



# ATTENDING PROFESSIONAL MEETINGS

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# ATTENDING PROFESSIONAL MEETINGS

## I. OVERVIEW

This brief manual provides information on various aspects of professional meetings. Although each meeting has its own unique characteristics (number of attendees, duration, amount of unscheduled time, and so forth), virtually all meetings have a great deal in common and thus most of the material is likely to be 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. Additional information, including an extensive bibliography is available on our web site ([www.survival.pitt.edu](http://www.survival.pitt.edu)).

### Why Attend a Professional Meeting?

Professional meetings, also known as conferences, are gatherings of individuals with related professional interests. These events can attract individuals from a particular region, from across the country, or even from around the world. Such meetings may range from 50 participants to 20,000 or more, may last from a day to a week, be held within the institution at which you work or far away in a large city or at an isolated venue, and be highly focused or multidisciplinary.

There are many benefits to attending a professional meeting, including the following:

- learn about new developments in your area of research  
*People often 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 research in your field.*
- broaden your knowledge of the field  
*Professional meetings usually 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” and/or a short talk.*
- get feedback on your work  
*Several dozen to several hundred people may see and hear 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.*

- explore funding opportunities and meet program officers from granting agencies  
*Participants may have the opportunity to meet with staff from funding agencies and get the latest information on grants available for research and training.*
- learn about employment opportunities and interview for positions  
*Employment services, career workshops, notice boards, and informal discussions may be available to assist you in obtaining your next position.*
- see the newest tools for conducting research and talk with technical staff  
*Vendors may 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 professional meetings. These are listed in the preliminary and final programs for the meeting. This information may also be available through the conference's website. Common types of events include the following:

***Lectures:*** Internationally renowned researchers often are invited to provide lectures for a general scientific audience.

***Symposia:*** These are selected from many proposals submitted for consideration. They typically focus on cutting edge topics and include leaders in the field – both established investigators and rising stars.

***Voluntary presentations:*** Participants may have the option of signing-up to make a voluntary presentation at the meeting – a short talk (often 10 minutes in duration) or a poster presentation. (These are discussed in detail below.) These presentations are an excellent way to get exposure and feedback on your work, as well as to practice networking skills. The deadline for submitting abstracts for posters and short talks is usually many months prior to the meeting. Thus, check the meeting instructions and plan ahead. Unlike proposals for symposia, which are highly competitive, at some meetings all submissions for voluntary presentations may be accepted, although sometimes membership in the professional society organizing the conference is required.

***Special interest socials, receptions, and conference dinners:*** These activities are designed to provide opportunities for discussions and networking. These are usually organized with junior investigators in mind. Indeed, leaders in the field are often invited specifically to promote networking with junior scientists. These events are listed in the program for the meeting and are open to all meeting attendees unless noted otherwise.

***Exhibits:*** A major component of many professional meetings (usually the larger ones) is the exhibits. If this is the case for the meeting you will be attending, 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:

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

**Funding agencies** – Stop by these booths to learn about funding opportunities for research and training and to meet and talk with staff members. (The value of talking one-on-one with these individuals cannot be overstated!)

**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.

**Short courses and workshops:** Be on the lookout for satellite events held in the days immediately before and after the meeting. There may be short courses or workshops run by prominent researchers who speak on topics of current interest and/or demonstrate new techniques. These events are usually listed in the preliminary program for the meeting. Pre-registration may be required.

## II. PREPARING FOR THE MEETING

*Preparation* is the key to getting the most out of the meeting. Listed below are multiple issues to attend to prior to arriving at the conference:

**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. Assuming that the meeting has multiple events occurring at the same time, 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 may be able to search the program for the meeting via the meeting'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 may be spread over a very large area, the crowd may be 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 session. If you still have time and energy — look at a few more. For oral presentations, attend only those of interest. Note that in the great majority of instances, walking in and out of the presentation room between (but preferable not *during*) 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 could 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 well over 75% of professional jobs are obtained through network connections, rather than through ads or employment services. Professional meetings are a prime venue for networking. Any time and place you are near other attendees is an opportunity for networking; it is not restricted to the conference center. 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 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, as 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 — 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.

