

How to make the most of academic conferences – five tips



Jeannie Holstein shares some advice on how best to prepare, perform and network at an academic conference.

1 Do the legwork

You need to decide whether it is the right conference for you, in terms of scope and timing. Each discipline will have a hierarchy, but more importantly it's helpful to make the decision based on the journals associated with the conference; the conference is part of your publication plan. The key is to fit your work to the theme; you must try hard at this bit.

Timing is about where you are in your research journey, knowing whether you're ready. For me, I tried a stepping stone approach, which was really successful. Others have put all their eggs in the 'one major international conference' basket, just prior to submission of their thesis. Horses for courses, its your publication plan, and research budget.

2 Don't put your entire thesis in one paper

In a conference paper, less is more. One finding is enough if you're addressing a theoretical gap. If you have implications for practice, then that's a definite bonus, and useful for some mixed academic/practitioner conferences that you often have in health.

3 Plan the conference like a military operation

It starts with your choice of accommodation – don't fall for the conference hotel, if all that is held there is the conference dinner. Treat it like you would as an independent traveller – find the best location to stay in, within walking distance or easy public transport to both the venue and the city centre. Book early, save money. Arrive one day before the conference. Its invaluable, you become the local expert for your late arriving conference buddies.

Identify the sessions you want to attend before arriving. I put a plan of each day on small index cards, stapled together with the notes for my paper. Register early and take the opportunity to find the room you're presenting in. Wear your badge; it helps people remember your name and gives you an excuse to look for their badge. Talk to people, obviously not the ones rushing around, but your fellow academic travellers. Sidle up to them and ask them a question – have you found the jazz festival/plenary venue/toilet? delete as appropriate. Breathe and enjoy.

4 Remember not everyone will be interested in your paper

Take any chance to discuss your work, in, as well as outside your session. Know what you want in feedback, and say so. Be ready to fire off a précis as you're

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collecting your lunch, or standing in a queue. You'd be surprised at the quality of feedback you can receive and how this helps you to develop your ideas. It is also a good way to identify your fellow academic travellers.



5 Network with people you don't already know

At conferences there is an overwhelming urge to fall upon colleagues from your home university. I would say resist the temptation. Plus the professors in your department also usually have their own fish to fry. My advice is to use the conference to make 'new friends'. They are your potential future joint authors and research collaborators. This brings me back to the dancing. Yes, go to the conference dinner; don't expect the food to be great or worth the extortionate cost. Sit at a table with interesting people you've just met or don't know. And, of course, don't forget to dance.

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