

ATTENDING PROFESSIONAL MEETINGS SUCCESSFULLY

Beth A. Fischer & Michael J. Zigmond
University of Pittsburgh

revised: September, 1999

© Fischer and Zigmond

This document is copyrighted but can be reprinted without permission so long as proper attribution is provided and the document is not used for for-profit, commercial purposes.

University of Pittsburgh
Survival Skills and Ethics Program
4K57 Posvar Hall
Pittsburgh, PA 15260

phone: 412/624-7098
fax: 412/648-7081
email: survival@pitt.edu
www: <http://www.pitt.edu/~survival>

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
I. Overview	2
Why attend a professional meeting?	2
Some events at professional meetings	3
Associated events	5
II. Preparing for the meeting	5
III. Participating in the meeting	8
Special concerns for women	10
IV. Poster presentations	11
Constructing your poster	12
Planning your presentation	13
Presenting your poster	14
V. 10-minute talks	15
Preparing your presentation	15
Designing visual aids	16
Making your presentation	16
Final advice on presentations	17
VI. Concluding points	18
Post-meeting follow-up	18
Summary	18
VII. Acknowledgments	19
VIII. Bibliography	19

ATTENDING PROFESSIONAL MEETINGS

I. OVERVIEW

Professional meetings are gatherings of individuals with related professional interests, often from across the country and even around the world. Such events range from highly focused meetings of a few dozen participants to much broader meetings of several hundred or even several thousand individuals. Indeed, the very largest of these meetings can involve as many as 60,000 people. Such events provide a formidable challenge to even the most experienced professional if the attendee is to profit from the experience and not succumb to “meeting trauma syndrome.” In this brief manual we provide some advice on how to prepare for and attend professional meetings, with particular attention to conferences at the larger end of the continuum. We occasionally mention our own experiences with such meetings, and in a few instances (e.g., above) have paraphrased comments made to us over the years by other meeting attendees.

Why Attend a Professional 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, meetings provide a mechanism to gain the most current information about the field.
- broaden your knowledge of the field
Professional meetings provide a way to learn about different areas of research, often via general lectures by prominent members of a field.
- get experience making presentations
At most professional meetings there are opportunities to 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
Professional 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 often can meet with staff members from public and private funding agencies and get the latest information on grants available for training, research, and other professional activities.

- 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. These activities are usually listed in the preliminary and final programs for the meeting, and may also be available through the organization's website.

Lectures: Internationally renowned individuals may be invited to provide lectures. For example, over the years we have heard such individuals as Francis Crick, winner of the Nobel Prize for his work on DNA, Stephen Jay Gould, the highly regarded biologist and essayist, Michael Crichton author of several popular science fiction novels, and Bill Gates, the founding president of Microsoft. Thousands of people may attend these events, so be sure to get there early!

Symposia: Symposia consist of several speakers talking on a specific topic. Such symposia are usually carefully selected to focus on issues of broad interest within the field and include as speakers both established investigators and rising stars.

Voluntary presentations: Often, participants will be have the option of signing-up to make a "voluntary" presentation at the annual meeting. These presentations usually require that a brief abstract be submitted by a deadline set several months prior to the meeting. In some cases, everyone who submits such an abstract is invited to make a presentation; in other cases, the abstracts are reviewed and only some are selected for presentations. Note that the deadlines for the receipt of these abstracts may be very inflexible.

Many meetings now offer two formats for voluntary presentations: a brief 10 to 15 minute oral presentation or a poster presentation. (These are discussed in detail below.) Many people prefer one of these formats over the other. Lokinto what the culture is at the meeting you are attending. At some meetings, poster presentations are the norm (and there may be very few) short oral presentations. Other meetings may be just the opposite mostly takes and few posters.

Oral presentations are somewhat easier to prepare for, the visual aids (usually slides) are easy to transport, the presentation is over very quickly. On the other hand, you will actually meet far less people and have time to answer only a few questions. Attendance is hard to predict and depends on the meeting, the particular topic, and what other sessions are scheduled at the same time.. In some cases there will be several hundred people in the audience, including many of the leaders in the field; in other cases only a handful of individuals may be present.

Poster presentations may require more preparation time, the poster itself can be somewhat cumbersome to transport, and the presentation can take several hours. Yet, we prefer this format – you will have a chance to meet a large number of

people and often be able to engage in extensive discussions. For a junior investigator, it is hard to imagine a better way to get exposure and feedback and to practice networking skills.

