- develop your network of contacts
National meetings provide an opportunity to meet new people and strengthen existing contacts through formal and informal interactions.
- learn about funding opportunities and meet program officers from granting agencies
Participants can meet with program officers and get the latest information on funds available for research and training.

- learn about employment opportunities and interview for positions
Employment services, career workshops, and informal discussions can assist you in obtaining your next position.
- see the newest tools for conducting research
Vendors exhibit their latest products at displays staffed by technical representatives.

Some Events at Professional Meetings

There are a variety of events that take place at a professional meeting such as that of the *Society for Neuroscience*. These events are listed in the preliminary and final programs for the meeting, and may also be available through the organization's website. The *Society for Neuroscience* provides a wide assortment of important information about their meeting at their website (<http://www.sfn.org>).

Lectures: Internationally renowned researchers are invited to provide lectures for a general scientific audience. Past speakers at the meeting of the *Society for Neuroscience* have included Francis Crick, Patricia Goldman-Rakic, and Stephen Jay Gould. Thousands of people may attend these events, so be sure to get there early!

Symposia: The symposia that are held are selected from many proposals submitted for consideration. They focus on cutting edge topics and include leaders in the field — both established investigators and rising stars.

Voluntary presentations: Members of the *Society for Neuroscience* (including student members) have the option of signing-up to make a voluntary presentation at the annual meeting, either a 10-minute talk or a poster presentation. (These are discussed in detail below.) Vast numbers of individuals make voluntary presentations, as it is a good way to get exposure and feedback on your work, and in the case of posters, to practice networking skills. The deadline for submitting abstracts for posters and 10-minute talks is usually many months prior to the meeting. In the case of the *Society for Neuroscience Meeting*, which is held in October or November, the deadline for abstracts is in late April or early May. Unlike the proposals for symposia, which are highly competitive, all submissions for voluntary presentations by members are accepted. Indeed, this year at the *Society for Neuroscience* meeting there will be more than 14,000!

Special interest socials and dinners: Special interest socials and dinners are often held to provide an opportunity for interactions on a somewhat smaller scale. They are listed in the program for the meeting and are open to all meeting attendees, providing an opportunity to discuss areas of mutual interest and network with like-minded individuals. These events are usually designed with junior investigators in mind; leaders in the field are often invited specifically to promote networking with junior scientists.

Exhibits: A major component of many professional meetings is the exhibits. This is certainly the case at the *Society for Neuroscience Meeting*, which features an exhibit area with hundreds of booths. Be sure to bring a bag with you when you tour the exhibits, as literature, product samples, and freebies (pens, magnets, etc.) abound. Among those represented will be:

Funding agencies – Stop by these booths to learn about funding opportunities for research and training and to meet and talk with program officers. (The value of talking one-on-one with program officers can not be overstated!)

Equipment manufacturers – At the manufacturers' displays you can learn about some of the newest products for neuroscience research and talk to sales and service representatives.

Publishers – Publishers' displays enable you to browse through new and relevant titles (books, journals, and electronic media), which often are available for purchase at a discount.

Some Associated Events

Educational Workshops: These are offered in the days immediately prior to the meeting. These high quality workshops are run by prominent researchers who speak on topics of current interest. Workshops are listed in the preliminary program for the meeting and pre-registration is required because space is limited. (There usually is no on-site registration.) In most cases there is a fee associated with attendance. Some examples of educational workshops offered at the Society for Neuroscience meeting:

Neurobiology of Disease Workshop: This workshop provides information on basic and clinical research into a designated disease. Also included are patient presentations.

Special Courses: There are two workshops have been offered on molecular biology: *Basics of Molecular Biology for Neurobiologists*, and *Advanced Molecular Techniques for Neuroscientists*.

Short Courses: These workshops provide instruction in new topics and techniques. The subject matter changes each year.

Satellite meetings: A number of smaller conferences often are held either immediately prior to or following the annual meeting and in the same general location. These may be free or require a fee; check their program for this information and also to determine whether advanced registration is required.

II. PREPARING FOR THE MEETING

Preparation is the key to getting the most out of the meeting. Listed below are multiple issues to which you will want to attend prior to arriving at the conference.

