

Attending Your First Scientific Meeting: Transcript

Slide 1 – Your First Scientific Meeting

Welcome to the National Institutes of Health, Office of Intramural Training & Education's Webinar on attending your first scientific meeting. We hope that you will find it helpful in preparing to make the most of this great opportunity. While we will be covering many general aspects of a scientific meeting, your mentor is an invaluable resource for understanding the unique details of the specific meeting you will be attending. We hope that this webinar will allow you to approach your mentor with specific questions about the meeting so that you can work together to create the best experience possible.

Slide 2 – Congratulations!

Congratulations on going to your first scientific meeting! It is a great opportunity to learn, network and have fun. Since scientific meetings vary in size, atmosphere and procedure, we will be discussing the general guidelines that apply to most meetings. However, your research mentor is your best source of information on the inner workings of the particular meeting you will be attending.

In this Webinar we will cover the basic principles for getting the most out of a meeting. As with most things in life, this starts with preparation. You will want to know the culture of the particular meeting you are attending and gather as much information as possible on the topics that will be presented, who will be attending and whom you might meet.

It is important that you understand what your role will be at this meeting. Regardless if you are giving a talk, presenting a poster or attending without presentation responsibilities, you are there to participate.

Also, we will discuss the basic rules of etiquette at a scientific meeting and how following a few simple guidelines will help you make the best impression possible. Finally, we will discuss what to do with all that you learned when you return to your research group.

Slide 3 – Know What to Expect

There are plenty of old adages about the benefits of preparation and most of them are true. To get the most out of a scientific meeting, you need to have realistic expectations. You need to minimize the time you spend acclimating to the surroundings and getting your bearings. In short, you need to know what you are getting into. The size of the meeting is going to dictate how you prepare and how you act. Are you going to a large society meeting with thousands of attendees? Or, will you be going to a smaller topical meeting with a few hundred people? For example, the American Association of Cancer Research

annual meeting has an average registration of nearly 16,000 people. In contrast a Gordon Conference can have less than 150 total attendees. The size of the meeting may dictate how easily you will be able to approach a speaker after his or her talk or how likely you are to engage in a meaningful conversation over a poster.

You will also benefit from understanding the culture of the meeting. Some meetings are more formal in both attire and attitude. At some meetings small talk is expected and accepted. Other meetings are all business. Talk to your lab mentor about the atmosphere at the specific meeting you will be attending

Slide 4 – Prepare to Plan

Knowing what to expect in terms of your schedule will help you feel confident as you start the meeting. Smaller meetings will be more structured with one talk occurring at a time and designated times to view posters. Larger meetings are more likely to have multiple sessions running at the same time and you will need to decide which talks to go to and when to view posters. With the large meetings, the abstracts for talks and posters are generally posted online ahead of the meeting, allowing you to plan your days. Many smaller meetings do this as well. If they are available, reading the abstracts for all the talks you will attend allows you to have a basic understanding before the talk begins. This allows you to focus on the data being presented instead of trying to understand the background information for the talk. It also allows you to prepare some questions ahead of time in case you get the opportunity to speak with the presenters. Knowing who the keynote speakers and the organizers are allows you to familiarize yourself with their work. A keynote speaker, has most likely done important work in his or her field. You should know what it is that the keynote speakers are known for and familiarize yourself with their seminal work.

Scientific meetings are great places to learn of the latest research being done in your field, but do not overlook the importance of networking. You should think about who you know who is attending. Is your boss? A senior post-doc in the lab? Ask them to introduce you to the people that they know. Also, find other young scientists at the meeting and start building relationships with them. These will be your peers and colleagues for the rest of your career. It is never too early to start building your network. If you are an undergraduate or post-bac, you can use meetings to look for potential graduate school mentors. If you are a graduate student, you should be exploring opportunities for post-docs and introducing yourself to potential future employers.

Slide 5 – Who Are You?

As a young scientist it is easy to question your relevance at a scientific meeting. After all, who are you? Amongst these established researchers with amazing credentials, where do you really fit in? The answer is, you are an essential part of the meeting. While it is appropriate to be humble and respectful of the more established scientists, this should not make you timid in asking questions or introducing yourself.

Regardless of what your role at the meeting is, participate. Ask questions if you have them. If you are presenting and you are asked a question that you know the answer to, answer confidently.

If you are presenting a poster, have it proofread by others to make sure there are not any big errors. Also, practice presenting it to your research group and mentor. When you are at the meeting and presenting the poster, be proud of the work you have done. Do not stare at the ground or talk to your shoes. If someone asks you a question that you do not have the answer to, don't make it up! Just say that you don't know, but it is a good question that you will look into. There is no shame in not having all the answers. No one expects you to.

If you are giving a talk at the meeting, practice the talk multiple times for your research group, friends, spouse or anyone else who will listen. That way, when it is time to present your talk at the meeting, you will be confident in your knowledge of your slides.