Special interest socials event, roundtables, and dinners: Many large professional meetings now hold special events designed to provide an opportunity for interactions on a somewhat smaller scale. They are listed in the program for the meeting and often are open to all meeting attendees, on a first-come first-served basis. They provide 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. We have both attended and sponsored such events and profited from them a great deal.

Exhibits: A major component of many professional meetings is the exhibits which can be made up of dozens or even hundreds of booths. If your meeting has an exhibit area, you might want to bring a bag with you as literature, product samples, and small gifts are likely to be available. Among those represented may 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 your research, talk to sales and service representatives, even arrange for discounts of equipment and supplies.

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. In addition, if you will be teaching a course soon, this is a place you can arrange to get a complimentary desk copy of a textbook you are considering for adoption.

Placement service: Many large conferences have placement services. In some cases these are very elaborate with materials being submitted to the service in advance of the meeting and staff members setting up interviews at the request of either employer or applicant. If plan to look for a new position in the next year or so and the meeting you will attend has such a service, it is worth investigating what sort of positions have been posted in the past. In some cases, the focus is on postdoctoral positions, in other cases many academic and industry jobs may be available. In either case, this may be a good opportunity to get a lot of experience interviewing in a short period of time.

Bulletin boards: Most meetings will have a number of places where information can be posted. These notices can include job openings, announcements of future meetings, and requests for rides home. It is worth keeping your eyes open for useful information.

Some Associated Events

Often, additional activities are scheduled before, during, or after professional meetings in order to take advantage of the fact that participants have already invested in the cost of traveling to a central location.

Educational Workshops: Training sessions may be scheduled that provide an opportunity to learn new techniques or to review an important field of investigation from prominent researchers. We have attended several such workshops over the years and also have given them ourselves on such topics as obtaining employment and communication skills.

Satellite meetings: Smaller, more focused conferences often are held either immediately prior to or following a large professional meeting and in the same general location. These may be free or require a fee; check the program for 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. The larger the meeting, the more critical and time-consuming is the recommended preparation. 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 usually provides you with the books of abstracts and program for the meeting in advance of the event, and it may save you from spending a great deal of time in a long registration line.

Make travel arrangements: If the meeting is large, flights and hotel rooms will fill quickly. We know of meetings in which the best airline arrangement and accommodations are completed booked months in advance. Thus, be sure to make your arrangements early. Not to do so may increase your costs by hundreds of dollars and require that you travel at inconvenient times and/or spend valuable time traveling between a distant hotel and the meeting site. The meeting organizers may have arranged for lower-cost travel and housing. Find out about these opportunities and consider taking advantage of them as soon as they become available.

A note of caution: *Cost* must take second place to *safety*. Check the location of any hotel you are considering and make sure you can get to and from that site without undue risk. Another consideration is *distance*: Student housing may be available at reduced rates, but those hotels may be some distance from the conference site. Although free shuttle bus service is usually available to designated conference hotels, the travel time may be long and the distance may also preclude your using your room to take short breaks during the day. 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. 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.

Review the program, read the abstracts: At least two to three weeks before the meeting, go over the program,. Select those aspects of the program that are most interesting or important to you. Review the book of abstracts if one is provided. Note that many meetings now provide abstracts on-line and in a format that permits searching by keywords. Consider getting some colleagues together to divide up this task (there may be 10,000 abstracts!) and to share in the discussion. This will help you to identify key presentations, sharpen your thoughts, and prepare questions to ask the authors.

Discussions with people who will actually be going to the meeting with you is particularly useful. As a group you may identify posters and sessions that all you wish to attend and then divide them among yourselves, planning to regroup after the meeting to debrief each other about what you learned at the various sessions. This is a good idea 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 which event and then meet later to share notes.

Plan your schedule: The two 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. 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 yourself 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 may be spread over a very large area, the crowd can be 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 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.

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 otherwise be inaccessible. One of us (MJZ) obtained his first faculty position as a result of a chance meeting at a large national meeting, the other (BAF) has obtained consulting positions and grants through a network that began at such meetings. Indeed our national trainer-of-trainers program on survival skills has its origins in an informal conversation at a national meeting.