Register for the meeting: Be sure to register in advance for the meeting! This point can not be over-emphasized. Pre-registration has several advantages: it often is cheaper, it will provide you with the abstracts and program for the meeting in advance of the event so that you can prepare, and finally, it may save you a great deal of time that you would otherwise spend in a very long registration line. If for some reason you are not able to register in advance because you missed the

deadline, at least be sure to review the program and abstracts so that you can still prepare a schedule for yourself before you get to the meeting.

Make travel arrangements: Flights and hotel rooms fill quickly, especially the discounted ones. Be sure to make your arrangements early. Definitely take safety into account when you are considering accommodations. The preliminary and final programs provide information on hotel cost and location. Staying in a hotel closer to the conference site is advantageous in that you can take breaks more easily; however such hotels are generally more expensive. Student housing may be available at reduced rates, although those hotels are usually a distance from the conference site. Free shuttle bus service is available to designated conference hotels. Having a roommate is another way to decrease the cost of lodging, and it has the added advantage of providing someone to discuss the meeting with. To locate a roommate, check with colleagues at your institution or try to find someone via the Internet.

Plan your schedule: The most common pitfalls with regard to planning a schedule for the meeting are, first, not to plan in advance, and second, to plan to do too much. In order to get the most out of the meeting, it is *essential* that you plan your schedule in advance of your arrival. Review the program and the abstracts for the meeting and determine which events you would like to attend. You can search the program for the meeting by keywords via the *Society for Neuroscience's* website. When you are making your schedule, note that there may be time required to get from one session to another event and plan accordingly. Finally, remember to budget some time for relaxation and exercise — this will help you to recharge your energy levels so that you can get the most out of the meeting.

Be very selective in choosing the events you will attend. With regard to posters, visit those that are the most interesting to you first. Attending posters can be extremely fatiguing — posters are spread over a very large area, the crowd is very large, and the poster hall can be very noisy. It is not unusual to have 10-15 people all trying to look at a particular poster at the same time — plus another 10-15 other people looking at each of the adjacent posters. A good rule of thumb is to plan to attend 5-10 posters in a given morning or afternoon poster session. If you still have time and energy — see a few more. For oral presentations, attend only those of interest. Note that walking in and out of the presentation room between talks is expected; simply try to seat yourself near an exit if you will be leaving prior to the end of the session.

When planning your schedule, try to work together with colleagues at your home institution who have similar interests. As a group you may identify posters and sessions that you wish to attend and then divide them among yourselves, planning to regroup after the meeting to debrief each other on what you learned at the various sessions. This is a good idea just for the sake of efficiency of time and energy. In addition, there may be concurrent events of interest, and it may be useful to agree upon who will attend what event and then meet later to share notes. Moreover, discussing the abstracts prior to the meeting will help you to sharpen your thoughts and prepare questions to take with you.

Prepare to network: Your *network* consists of the individuals that you know: colleagues, personal friends, family members, and casual acquaintances. The value of a large network can not be overstated. For example, some statistics indicate that more than 75% of professional jobs are obtained through network connections, rather than through ads or employment services. One of the great benefits of attending a national meeting is the opportunity for networking that it affords

Indeed, connections of the types that begin on the shuttle bus to the hotel or while waiting in line for breakfast can turn out to be extremely valuable. Often it is through such opportunities that you can meet well-known individuals who would be inaccessible in the conference center itself.

You can facilitate your networking even in advance of your arrival. The program and abstracts will provide you with a good idea of who will be attending the meeting. If there is someone relevant to your work that you would like to talk to, contact them prior to the meeting, explain your interest, and ask whether it would be possible to get together. Senior scientists are often willing to set aside time to talk to students at meetings. However, it is best to plan this in advance, for frequently by the time a senior individual gets to a meeting their schedule is filled. Also, use your current network — your advisor and your mentors — to facilitate increasing your network. Ask those individuals for assistance in introducing you to people at the meeting. Such introductions may involve little time for the mentor yet be extremely beneficial and energy saving for you.

