

How to present at a research conference

Being accepted for a conference presentation should be considered a career highlight, as this implies that your work has received a positive endorsement from a blinded, peer-review, panel.

You should feel comfortable and confident when you arrive at the conference, safe in the knowledge that you have earned the right to attend. Understandably, however, as the big day approaches, you may start to feel a little anxious about delivering your presentation to your audience, no matter how large or small, and not to mention those dreaded questions at the end just when you think you can breathe a sigh of relief! Rest assured, these mixed emotions are perfectly normal and experienced by many researchers, especially those who are presenting for the first time and so you are not alone. Here are some simple words of advice and tips to help you prepare and calm those nerves!

1. Finding the right conference

When thinking about attending a conference you need to find the right one for you so ask yourself what you want to achieve out of attending. In addition to your desire to present your own research you may want to broaden or deepen your knowledge of your research area or you have sights on meeting particular researchers. Discuss the options with your supervisors or peers as they will be best placed to provide you with some guidance by drawing on their own experiences. Thus, whilst the most exotic location may influence your initial choice, make sure that you spend some time carefully considering the specific disciplines which this conference aims to target, as you don't want to end up sitting through presentations that are totally outside of your research interests!

2. Submitting your abstract

So you have chosen your conference, now you need to give yourself the best chance of getting there and presenting your research. Submission dates can be up to 6 months before the start of a major conference, so make sure that you double check the abstract submission date before you progress any further. You then need to consider the specific formatting requirements, including whether you are allowed to submit figures, tables and images. Ensure that your work complies with all the guidelines, and where possible ask a 'critical friend' to read your abstract prior to submission. Finally ensure that you convey your research in such a way as to make it relevant and exciting so that it stands out in the crowd.

3. Abstract acceptance

It can take as long as 4 months for some major conferences to complete their decision-making process; however, it is typical that they email the corresponding author even if their submission is unsuccessful, so do be patient! If your work is

accepted then the first thing you should do is give yourself a pat on the back, well done – conference attendance can be highly competitive and so you should take this opportunity to reflect on your achievement. Once you have, you then need to start planning. Do you need to find funding, apply for a visa, or make travel arrangements? Funding for conferences is out there so it is worth spending some time searching for opportunities.

4. Presentation preparation

Follow the golden rule - preparation is key! You should be sure to check the precise time slot allocated for your presentation. Sometimes, conferences may provide very specific durations (e.g. 7 minutes); however, 7 minutes means 7 minutes, and so avoid the temptation to round it up! You should broadly allocate 2 - 3 minutes per slide, such that it remains on the screen for a sufficient period to allow the audience both to listen to you, and then read your slide. Make sure that you also include a front slide that includes, in big letters, your details and those of your institution – be sure to take all available opportunities to promote yourself and the work of your research group!

5. Formatting your presentation

Make sure you establish whether there is a standard template for you to use. If not, avoid garish colours and, where possible, adopt a bright text on a dark background. Try and keep the content of your slides to a minimum by highlighting the main points/take home messages you want to transmit and use a large font size so that the whole audience can see clearly no matter where they are seated. Also, be very wary when including images and (especially) movies, as you are likely to be using a 3rd party PC that may not have the necessary advanced features. At the very worst, ensure that you prepare a reserve presentation that only includes text.



6. Practicing your presentation

You will want to ensure that your presentation is as smooth as possible but may be worried about stuttering or saying 'um' after every other word! You may find it useful to write out your 'speech' before trying to recite it verbatim, or that you feel sufficiently confident to rely upon only 'cue cards'; anything less and you may look very exposed should you suddenly lose your direction when presenting on stage. Be sure to time yourself to ensure that you don't exceed the stated time limit for your presentation. You can quickly develop your confidence by practicing your presentation, firstly to yourself and then, as you become more polished, by asking for feedback from friends and peers. You should also present to your supervisors to ensure that you haven't overlooked any fundamental errors prior to departing for the conference. So the key here is to practice, practice, and practice!

7. Presentation day

The big day has arrived and you will want to ensure that everything is in place before you walk on stage to deliver the presentation. It is possible that you may have to upload your presentation on to a shared network, so make sure you check your paperwork to ensure that you aren't required in a different room at a surprising time! Sit through a session prior to the one in which you are scheduled to present, to avoid panicking about missing your slot. This will also enable you to feel more comfortable with the audience, and be less fearful of their supposed passion for questioning! Keep an eye on how presenters are invited up to the podium, so that you know what to expect as your time approaches.

8. The presentation

Finally the time has arrived and you find yourself on stage ready to present your research. Firstly, ensure that you fully understand the instructions provided by any support staff, perhaps in relation to any wireless gadgets that they may provide for your assistance. Once you feel comfortable, look towards the audience as you present yourself and your institution. Ensure that you briefly introduce yourself and the title of your presentation if this has not been conveyed clearly as you were introduced. Calmly look back to the PC as you progress the presentation on to the next slide, and then begin. You may experience some initial nerves which for many people will tempt them to try and rush through the presentation. Take deep breaths and try to keep focussed and soon the hard work you put into practicing and preparing for this presentation will soon kick in and you will soon be in your stride. Also, as you talk, try and gain eye contact with people sat in different locations about the room and try to keep your hands on the lectern, thus avoiding any nervous key jangling!

9. The questions

It is typical for the Chairperson to invite questions from the audience, and it is this unknown which holds the greatest fear for most presenters. Ensure that you listen carefully and, where necessary, ask questioners to rephrase or repeat elements of their question. If you fail to catch the question on a second occasion, avoid any awkwardness by simply prefacing your response with your interpretation of their question. Take time to consider the questions carefully rather than rushing in with a confusing answer. If you don't know the answer, invite the questioner to meet informally after the session, as you would be interested to gain their valuable insight!

10. Any finally...

Remember you are not alone; you are amongst your peers who will be experiencing the same emotions as you. Make sure you enjoy the occasion, as this experience should be considered a great achievement – and don't forget, there may be many researchers who wanted to be where you were, but whose work was rejected by the peer-reviewer panel! To that end, ensure that you keep a record of your presentation and accept any certificate that may be offered for use in future CPD folders or job interviews.

Remember that conferences are more than just presenting so use the opportunity wisely to network, learn more about research in your field and socialise! Finally, try and find time to explore some of the city or surrounding area, as conference travel is accepted as one of the perks of academia!