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. Email is a fine vehicle

for such contacts. 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.

**Table 1:
Some Questions to Anticipate**

1. What do you do?
2. What's your research project?
3. How did you get interested in _____? (your general field, your specific area)
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)

Develop and practice your informal presentations: Whether or not you have signed-up to present a poster or give a short talk, you will be making presentations at the meeting. These may be informal, but 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. But don't wait to develop a response to such questions until they are asked – prepare and practice in advance of the meeting well-thought out answers. They should be well-thought out and *brief*. Two 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 (Table 1), 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 or a wheel chair; notify your hotel if you want a non-smoking room or a room for individuals with limited mobility; notify the meeting organizers 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.

If you are relatively junior or simply do not know too many other people who will be attending this particular meeting, we strongly encourage you to also bring, or identify in advance, a *meeting mentor* – someone who can help you meet people, answer questions about content, and simply be a friend when the need arises. Being entirely alone in a crowd of thousands is a near sure way to contract meeting trauma!

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 for all but the most informal meetings. However, you will be on your feet a lot, so be sure to wear comfortable shoes. Also, check the weather at the conference site before you pack. And note that should you need it, a coat (or bag) check service is available at most convention centers for a small fee.

While we are on the subject of packing, a note about traveling with luggage: Our strong advice about checking luggage on a plane is simple – ***don't***. It will cost you time (as much as 45 minutes) and can get lost. One of us once waited for 3 days for their luggage. Indeed, it did not come until well *after* he gave his talk in the clothes he had just slept in. Another of us had several items stolen while the luggage was in transit. It should be possible to pack so that everything you need can be carried on. If necessary, you can wash clothes in your hotel room or even send them out to be cleaned. However, if you find it necessary to check luggage, then be sure that any items essential for your presentation notes, slides, even clothing, are transported in a small bag you will carry onto the plane. Do not pack anything critical in your checked luggage.

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 who you talk to. Again, try to sit with new people rather than your lab-mates. If there is a "hospitality room" (see below) that will be 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. Nowadays, a cell phone can be a useful way to stay in touch. But if you use this method, make sure you keep the ringer off when in public.

Contacting people at the meeting: There often 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 there. 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 meeting organizers, the concierge at your hotel, or the visitors' bureau for recommendations on childcare services. Taking care of such arrangements in advance is best.

Search out a "hospitality room." Some meetings have "hospitality rooms." In some cases these are specifically set aside for students. (If you are a student and the organization sponsoring the meeting does **not** have such a room, you might want to recommend it.) Such a room may provide 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) 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 as 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 junior investigators – are shy about asking questions at presentations. Individuals may think that it is better to say nothing than to indicate a lack of understanding or knowledge. However, remember that people are always forming impressions of each other, and the impression they form of someone who never speaks in public is generally not very positive.

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 for the speakers, 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 posters: Each poster will probably have a number which is printed in the program for the meeting. Once you arrive at the designated location, the poster presenters may be provided with a tag to wear that facilitates easy identification. If not, they probably will be conspicuously eager to talk or even already engaged in conversation. It is entirely appropriate to seek them out, ask questions, and even request that they “walk you through their poster.”

Attending voluntary oral presentations: These presentations usually consist of a 10- to 20-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 them 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.