Assemble a conference binder: It is useful to assemble a thin, three-ring binder containing your materials for attending the conference. Divide the binder into sections, one per day of conference attendance. Within each section, include your schedule for the day and photocopies (enlarged if you wish) of the abstracts for the posters or talks you plan to attend, and your lists of questions relevant to those presentations.

Practice your formal presentations: If you are giving a formal presentation, preparation is essential. Be sure to start planning early. Information on preparing and presenting posters and 10-minute talks is listed below in Sections IV and V.

Develop and practice your informal presentations: Whether or not you have signed-up to present a poster or give a 10-minute talk, you will be making presentations at the meeting. These may be informal, but that may be very important none-the-less. The person standing in line next to you who asks “what do you do?” may be the director of a large research program looking for staff scientists or the head of a private foundation hoping to give out some seed money grants. Don’t wait until such questions are asked — develop and practice in advance of the meeting well-thought out answers; well-thought out and *brief* — 2 minutes is a good first answer. If your questioner wants to know more, he or she will ask. Also, anticipate what other questions you may be asked about your research or career plans, and prepare and practice short answers to those as well. Enlist a colleague and engage in some role playing exercises before the meeting — not only will you polish your presentations, but also you’ll be more relaxed when someone does ask about what you do.

Indicate special needs: Let the appropriate persons know if you have a special need that will affect your participation in the meeting. For example, notify your airline if you need a special meal

**Table 1:
Some Questions to Anticipate**

1. What do you do?
2. What’s your research project?
3. How did you get interested in _____? (neuroscience, your specific area of research)
4. Why did you choose that _____? (topic, technique, graduate program, etc.)
5. What do you plan to do after you get your degree? (short-term, long-term)

or a wheel chair; notify your hotel if you want a non-smoking room or a room for individuals with limited mobility; notify the *Society for Neuroscience* if you will need assistance during the meeting itself.

III. PARTICIPATING IN THE MEETING

In general: Bring your notebook, the conference binder you assembled (see above), and the program for the meeting. Leave your books of abstracts in your hotel room — or even better, at home. You may find that a small briefcase or tote bag is useful, as exhibitors usually distribute a lot of brochures, handouts, and samples.

What to wear: The goal is to be inconspicuous — not too flashy or tattered. Remember that you are always being interviewed — people are always forming impressions of you. Therefore, if you want to be treated like a professional, dress like one. Although dresses or ties and jackets may not be necessary, we recommend that you leave your T-shirts and jeans at home. However, you will be on your feet a lot, so be sure to wear comfortable shoes. Should you need it, a coat (or bag) check service is available at the convention center for a small fee.

Taking breaks and meals: Use breaks and meals wisely, as an opportunity to meet and network with people that you don't normally get to see. An occasional outing with your friends from your home institution is fine, but focus most of your efforts on expanding your network. When you attend group dinners, be careful of where you sit, as it will define whom you talk to. Again, try to sit with new people rather than your lab-mates. The Student Hospitality Room (see below) is a good place to learn about inexpensive local restaurants, and even find people to dine with. There are some food vendors in the convention center, however, these can be expensive (and of low quality). You can save money on things like snacks and bottled water by purchasing these items in a drugstore near your hotel.

Staying in touch with your family: Not only will it make them feel better, but also you will likely benefit from the positive support they can provide. Be sure to leave a number where they can reach you in case of an emergency.

Contacting people at the meeting: There is an electronic message center at the convention center where you can leave messages for individuals. Also, remember to check occasionally to see if you have any messages. There is a directory at the meeting through which you can usually determine the hotel at which an individual is staying, so that you may call and leave a message at their hotel. Another way to contact someone is to approach them at their poster or after a presentation. It is often advantageous to try to contact people and set up appointments before arriving at the conference site. However, this usually can be done at the meeting, too.

Bringing guests to the meeting: Should you bring a family member (spouse, partner, child) to the meeting? Certainly the decision is a personal one. However, guests usually are a distraction from the meeting and limit your ability to spend time networking. Bringing a guest is sometimes necessary for personal reasons. In those cases, simply do the best job of attending the meeting that you can given your constraints. Check with the concierge at your hotel or the visitors' bureau for recommendations on childcare services.