If you are not presenting at the meeting, remember to participate. There is a reason that labs hire young scientists. Your ideas are fresh, your enthusiasm should be high and your curiosity should be piqued by all that is going on around you. Let those qualities show at the meeting. It is why you are there!

Slide 6 – Etiquette - Listening

While you may believe that scientists only pay attention to data and results, that is simply not true. How you behave and present yourself is becoming increasingly important in today's science. As a young scientist, you will be remembered not only for your work, but also for how you act.

There are few things that make a bad impression faster than being a disrespectful audience. While a speaker is giving his or her presentation, be quiet and listen. Do not discuss the presentation with your neighbor until the talk is over. Take notes so you can reference them when asking a question at the end of the talk. At a scientific meeting, it is not common practice to interrupt the speaker to ask a question. Wait until the talk is finished, and ask the question in the proper forum. If you are unable to ask your question during the session, find the speaker after the session and ask him or her then. Also, do not speak negatively of another person's work. Even if the work is completely contradictory to yours and the science is just plain bad, a scientific meeting is not the place to criticize someone else's work.

One of the simplest ways to show respect is to turn your phone off during a session. If you need your phone on for emergency purposes, remember to turn it to vibrate. However, do not answer your phone during a talk or while you are having a conversation with someone outside of a session. Answering your phone in the middle of a conversation says to the person you are talking to that they are less important than the phone. That is not the way to make a good impression. Also, playing games or answering e-mails on your phone in public makes you seem disinterested in the meeting and those presenting.

Slide 7 – Etiquette - Interacting

Networking is an essential component to a successful scientific meeting. While being a good audience will make sure you are not noticed for the wrong reasons, how you interact with other scientists will create an opportunity to be noticed for the right reasons. Being respectful is key to successfully interacting with other people. Do not interrupt someone while he or she is talking. If there is a one-on-one conversation taking place between the person you wish to speak with and someone else, it is best to wait until the talk has become more social. It is easier to introduce yourself to the person you wish to speak with if he or she is either alone, or in a group of people,. However, be careful to introduce yourself to everyone in the group. It can be uncomfortable for everyone involved if you ignore some people just to make a contact. If you find yourself in a social setting where you are interacting with people you have never met, do not be afraid to introduce yourself to them. While it may feel awkward to stop a conversation with someone to introduce yourself to them, it is far more awkward to walk away from a great conversation not knowing with whom you just spoke.

One of the most important aspects of your interactions is to monitor the time. Remember that time is a resource valued by most everyone. So, mind the clock. If you are presenting, stay within your scheduled time allotment. You will find many scientists do not do this. So, by being respectful of the time limit, you will stand out from the crowd in a good way. In the same light, do not monopolize a presenter's time. If you are viewing a poster, stay on topic. Discuss the poster material and the project. If your conversation takes you to another topic, ask to follow up with the presenter later. This frees that presenter up to interact with more people who want to discuss his or her poster as well as gives you an opportunity to network outside the scheduled meeting sessions.

Slide 8 – Outside the Meeting (pt 1)

While scientific meetings are often packed full of talks and poster sessions, an often overlooked component of a meeting takes place outside of the scheduled events. This is where many of the best scientific discussions are had. It is also where many collaborations are discussed and networks are expanded. This time should not be considered "off" time or "down" time. How you present yourself during these unscheduled times is just as critical as how you present yourself in the scheduled meeting events.

There are two activities that occur at most meetings outside of the scheduled events: meals and the after party.

Meals can be a great time to get to know new people and build your network. At smaller meetings often times everyone will eat in the same place. This is a great opportunity to find an empty space at a table with people you do not know and introduce yourself. Ask them where they are from and what they study. Have casual conversations and listen well to what people are saying. If you have the opportunity to dine with a presenter or keynote speaker, do it! Do not be intimidated. It will be a great learning experience and networking activity. Also, ask your mentor to introduce you to people he or she

knows over a meal. It is best to think up a question about their work ahead of time. This will help get the conversation started.

Slide 9 – Outside the Meeting (pt 2)

The other common activity outside of the meeting is heading out to the pub. While this may not seem like an obvious part of the meeting, more than a few collaborations have been formed in the late hours following a scientific meeting. It is also a great, casual environment for getting to know people better. Remember, building a network is not based solely on scientific dialogue. Friendships are part of a network as well. Here are a few tips for getting the most out of your time at the pub.

Buy a presenter a drink. It is a small gesture and often is just the opening you need to introduce yourself. Something as simple as saying, “I really enjoyed your talk earlier. You had some great ideas. Can I buy you drink?” is a great way to start a relationship. Don’t overstay your welcome though. Walk to the bar, buy their drink and then let them dictate the rest of the interaction. Some people will love to continue talking about their research with you. Others will thank you for the drink and move on to their established circle of friends. Be gracious either way.