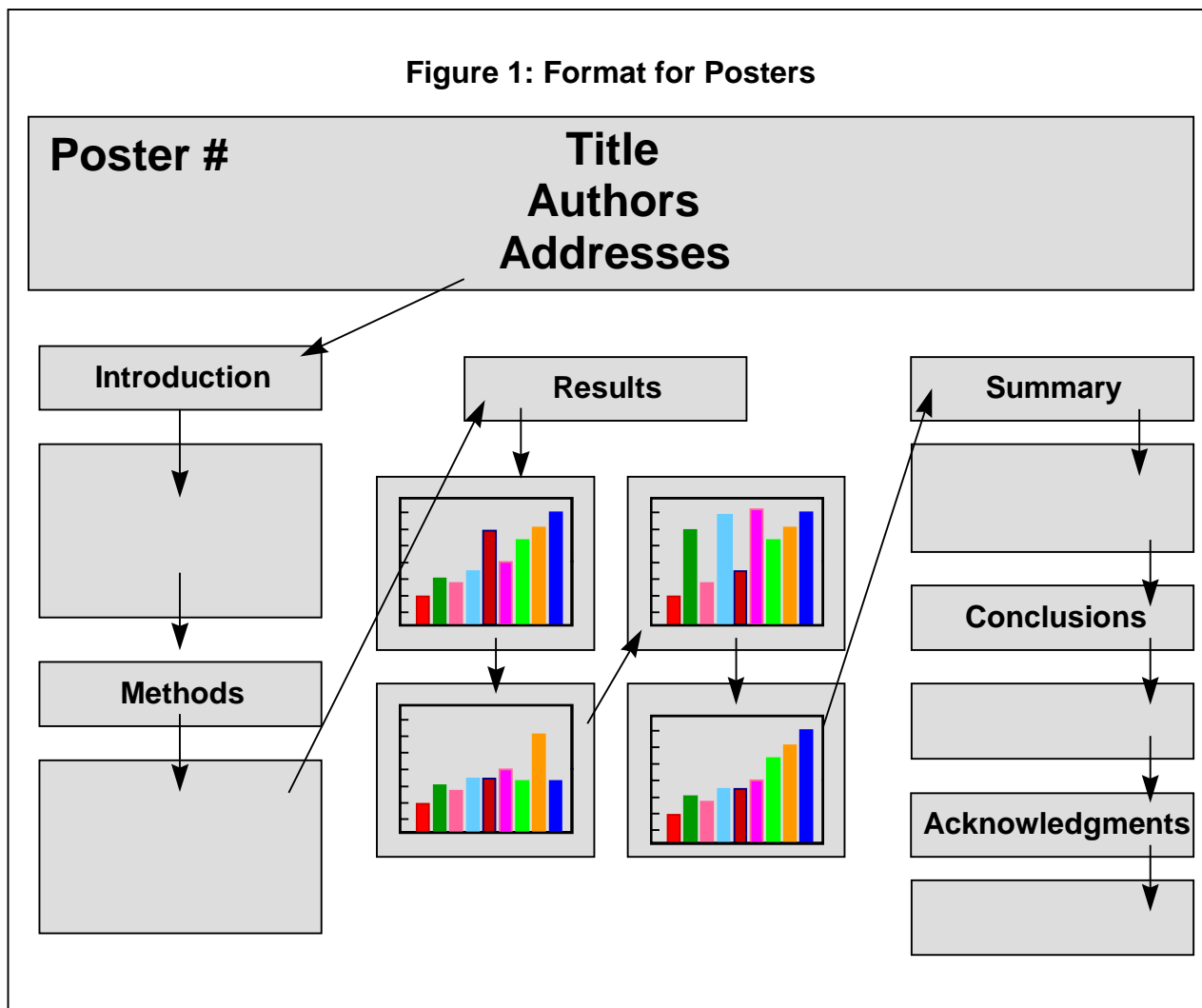
Being taken seriously: Encourage others to take you seriously by taking yourself seriously. And, don't hesitate to be assertive. If you have not had much experience in being assertive, do some role playing with friends in which you practice this skill. (Indeed, this skill will serve you well in many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



If you have never prepared a poster before, start the process early. We guarantee that it will take longer (several days!), be harder, but in the end be much more satisfying than you expect. So plan ahead. We know of people who did not plan ahead and were still completing their poster the night (or even in the morning) before their presentation. What a great idea – to spend hundreds of dollars to travel to an important conference and then show up for your presentation exhausted and with a poorly prepared poster! Please don't pick this approach!

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 available 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.

Text: Find out how long your poster will be up and whether you will be able to be with it the entire time. In some meetings, posters are up for only a few hours and you can plan to be there for the full time. In this case we strongly suggest you do just that. This will be an invaluable opportunity to meet new people and to get feedback. During this time, 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).

On the other hand, in some meetings, posters are up for a full day or even two. In that case, of course, you will not want to be with the poster all the time and it must be relatively self-contained. However, usually a specific period during the meeting are set aside during which people will expect to be able to meet you at your poster.

Figure 2: Example of telegraphic style

On visual aids:

- keep text to a minimum
- use bullets, telegraphic style
- avoid long sentences

Poster size: Check well in advance what size poster you will be permitted to display. It can vary anywhere from quite small (e.g., 3' x 3') to quite large (e.g., 4' x 6'). Plan your poster so that it will make best use of this space without exceeding it. This includes spilling over onto the side (there may be another poster there) or below the poster area (people will not be able to see 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.