Visiting the Student Hospitality Room: The *Society for Neuroscience* and the *Association of Neuroscience Departments and Programs* co-sponsor a student hospitality room. This room provides a place for students to meet, relax, enjoy light refreshments, and get information on the local area, including tips on inexpensive places to eat.

Taking notes: There are several reasons to take notes when you attend a presentation: (1) it helps provide a focus for your listening; (2) notes provide a record for later reference; and (3) data indicate that the act of writing helps to promote retention — even if you never re-read the notes! Items to incorporate in your notes include information from speakers, audience member's comments/questions (include their name if you know it), questions you think of (even if you don't ask them), and any additional ideas that may come to you during the presentation.

Where should you write your notes? Loose sheets of paper, tablets, and a bound notebook are frequently used. We recommend having a bound notebook and using it like you would a diary — with entries arranged by date. Bound notebooks tend to be sturdier, have less of a tendency to get lost, and do not require establishing and maintaining a filing system. We find that when searching through archived notebooks for information that we heard in a presentation months or even years ago, we can usually estimate the date of the presentation fairly well and thus have a relatively easy time locating the information. Finally, should you desire it, you could make a table of contents for each of your notebooks to facilitate information retrieval.

Asking questions: We encourage you to ask questions at the sessions you attend. Not only will this facilitate your learning, but it also enables you to teach others about the topic and about *yourself* (i.e., that you are a bright, thoughtful, articulate researcher). Asking good questions is a skill that is valued by scientists. Frequently, people — especially juniors — are shy about asking questions at presentations. Individuals may think that it is better to say nothing than to appear stupid. However, remember that people are always forming impressions of each other, and the impression they form of someone who never asks a question is probably not very positive.

Fortunately, formulating and asking questions is a skill that can be developed through practice. To become a more-active meeting participant, we suggest working through the following steps: At each presentation you attend, try to come up with at least three good questions, and write these questions in your notebook — whether or not you intend to ask them. The next step is to begin asking some of those questions. Initially you may wish to approach the speaker or a colleague with your questions after the session. However, eventually work up to asking your question in public.

Generally, questions at a seminar should be held until the question and answer period. Interrupt the speaker only for clarification of an issue critical to understanding the rest of the presentation. When you ask a question or make a comment, be brief and to the point. This is not an opportunity to give a speech. We encourage you to write out your question ahead of time. In seminar rooms at national meetings there are usually microphones in the aisles. During the question and answer period, individuals will form lines behind the microphones and wait to ask a question. Thus, if you are attending a session in which you are likely to want to ask a question, try to sit near the microphones. Do not feel shy about bringing the written text of your question to the microphone with you — people frequently do this. You may not need to refer to the text, but you have it should you need it.

Attending poster presentations: Each poster has a designated number and letter, which is printed in the program for the meeting. The letter indicates what row the poster is in; within each row, posters are further arranged by number. Presenters are asked to be with their poster for a one-hour interval designated in the program. However, individuals usually stay with their poster most of the time it is on display. Poster presenters are provided with a tag to wear that facilitates easy identification, and it is appropriate to seek them out, ask questions, and even request that they “walk you through their poster.”

Attending voluntary oral presentations: These presentations consist of a 10-minute talk followed by a 5-minute question and answer period. The time schedule for the presentations is listed in the program for the meeting, and session moderators are very strict in ensuring that speakers adhere to that schedule. If you do not get a chance to ask a speaker your question during the question and answer period, you may be able to follow-up with her or him in the hallway afterward.