**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 short oral presentations 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 short talk, you will be making presentations at the meeting. These may be informal, but they are 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 well-thought out answers in advance of the meeting; they need to be well-thought out and *brief*. A good first answer should last no more than 2 minutes. 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 (see 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 meeting organizers if you will need assistance during the meeting itself.

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. What do you do?</li><li>2. What’s your research project?</li><li>3. How did you get interested in _____?<br/>(your specific area of research)</li><li>4. Why did you choose that _____? (topic, technique, graduate program, etc.)</li><li>5. What do you plan to do after you get your degree (or finish your current postdoc position)? (short-term and long-term)</li></ol> |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

### III. PARTICIPATING IN THE MEETING

***In general:*** Bring your notebook, notes you made on the abstracts, and the program for the meeting. You may find that a small briefcase or tote bag is useful the brochures, handouts, and samples you may get at the exhibits.

***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, although the lines may be long.

***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 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 the people you see at your home institution. Of course it is a lot easier and perhaps more fun to sit with those you already know, but networking with new people will pay off in the long-term. In larger meetings there may be a "student hospitality room" and if so it 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.

***Contacting people at the meeting:*** There may be an electronic message center at the convention center where you can leave messages for individuals. If so, also remember to check occasionally to see if you have any messages! There is likely to be 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. If available, check with the concierge at your hotel or the visitors' bureau for recommendations on childcare services.

***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 posters:*** Refer to the conference program to see when the posters you are interested in will be on display. Posters will be assigned an identification number, and then displayed in aisles in numerical order. Each poster should include its ID number at the top for easy identification. It is appropriate to seek out the poster presenter out and ask questions, or even request that they “walk you through their poster.” (At some meetings, poster presenters are provided with a tag to wear that facilitates easy identification.)

***Attending voluntary oral presentations:*** These presentations usually 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. 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

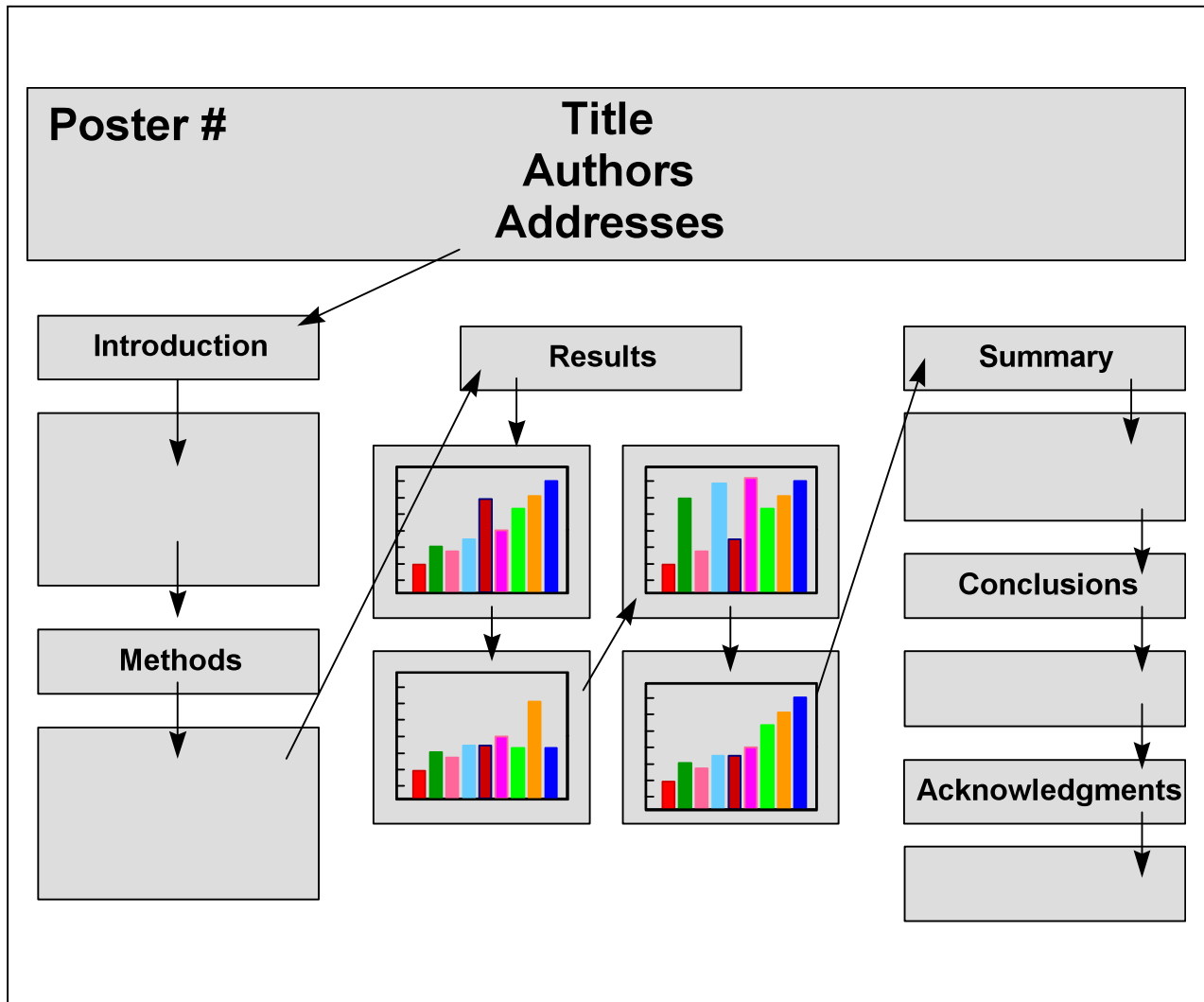
The three most common mistakes made in constructing a poster are (1) including too much text, (2) using a font size that is too small, and (3) not planning for the space. Remember the conditions under which individuals will likely be viewing your poster — a crowded, noisy room, reading at a distance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

