How to Get the Most Out of Your First Conference

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How to Get the Most Out of Your First Conference

Attending your first conference can be an intimidating experience. What should I wear? Who do I talk to? What's going to happen? Will I look stupid?

This Web page is intended to help relax you.

Audience

Because I teach at an undergraduate institution, these suggestions are specifically aimed at undergraduates. Nevertheless, graduate students may also find them useful.

Also, I am a computer scientist, so my view of conferences is biased by my field. The farther you get from CS, the more you should take my advice with a grain of salt. What I say applies throughout CS, a bit less so for engineering meetings, and perhaps very little in political science.

What to Wear

One of the most common nervous-makers for the conference first-timer is clothing. Should I wear a suit and tie? Or torn board shorts? In general, the answer depends on your field, so you should ask somebody with experience—generally, an advisor or professor. If you're unsure, you could always e-mail the conference organizers (NOT the program chairs, but the general or location chair). However, please realize that these people are very busy and don't really want to spend time dealing with questions you could have answered on your own.

In computer science, the usual rule is "What you wear to work." Note that this means what professionals and academics wear, not what students wear. Most people at a CS conference will be wearing some form of jeans. Grad students and even professors often wear T-shirts; some male professionals and academics will don a polo shirt or even a collared shirt with a tie. Women who want to be fancier will wear slacks or a skirt with a simple blouse. You'll see a smattering of people in shorts and sandals, and a very few in more formal suits (a lot of those are upper management or non-CS types who don't attend regularly, but are at the conference for some special reason).

I have found that many conference venues are air-conditioned to an uncomfortable level. For that reason, I always bring along some kind of warm clothing (I'm partial to sweaters) even if it's the hottest part of the year.
Finally, bring comfortable shoes! You will be spending much more time on your feet than you might expect.

**Attending Sessions**

Every conference is divided into sessions, each of which is loosely organized around a topic. Sometimes there are parallel sessions scheduled against each other. But even if there is only a single session at a time, there are other things you could be doing (see "The Hallway Track" and "Rechargin" below). So it's important to think about which sessions to attend. There is no law that says you have to be there for everything. At the same time, you don't want to miss the opportunity to learn new things!

Before the conference, look over the sessions and the paper titles. If possible, read the abstracts or even (if they are available and you have time) some of the papers themselves. Decide which ones are going to be most useful to you. That depends on a lot of things, especially your interests and your background. There is little point in attending a session if you're not going to understand anything or if it's far away from your interests. (On the other hand, exploring new areas can be both fun and enlightening…)

During the session, *pay attention*. You'll have perhaps half an hour to learn about the research being presented. If you spend that time updating Facebook, you'll miss the important points and you won't get the value you are there for. Remember that even if you have already read the paper, the author will often highlight interesting tidbits or present extra results that didn't fit in the published version.

Every field, whether it's solid-state storage or medieval history, has a set of shared knowledge, terminology, and assumptions that won't be explained to conference attendees. As a first-timer, expect that you won't understand everything you hear. It can be useful to take notes during a presentation so that you can ask somebody about it later.

If a particular paper catches your interest, make a note of that fact. Then read it later, either in your hotel room or after you get home. The paper will typically have much more detail and will answer some of your questions. It will also have references that can lead you to more information on the topic.

**The Hallway Track**

Although the scheduled sessions are (critically) important, much of what is best about a conference happens outside the meeting rooms. In the hallways, during coffee breaks, at lunch, and in poster sessions and receptions you'll have the chance to talk one-on-one with other people who are interested in the same things you care about. This is your chance to get details about a fascinating paper by spending fifteen minutes with the author. You can meet other students working on the same problems you've been exploring, or have dinner with one of the leaders in the field. If you're an undergraduate, this is a chance to start developing relationships with graduate advisors; if you're a graduate student, you can meet potential employers.

To use the hallway track wisely, spread yourself around. Even if you're an introvert and you're terrified of other people, wander up to somebody and start talking. "Hi, my name is X" is often enough to start a conversation; "What are you working on?" or "Tell me about your research" are always reliable.
choose a small group and just walk up, stand there, and listen; pretty soon you'll learn something and maybe be able to ask a question.

The one thing to watch out for is clinging to familiar people. In a big crowd, it's easy to zero in on the faces we know. So maybe you spot your advisor, or a friend from your own institution, or the person you met at dinner last night. **Don't spend all your time with that person.** Instead, deliberately spread yourself out. That has two advantages: first, it means that you'll gradually develop more and more people you're comfortable with, and second, it means you won't be thought of as a pest. This rule is especially important if you're relatively new to the field (e.g., you're a graduate student or planning to become one). You're going to need a wide network of relationships, and this is the time to develop them.

**Recharging**

Many academics are introverts to some degree. Introverts can find it extremely stressful to be around crowds or new people. If that is true of you, remember that it's not the end of the world to withdraw for a while. Paper sessions are a good way to get some time to yourself, but it's also OK to leave entirely and take a nice walk. I almost always choose to skip a less interesting session and either explore the surroundings, or simply catch a nap. Conferences can be stressful!

**A Note on Safety**

It would be wonderful if everybody at a conference were a nice person. Unfortunately, especially at larger events, that's not true. Laptops have been known to disappear during coffee breaks. So don't make the mistake of thinking that just because everybody is interested in your field, they're automatically honest people. Sigh.

Also, specifically in computer science where there is an unbalanced gender ratio, there is unfortunately a problem with sexual harassment. My observation is that it's less of an issue at academic conferences than at industry ones, but there are still a few people who think it's OK to behave badly. Remember that the conference organizers will have an explicit policy on harassment, and they are on your side. If you experience something inappropriate, please report it so that they can know that there is a problem, and so they can try to help you.

**Have Fun!**

Above all, have fun! Conferences are one of the best things about the research community. Take advantage of them, learn from them, and enjoy!