Special Concerns for Women

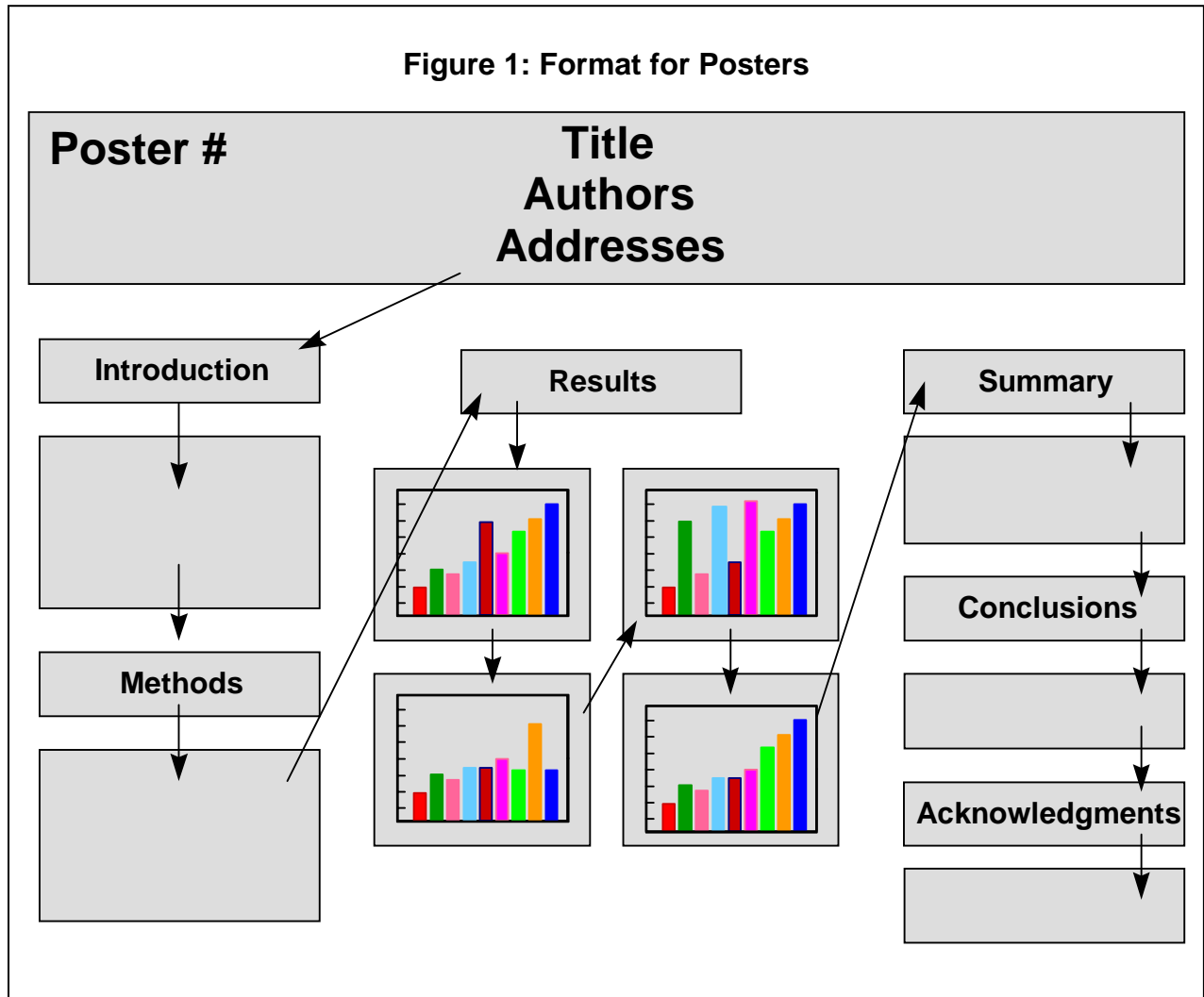
The women we have spoken with occasionally mention two issues of special concern: being taken seriously and the possibility of harassment. We have not heard a large number of complaints with regard to these issues, nevertheless, a few words of advice are in order. Preparation for dealing with such an occurrence is certainly the best defense.

Being taken seriously: Encourage others to take you seriously by taking yourself seriously. And, don't hesitate to be assertive. If you have not had much experience in being assertive, do some role playing with friends in which you practice this skill. (Indeed, this skill will serve you well in many situations!)

Your mentor can help in a couple of ways as well. Ask your mentor to introduce you to people that you think you might have trouble meeting on your own. Your advisor can also help by not taking away the limelight — for example, at your poster presentation you will want to take primary responsibility for walking people through your poster and answering questions. If you have noticed a tendency for your advisor to take a more active role than you would like in your presentations, then you may want to discuss your wishes with her or him prior to your poster session.