#### Figure 2: Example of telegraphic style

On visual aids

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

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



**Text:** If you can be with your poster for the majority of the 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 strongly recommend that you use bulleted points and a telegraphic style of presenting the material (Figure 2).

**Poster size:** Find out in advance what the poster size will be and plan accordingly so you can make best use of this space without exceeding it.

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

This paragraph is set in 12 point Palatino, 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 **paragraphs** or other blocks of text. Other examples of serif typefaces include Times New Roman and Century Schoolbook.

This paragraph is set in 12 point Arial, which is a sans (without) serif typeface. Sans serif typestyles are good for **titles** and **telegraphic text**. Thus, for slides — 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 Tahoma.

**Point 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.

**Figures:** Usually 4-6 figures can typically be 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).

| <b>Table 2: Suggested Font Styles and Sizes</b> |                   |                           |                                                                  |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Section</b>                                  | <b>Font style</b> | <b>Font size (points)</b> | <b>Additional comments</b>                                       |
| Title                                           | sans serif        | 120                       | poster title must match title of abstract                        |
| Section labels<br>(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<br>(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  |

## **Printing**

**Software:** Microsoft PowerPoint is one example of a software program that will allow you to design your poster to print on a single large sheet of paper.

**Printing:** If you will be printing your poster on one large sheet, there may be places within your institution that have the ability to do that for you. In addition to your own department or center, check with any media services center or with departments of geology or anthropology (i.e., anywhere where they need to print large maps). Alternately, if you are in the United States, a company such as FedEx/Kinkos could print it for you; however, that can be quite expensive.

## Planning Your Presentation

Plan and practice a 3-minute presentation of your poster (table 3). Visitors to your poster may ask for additional details, so be prepared to provide 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.

| <b>Table 3. Suggested Distribution of Time for Different Types of Presentations</b> |                    |                            |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|
|                                                                                     | <b>15-min talk</b> | <b>Poster presentation</b> |
| <b>Introduction</b>                                                                 | 3 min              | 0.5 min                    |
| <b>Main body</b> (e.g., question, method, results, interpret.)                      | 10                 | 2                          |
| <b>Closing</b>                                                                      | 2                  | 0.5                        |
| <b>Questions</b>                                                                    | 5                  | As requested               |

## 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: scotch tape, a black marker, correction tape or fluid (in case the poster is damaged in transport or you notice an error while your poster is on display)
- pen and a pad on in which to write names, addresses, ideas
- extra figures, data you might 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 (maximum) 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 colleague to staff the poster while you are gone or tack a sign next to your poster 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. SHORT ORAL PRESENTATIONS

This type of presentation typically lasts for 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

***Designing your talk:*** Focus is the key. This is not the time to present every experiment you have ever done. Aim to provide a meaningful discussion of a few key experiments rather than a superficial survey of topics. Determine what two to three points you want audience members to recall after attending your presentation, and construct your talk around those points.

