Proven pointers for getting the most out of your next scientific conference

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Whether you’re in your first year of graduate school or nearing the end of your graduate training, attending a scientific conference is an excellent career building opportunity. You’ll have the chance to introduce yourself and your work to other scientists, network with researchers who can provide needed ideas or reagents, and you may even meet your future employer. Almost all scientific meetings consist of three essential components: platform talks, poster sessions, and social events. Each venue has its unique advantages and challenges for facilitating interaction with scientists in your field. Let’s examine what you can do before, during, and after your next scientific conference to get the most out of the experience.

Before the Conference

- Often the list of attendees and the meeting schedule will be posted on the conference website a few days before the meeting. If it is, look through the information to find out who will be in attendance and what they’ll be talking about. Send an email to the students and professors with whom you’d like to meet to discuss their research, to request technical assistance, or to plant the seed for future employment. Anticipate who will come to your poster and what they’ll be interested in. If you haven’t met them before, look for a photo on the web so you’ll have a chance of recognizing them even if their nametag happens to be turned over when you meet them.

- If you’re presenting a poster, be sure to have it printed with plenty of time to spare keeping in mind that most copy centers require 3 to 5 days to print a poster. (See the “Additional Information” section below for links on how to prepare an effective poster.) Practice a 5 minute and 10 minute version of your poster presentation with your lab members, your dog, or better yet a non-science major. Practicing beforehand will ensure that you exude competence and confidence during the poster session. Once printed, don’t let your poster out of your sight! Even if the airline attendant wants to put your poster tube in the cargo hold because it looks like a bazooka, insist on keeping it with you. You could even prove your innocence by pulling out the poster and practicing your 5 minute spiel on them.

- Richard Reis of the Stanford Learning Laboratory recommends having a hallway (30 second), elevator (1 minute), and mealtime (5-10 minute) description of your research ready to share with any interested meeting attendee. He suggests that the ability to succinctly explain your research interests without notes or illustrations will help you to stand out among your peers. (See the “Additional Information” section to locate more tips from Dr. Reis.)

During the Conference

Platform talks

- Platform talks are a great way to hear about recent, unpublished results from leaders in your field. The talks and the audience’s questions following them will give you a sense of the currently contested issues and the pressing future questions. Be sure to take notes during the talks. If nothing else it will keep you from nodding off during that killer session after a big meal.
• Try to think of at least one question you could ask each presenter. Thinking of questions even if you never verbalize them will help you become a better scientist, and there’s no better way for a graduate student to get noticed than to ask a question following a platform talk.
• Take the opportunity to analyze each presenter’s speaking style and PowerPoint usage. You’ll receive lots of insight about what to implement and avoid in your own presentation style.

**Poster sessions**

• When you’re presenting your poster be enthusiastic and engaging but don’t hijack your listeners for more than 5 minutes unless they are asking the questions. Don’t feel bad if 75% of the people who look at your poster just read the title and walk away – that’s normal. When you meet someone who’s interested in your work or asks you for advice be sure to write down their contact information so you can follow up with them after the meeting.
• You can maximize your efficiency when it’s your turn to poster surf by scanning through the abstracts beforehand. Highlight names or keywords in the abstracts so you can be sure to visit the posters that are most interesting to you. Keep in mind that the most interesting posters may not necessarily be the ones that are the most relevant to your own project. Poster sessions are the ideal opportunity to meet new people who share your research interests.

**Social events**

• Every scientific meeting will have unstructured social activities where you can get to know your colleagues better and talk about science (or not) in a more relaxed way. Depending on your personality this can be the most enjoyable or the most terrifying part of the conference. No matter how uncomfortable you may feel, don’t just hang around with your labmates. Take advantage of these opportunities to introduce yourself and build your network. If you’re at the meeting with your mentor ask him or her to introduce you to the important people in your field.
• Finally, one last bit of advice about staying sane during multi-day meetings that have something scheduled 18 hours per day every day of the conference. Make opportunities to take a walk, head into town, go to the fitness room or whatever relaxes you so that your brain doesn’t give out half way through the conference. By the same token, never underestimate the importance of a good night’s sleep.

**After the Conference**

• Get some rest – you’re probably exhausted and your brain likely feels like Jell-o.
• Take time to review your notes to look for ideas on how to move your project forward (or start a tangential project). Then discuss with your mentor how to incorporate those ideas into your project.
• Send an email to the people you met to thank them for their advice and friendship.
• If you agreed to help another researcher, be sure to follow up in a timely manner.

In conclusion, scientific conferences offer a unique opportunity for personal contact between researchers that would probably never occur otherwise. As Gregory Petsko, a principle investigator at Brandeis University, states; “We have to go to meetings – they’re the only practical way to get a sense of how other
scientists think about their work. They’re also the only way we can ensure that our work, apart from maybe the most newsworthy bits of it, gets noticed.” With a solid understanding of what to expect and how to prepare, you can make your next meeting a maximally beneficial and enjoyable experience.

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Additional Information:

Articles about attending conferences:

- [http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_development/previous_issues/articles/0210/how_to_work_a_scientific_conference/](http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_development/previous_issues/articles/0210/how_to_work_a_scientific_conference/) This editorial found on Science Magazine’s website titled “How to work a scientific conference” has a lot of practical advice.
- [http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/2000/02/2000020403c.htm](http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/2000/02/2000020403c.htm) This is an article by Richard Reis in the Chronicle of Higher Education titled “How to get the most out of scientific conferences”.
- [http://www.grc.org/students.aspx](http://www.grc.org/students.aspx) This link gives general advice and guidelines for students and postdocs attending Gordon Research Conferences.
- Aiken, J. What’s the value of conferences? 2006. The Scientist 20(5):54. This article describes an effort by Keystone Symposia planners to quantify the benefits of attending scientific conferences in terms of research dollars and time saved as a direct result of researchers interacting with one another. You might be surprised by their findings.
- Petsko, G. The highs and lows of scientific conferences. 2006. Nat Rev Mol Cell Biol. Mar;7(3):231-4. This article from Nature Reviews humorously describes the author’s opinions about different conference styles and how to cope with each one.

Resources for preparing and presenting a poster at a scientific meeting:

- [http://www.hsl.unc.edu/services/tutorials/poster_design/home.htm](http://www.hsl.unc.edu/services/tutorials/poster_design/home.htm) This is a poster-making tutorial from the UNC Health Sciences Library. They can also print your poster if you design it in the HSL.
- [http://www.ncsu.edu/project/posters](http://www.ncsu.edu/project/posters) This NC State website has excellent advice on creating a poster and quickly evaluating your poster for common pitfalls.
- [http://www.swarthmore.edu/NatSci/cpurrin1/posteradvice.htm](http://www.swarthmore.edu/NatSci/cpurrin1/posteradvice.htm) An excellent (and humorous) resource from Swarthmore College about creating and presenting effective scientific posters.
- [http://www.training.nih.gov/careers/careercenter/publish.html](http://www.training.nih.gov/careers/careercenter/publish.html) Scroll down to the bottom of this page from the NIH Career Center for lots of great information about presenting a talk or poster at a conference.