Avoiding with potential harassment: There are several steps that you can take to minimize any potential harassment at meetings: Stay in public, involve another person in a meeting if you feel uncomfortable about meeting one-on-one, pay your own way, and make your own arrangements to/from a restaurant. Also, you may find that meeting for coffee, breakfast, or lunch as opposed to dinner is a bit easier, as the former are usually of shorter duration with a pre-defined ending. And probably the most important advice is to *trust your instincts* — if it doesn't feel right, it probably isn't.

IV. POSTER PRESENTATIONS



Constructing Your Poster

The three most common mistakes made in constructing a poster are (1) including too much text, (2) using a font size that is too small, and (3) not planning for the space. Remember the conditions under which individuals will likely be viewing your poster — a crowded, noisy room, reading at a distance of about 3 feet from the poster, when they are tired and rushed. Thus, make it simple, attractive, and large!

Organization: Posters should be organized for a vertical flow of information (figure 1) so that individuals can view the entire poster in one left-to-right pass.

Figure 2: Example of telegraphic style

On visual aids

- phrases are easier to read
- use bulleted, telegraphic text
- avoid sentences

Text: Since you can be with your poster for the entire time that it is posted, your poster needs only to be a prop for your presentation. Therefore, the amount of text should be kept to a bare minimum. To ensure readability, we recommend that you use bulleted points and a telegraphic style of presenting the material (figure 2).

Poster size: At the *Society for Neuroscience Meeting*, the display boards onto which you will mount your poster are **5’8” wide and 3’8” tall**. Plan your poster so that it will make best use of this space without exceeding it.

Font size: Suggested font sizes are included in table 2. However, a simple test for determining if the font size is large enough is to place your formatted text onto the floor. If you can read all aspects of the text when you are standing above it, then the font size is adequate.

Font style: There are two styles of fonts, *serif* and *sans serif*:

This paragraph is set in New Century Schoolbook, which is a *serif* typeface. The word serif refers to the "little feet" that are present at the tops and bottoms of the characters. Serifs help to make characters more unique and thus make it easier to read blocks of text. Other examples of serif typefaces include Times Roman and Palatino.

This paragraph is set in Arial, which is a *sans* (without) *serif* typeface. Sans serif typestyles are good for titles and telegraphic text. Thus, for transparencies — in which text should be minimized via the use of telegraphic statements — we recommend using sans serif type. Other examples of sans serif typefaces include Helvetica and Avant Garde.

Table 2: Suggested Font Styles and Sizes			
Section	Font style	Font size (points)	Additional comments
Title	sans serif	120	must match title of abstract
section labels (e.g. “Introduction”)	sans serif	48	helps orient reader
Introduction	serif	24	keep very brief
Methods	serif	20-24	keep simple; limit to essentials; use references, if appropriate
Results	serif	24	state results obtained (e.g. “heat melted ice”)
Summary	serif	24	use brief numbered statements; can refer to specific data panels
Conclusions	serif	24	limit to 1-2 short statements; a diagram may be useful
Acknowledgments	serif	20-24	include technical assistance, donated materials, funding source

Figures: Usually 4-6 figures are included in a poster. Make them simple, readily comprehensible, and self-contained. Color is often useful for distinguishing among conditions and aesthetic reasons. Figure legends are optional; should you decide to use them, keep them very short (10-25 words maximum).

Mounting: Many people find that it is useful to mount their formatted text onto colored poster board. This adds stability to the pieces and the use of color makes it more attractive. Spray adhesive (available in art supply and craft stores) seems to work well for mounting the text. Remember that you will need to transport the poster to the conference, so don't try to mount all of the text onto one big piece of poster board — use several smaller pieces. For an experienced poster-maker, it takes about a day to mount the poster, not including the time it takes to write and format the text.

	10-min talk	Poster presentation
Introduction	2 min	0.5 min
Internal sections expt. 1: method data conclusion (repeat if necessary)	7	2
Closing	1	0.5 min
Questions	5	(as requested)

Planning Your Presentation

Plan and practice a three-minute presentation of your poster (table 3). Visitors to your poster may ask for additional details, so be prepared to provide more information if they request it. You will be able to anticipate many of the questions that individuals will have and you should prepare and practice a response to those questions, as well.