Also, remember that complimenting someone’s work is more appreciated than challenging their data in public. Even if you have concrete data of your own that directly contradict something that was presented, it is best to avoid bringing that up. This is a casual, fun time of the evening. Do not try to assert yourself as an expert.

As a word of caution, people remember how you behave at the pub. You do not want to be remembered negatively for how you act there. A first impression is hard to change, so keep your behavior in check. Casual does not mean out of control.

Slide 10 – Write It Down!

Regardless of the size of the meeting you are attending, you will not be able to remember everything or everyone you will want to remember. To help with this, write it down. Carry a notebook or journal with you. Take notes on everything you see and hear. This includes any background knowledge in your field or a related field that you may not already know. Most talks and posters will begin with an introduction or background section. Do not be embarrassed to take notes from these sections. If everyone was expected to know this, the presenters would not use the time and space to present this information.

Also, write down any data that are relevant to your project, even if you don’t fully understand them. It is great to take your notes to your lab mentor and ask him or her to more fully explain what they mean. It shows initiative on your part as well as showing your trust in him or her. Also, write down any data that strike you as being exciting or cool. They do not have to relate to your project. Cool data are still fun to know and discuss. At this stage in your career, techniques and technologies that are used to

answer different types of research questions may be the most practical knowledge you gain at a scientific meeting.

In addition to writing down scientific knowledge that you gain from the meeting, you should also keep records of the people you hear present and those that you meet. Keynote speakers and session chairs are usually important people in their field. Having a record of when you heard them discuss which topic provides you with an opening line for further communication. You never know when you will get the opportunity to meet with or possibly work with these investigators. The same is true of the postdocs and graduate students who present at the meetings. Having questions or comments about someone's presented work is an easy way to write an initial contact e-mail or to include in your request to add someone to your LinkedIn account or other social networking account. And as was mentioned earlier, building a network of other young scientists is one of the best opportunities you will have at these meetings. Be sure to write down names, e-mail addresses and some characteristic about the person that is certain to remind you of which name goes with which person.

Slide 11 – OK The Meeting is Over...Now What?

Now that you know how to prepare for the meeting and what to do while you are there, it is time to discuss what happens next. You have your notebook full of notes about science, data, people and places, but what exactly should you do with it? The first thing to consider doing is to set up a meeting with your research mentor. Your mentor sent you to the meeting to stimulate your thinking on your project and broaden your understanding of your field. Discuss the different talks you heard or the posters you visited. Have specific questions about data that you did not fully understand, or vocabulary that you heard that you did not know. Also, discuss some of the techniques you learned about and how you might use them in your project.

Speak with you mentor about the different scientists from the meeting. The meeting has as much to do with people as it does with the science. If you enjoyed a particular investigator's work, ask your mentor if he or she knows him or her and if they can introduce you. This is one of the best ways to make a connection with an established scientist.

After talking with your mentor make contact with people from the meeting. Perhaps the best place to start, and certainly the easiest, is to follow up with some of the friends you made. If you are both on LinkedIn, connect. If not, e-mail and mention you enjoyed getting to know them and are excited about their research. This is where taking good notes about the people you meet at the meeting comes in handy. You can be very specific in your e-mail and reference a story they mentioned or a specific project they talked about working on. This serves two purposes. One, it reminds them of who you are. It is often difficult to keep names associated with the right people. A generic e-mail will often be ignored, but one that references a specific conversation or activity that you shared helps the person remember you. Secondly, It shows that you valued the time you spent with that person and that you were listening during the conversation.

If you enjoyed a specific presenter and your lab mentor is unable to introduce you, sending an e-mail referencing his or her talk and asking a specific question is an appropriate way to start building that

relationship. This is especially true if you are interested in working for that person in some capacity in the near future. The Office of Intramural Training & Education has a Web tutorial on writing a professional e-mail that you should review before sending your initial contact e-mail. This information can be found at https://www.training.nih.gov/writing_professional_e-mail or by searching “new online resources” on the OITE Web site. There is also a link on the following slide.

Lastly, evaluate your performance at the meeting. Are there things you feel you did well at? Great! Write down and build on them. Are there areas you felt were lacking? Brainstorm ways you can improve your skills in that area. As always, this is a good exercise to do with a mentor.

Slide 12 - Resources

We hope this Webinar has been helpful in preparing you for your first scientific meeting. Remember that your research mentor is your best resource for specific information on the meeting you will be attending.

For more online resources to aid in your training and career development, visit the OITE Online Resources page by clicking the link on this slide.

As mentioned in the last slide, the guidelines for writing a professional e-mail can be found by clicking the link on this slide, or typing in the address below.

https://www.training.nih.gov/writing_professional_e-mail