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 in general don't try to mount all of the text onto one big piece of poster board – use several smaller pieces. The one exception to this would be to make the entire poster on a single large computer-generated page. This can be rolled into a tube and transported without too much trouble. It has the added advantage that you will be able to print out a miniature version and provide that to people who come to your presentation.

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

Planning Your Presentation

Yes, you will be making a presentation. Your poster is *not* your presentation, only your visual aid. 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!)

A word about *business cards*. They are still unusual, at least among junior investigators and at American conferences, and you should not be passing them out like a salesman might. But they can be very handy and quite easy to make – your institution can do so, as can many print shops; in fact you can make them yourself. They will not only be useful at your poster should someone indicate they would like to contact you later, but they can be used in many other venues, as well.

Transporting your poster and related materials: Under *no* circumstances should you allow yourself to become separated from your poster and other essential materials at any time. Do not check your poster in your luggage, do not ask someone to transport your materials for you, do not set your poster aside while you register.

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 presentation – the three-minute version. 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 much of what was said.

V. BRIEF ORAL PRESENTATIONS

This type of presentation lasts 10-20 minutes and is followed by a brief question period. Check to see exactly what the format will be at your meeting. (The most typical format that we have experienced is 10 minutes for your talk plus 5 minutes for questions and answers. Our comments that follow are based on that distribution of time.) Note that 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 your revised *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!)

Table 3: Distribution of Time for Presentations

	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)

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 Visual Aids

Design your visual aids 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. After you have assembled the slides for your talk, number them with a pencil, so as to facilitate loading them in the correct order.

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. Alternatively, use PowerPoint – its 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.

Loading your slides: Orient slides so that you can read the text and then place a dot in the bottom left corner (see diagram). Load slides into the slide carousel such that the dot is in the top right corner and faces the next slide in the carousel. Take care to load your slides properly; there are eight possible ways to orient slides within the carousel and only one way will project properly.

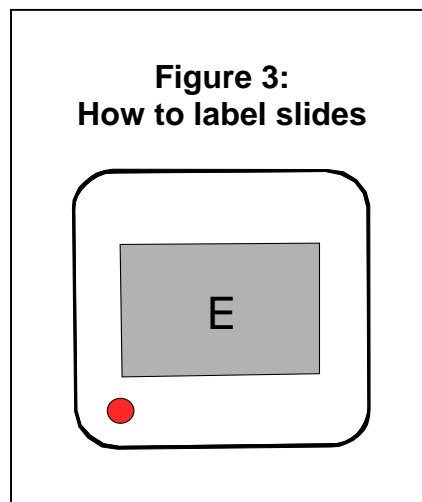
Checking the room: It is a good idea to check out in advance the room and the equipment you will use for your presentation. Make sure that you know how the controls work (lights, remote for slide projector). Also ascertain that there is a light at the podium that will enable you to see your outline if 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, during, and after 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!

*

Postscript

Our request for feedback from you

We would appreciate learning whether you found this short manual useful and to get your suggestions for ways in which it can be improved. If you send us your comments at survival+@pitt.edu, we will read and respond to your messages. We also will be glad to put you on a distribution list that will alert you to updates of this manual as well as other documents related to professional development, including those posted on our web site, www.pitt.edu/~survivial.

VII. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

These materials were developed with funding from the National Institute of Mental Health (MH56194), National Science Foundation (EVS-9620004), and the University of Pittsburgh.

VIII. BIBLIOGRAPHY

This manual is part of a larger work on professional skills now being prepared for *Academic Press* for publication in 2000. For additional sources, we recommend the following:

Briscoe MH. *Preparing Scientific Illustrations: A Guide to Better Posters, Presentations, and Publications*. New York: Springer, 1996.

Kosslyn SM. *Elements of Graph Design*. New York: Freeman and Co, 1994.

Stuart C. *How to Be an Effective Speaker*. Chicago, NTC Publishing Group, 1989.

Todoroff C. *Presenting Science with Impact: Presentation Skills for Scientists, Medical Researchers, & Health Care Professionals*. Toronto: Trifolium Books, 1997.

Turk C. *Effective Speaking: Communicating in Speech*. New York: E & FN SPON, 1992.