Presenting Your Poster

Materials to bring to a poster session: In addition to your poster, we suggest bringing a kit consisting of the following items:

- thumbtacks (usually provided, but sometimes they run out)
- repair materials: tape, a black marker, correction fluid (in case the poster is damaged in transport or you notice an error while your poster is on display)
- pen and a notebook on in which to write names, addresses, ideas
- extra figures, data you may wish to present but doesn't fit on poster

- possible items to distribute: reprints, copies of methods, business cards
- a bottle of water and/or throat lozenges (hopefully you will be talking a lot!)

Transporting your poster and related materials: Under no circumstances should you allow yourself to become separated from your poster and other essential materials while in transit to the conference. Do not check your poster in your luggage or ask someone to transport your materials for you.

Presenting your poster: If individuals stop and look at your poster, take the initiative. Ask “Would you like me to walk you through my poster?” Frequently the answer will be yes, and at that point, provide your three-minute presentation. Provide more information only if they ask for it.

To facilitate interactions, plan to be with your poster as much as possible. Should you wish to view other posters in the same session as yours, ask a lab-mate to staff the poster while you are gone or post a sign indicating when you will return.

Visitors to your poster may ask a question or make a comment that sparks an idea that you will want to follow-up when you get back to the lab. Be sure to write it down immediately. By the end of the poster session you will likely be quite tired and probably won't be able to remember a lot of what was said.

V. 10 - MINUTE TALKS

This type of presentation lasts 15 minutes: 10 minutes for your talk plus 5 minutes for questions and answers. Although this seems like a short amount of time, do not underestimate the amount of material that you can present or the time needed to design an effective presentation.

Preparing Your Presentation

Writing your talk: Determine what 2-3 points you want audience members to remember after attending your presentation, and construct your talk around those points. Remember that even the most attentive listeners will blank-out at times and thus you will want to repeat your key points several times. Moreover, listening to an oral presentation is not like reading a paper — you can not flip back a few pages to find something you missed, so plan to also repeat any crucial information about the methods used, etc., as you move from section to section of your presentation. Follow the guidelines listed in table 3 as to the distribution of time among the sections.

With your key points in mind, outline your talk. Then, unless you are very experienced, write out your talk, *word for word*. This is essential as the hardest parts of a presentation are (1) making the transitions between thoughts, which are generally not specified in an outline, and (2) staying within the time. After you have written out your talk, revise your outline to match your text. Then, when you make your presentation, plan to speak from the *outline* and not the text. Speaking from an

outline is strongly recommended because if while making your presentation you blank out you will have a very hard time finding your place within a full text, whereas with an outline it is much easier to skim to the right section and continue your presentation. Moreover, if you have the text in front of you, you will have a tendency to read from it — which makes for a very boring presentation from the audience's perspective. (There's a good reason why your parents *read* to you at bedtime!)

The one exception to the above rule is that you may want to bring the text of your first paragraph and your last paragraph to the podium with you, and speak from them. The reason for this is as follows: When you start your presentation you are likely to be nervous. You may not remember how to get started and this way you will be able to read your introduction if absolutely necessary. Since you will have practiced a lot prior to your presentation, once you get past the first few sentences you will be more confident and remember the ideas that follow. At this point, speak from your outline. Having your last paragraph with you is a good idea because if you are running off schedule and/or get nervous you can flip through your notes to the summary and wrap things up, making sure that you say all of the things that you planned.

Print out your outline and your first and last paragraphs in large type (16-18 points) so that it will be easier to read when you are speaking from the podium. Also, when you practice your presentation, be sure to say it *aloud*, and make notes of how long it takes to get from one section to the next. Note the time elapsed in the margin of your outline, and as you deliver the talk check periodically to see that you are sticking to the schedule and make adjustments if necessary.

Designing PowerPoint Presentations

Design your PowerPoint slides such that they are visible from the back of the room and readily comprehensible. Make them as simple as possible — both with regard to the amount of information presented and the level of fanciness. A reasonable number of slides to aim for is approximately 1 slide per minute.