Give the information to the audience when they will need to use it. Thus, do not describe 3 different methods and then go on to present the data from the first experiment. By then they will have forgotten what the first method entailed. Instead, provide the method 1 then experiment 1, method 2 then experiment 2, and so forth. Moreover, remember that even the most attentive listeners will blank-out at times, and that listening to an oral presentation is not like reading a paper — you can not flip back a few pages to find something you missed. Thus, plan to repeat your key points throughout the talk and remind the audience of any crucial information details as you go through each section of your talk. 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, follow your outline write out your talk, *word for word*. This is essential as the hardest parts of a presentation are (1) making the transitions between points, which are generally not specified in an outline, and (2) staying within the time. Indeed, in converting your outline to a written document, you will probably find yourself altering the outline.

After you have written out your talk, revise your outline to match your text. When you make your presentation, plan to speak from the *outline* and not the text. We *strongly* recommend this even though it may initially sound more stressful (“I will forget what to say! I will make a mistake! I will not be as fluent!”). Providing an engaging oral presentation from a written document is very difficult – actors (and politicians) train for years to pull this off. For most of us, listening to a reading is boring. (Think about the reason why parents read to their children at night!) Moreover, if while making your presentation you blank out you will have a very hard time scanning to find your place within a full text, whereas with an outline it is much easier to skim to the right section and continue your presentation.

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 may 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 find you are running off schedule and/or get nervous you can flip through your outline 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*. This is absolutely essential, as once again it will force you to think through the transitions from one issue to the next. It also will affect the timing of the talk. Note the time elapsed in the margin of your outline as you move from one section of the talk to the next. That way, when you deliver your presentation periodically check to see that you are sticking to the schedule and make adjustments if necessary.

### Figure 3. Turning off AutoFit in PowerPoint

1. From the drop-down menu “Tools” select “Auto Correct Options”
2. On the tab “*autoformat as you type*” the following should NOT be checked:

“*autoFit title text to placeholder*”

“*autoFit body text to placeholder*”

## 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.

**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 7 lines per slide. PowerPoint’s default settings for point size are excellent as long as the AutoFit settings are not activated (see figure 3). We strongly recommend that you do not override them. If you cannot fit all you wish to place on a single slide with these default settings, either (a) use an even more telegraphic style or (b) use more than one slide to make the point. Another valuable approach is to use a “build.” See the slides below.

**Using color:** If you are speaking in a darkened room, 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. Make your slides so that you will have time to check their projection in a darkened room and revise if needed. For emphasis you can use other light colors, such as yellow or light orange. But do not use a dark color (e.g.,

red, blue, or black) on a blue background, even though it may look great on the computer screen, when projected they provide too little contrast and are very hard to see.

Slide 1

1. Builds can be useful
  - allows focus
  - reduces text per slide

Slide 1

1. Builds can be useful
2. You can darken previous pt.
  - here point #1 could be darker
  - point #2 could be lighter
  - will focus attention on second

**Other tricks:** Our advice – limit them! Some animation can be mildly useful (e.g., “wiping” from left to right), but too much motion can be distracting. And we discourage virtually any backgrounds other than a solid color; gradients, patterns, pictures...we find that rather than make the slides more attractive, they, too, serve to draw attention away from the main points. (But clearly not everyone agrees with us!)

## 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 examine the room and the equipment you will use in advance of your presentation. Make sure that you know how the controls work (lights, remote for PowerPoint projector).

**Presenting your talk:** It is important that you use try to use all of your time...and *essential* that you used no more. Thus, for example, if the total time allotted is 15 minutes, speak 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. If your limit is 15 minutes, speaking 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. What if you cannot fit it all into your allotted time and still leave time for questions? Say less!

And 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. If someone asks a very specific question of limited interest

to the rest of the audience or a question that will take too long to answer, simply indicate that you would be glad to discuss the matter later. And 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 remain near the room in which you have made your presentation after you talk (or the entire session) is over. 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.

## **VI. CONCLUDING POINTS AND SUMMARY**

### **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 few individuals may review your application for funding, 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!

### **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!

## **VII. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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