Designing data slides: In general, graphs are highly preferred over tables, as they are more quickly comprehended. Do not include anything that is not essential. Thus, avoid using three dimensions unless the third dimension adds information about a third, important variable. Include only one figure or image per slide, and if you need to show a slide twice in the same presentation, bring a duplicate.

Designing text slides: Text slides can make a valuable contribution to your oral presentation. Not only do they reinforce the main ideas of your presentation, they can be particularly helpful for audience members who are not native speakers of English or those who are hearing impaired. Moreover, they provide a prompt for the presenter. A telegraphic style (see above) is recommended. For text slides a good rule of thumb is to limit text to *no more* than 42 characters per line (count letters, numbers, and spaces) and 14 lines per slide. PowerPoint's default settings for point size are adequate.

Using color: For slides, white text and graphics on a blue background is often easier on the viewers' eyes. If you are using software to design your own slides, note that colors often appear differently when projected than they do on your computer screen. Thus, make your slides so that you will have time to check their projection in a darkened room and make revisions if needed.

Making Your Presentation

Transporting the materials for your talk: Under no circumstances should you allow yourself to become separated from your slides, outline, and any other essential materials while in transit to the conference. Do not check these in your luggage or ask someone to transport your materials for you.

Checking the room: It is a good idea to check out in advance the room and the equipment you will use for your presentation. Make sure that you know how the controls work (lights, remote for slide projector). Also ascertain that there is a light at the podium that will enable you to see your outline if you dim the lights when showing slides. If there is not a light, see if you can arrange for one.

Presenting your talk: It is essential that you stick to the time: present for 10 minutes and take questions for 5 minutes. These sessions are scheduled very tightly and the session leaders are very strict about limiting you to the allotted time. And, presenting for more than 10 minutes will give the impression that you are trying to avoid answering questions. However, take care not to talk too fast, which is a common problem among presenters.

As you make your presentation, look at the audience; make eye contact with individuals in all parts of the room. Modulate your voice to emphasize key points; gesture when appropriate. Try not to over-use or fidget with the pointer. Explain each slide. For data slides, this means specifying the conditions tested in the experiment, defining x-axis (and units), the y-axis (and units), and summarizing the data presented in the slide.

Answering questions: Be sure to save time for the question and answer period. Repeat the question that you are asked, and then address your answer to the entire audience (not just the questioner). If you followed our advice for preparation, you will have anticipated and practiced answering most of the questions you will be asked. You can bring notes to the podium if you wish; this may be especially useful if you are asked about methodological details. Finally, if you don't know the answer, say so: *don't try to fake it.*

After your talk: A good strategy is to plan to be in the halls outside of the auditorium after your talk. That way people who have additional questions can have an opportunity to speak with you, and you will have the opportunity to network with people who heard you talk. If you get any great ideas from these interactions, be sure to write them down immediately.

Final Advice on Presentations

Don't be discouraged if only a few people come to your poster or oral presentation. Remember that one of those individuals may review your fellowship application, another may offer you a job, and a third may invite you to speak at an event they are organizing. Thus, even if there are only a handful of people at your presentation, do your best. You never know what a positive impact these individuals could have on your career!

VI. CONCLUDING POINTS

Post-meeting Follow-up

After you return home there are a few things that you will want to do to wrap things up. It's a good idea to meet with other people and discuss what you learned at the meeting — this will help to solidify things in your mind and also allows others to benefit from your experiences. Also, look through your notes and follow-up on the promises you made to send reprints, provide references, etc. And finally, remember to keep in occasional contact with the newest additions to your network.

Summary

Participation in professional meetings can make a significant contribution to your education and career development. Conferences provide a mechanism to gain new information, experiences, and greatly facilitate the development of your network. However, in order to reap such benefits, you must invest effort before and at the meeting. Plan well and use the experience to the best of your ability. And don't be discouraged if your experiences at your first couple of meetings are less than optimal. You'll likely find that with adequate preparation and practice you'll start looking forward to attending your third or fourth meeting. Best wishes!

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VII. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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