

CONFERENCE TIPS FOR FIRST-TIMERS

Introduction

The book *Studying Primates* [Setchell 2019, pp. 286-298] provides excellent detail and advice on the academic aspects of conference attendance, with especially good tips on preparing your poster or oral presentation. Please do access and read this. The English version is free to access on [Researchgate](#). Here, additional advice is offered with details covering the full experience of attending a conference for the first time, from travel preparations to networking and looking after your health and safety. We hope this is useful!

1. What do you want from the conference?

Having a good conference experience starts before you arrive. There are so many ways to navigate a conference.

You may feel you need to attend everything, including the evening networking, dash from one talk/poster/roundtable/discussion to another, but this will leave you physically and mentally exhausted, especially if your conference lasts for 5 days and has involved travelling long distances, where you may have jet lag. But even a 2-day conference close to home can be exhausting.

Read the conference schedule carefully and plan where and when you *want* to be and where and when you *have* to be if you are presenting a talk or poster! You can only be in one place at one time, so choose as wisely as you can!

What do you want out of the conference?

- ☐ Looking to increase your knowledge or skills in a particular topic? If so, it makes sense to read the programme carefully for the sessions and people with the most direct association with that subject area.
- ☐ Are you looking for new connections, potential supervisors, collaborators or new job opportunities? If so, you're more likely to spend time in networking areas, building relationships with people. Remember that some people may leave early, so don't wait until it's too late to talk with them. If they are busy when you see them, ask to make an appointment for a later time.

- ☐ If you plan in advance what you want to get out of the conference, you reduce the likelihood of arriving and feeling overwhelmed by the number of people, sessions and places on offer.

2. Food and drink

You should be able to note your diet preferences/needs online when registering for the conference or gala dinner. Most diet requirements should be catered for, indeed some conferences are going 100% vegetarian due to the impact of meat on the climate. If you do not drink alcohol there should always be alternatives on offer, e.g., during welcome drinks, ‘wine and poster’ sessions and conference dinners.

3. What to wear

This is a hard question to answer! This usually reflects local customs where the conference is held or the culture of the academic group attending the conference. Generally casual or smart casual (broad yes) is what many people choose. Ultimately there is generally no dress code other than dress with respect (think also about the societal norms of the country in which the conference is taking place and the weather!). Some occasions you may want to think about switching your dress would be for the 4 main parts of the conference:

- ☐ Welcome/ice-breaker
- ☐ General attendance
- ☐ When presenting
- ☐ The “Gala” Dinner

Some attendees also wear a smart version of their field clothes or branded-wear, i.e., shirts/tops etc. with the logo/name of the organisation they work for. Always carry a warmer layer (light jacket or scarf), as some conference venues can be very cold due to the air-conditioning being turned up high!

The Gala dinner is not black tie, though getting dressed up can be fun for the occasion.

Ultimately remember you may reach the conference venue around 8am, leave after the poster session around 8pm and then go out for dinner without a chance to return to your accommodation to change. Make sure you are *comfortable*, especially your shoes. Air-conditioning can mean that you need warmer clothes inside than you do outside.

4. Attendees with additional needs

Reach out to the conference organisers about accommodations you may need if these are not clear. Some examples are:

- ☐ Live-captioning on the big screens for talks helps both people with hearing disabilities and people who have challenges with auditory processing, which is a common issue for neurodivergent people.
- ☐ Reserved seats, such as closer to the stage for attendees with vision or hearing disabilities, or who have another reason to need to be at the front.
- ☐ Chillout areas set up for getting away from the action if you're overwhelmed (neurotypical attendees can also benefit from these spaces). But even if a conference doesn't have a designated chillout area, the organizers could probably tell you where some good places are in and near the venue to get a break.
- ☐ The hidden disabilities sunflower lanyard is becoming an increasingly well-known symbol for someone to convey they have a non-visible disability, making it easier to ask for support as the symbol becomes more widely recognized. Besides at conferences, it's also being recognized at a lot of airports.
- ☐ The point of contact for IPS-Madagascar is: edei.ipsmadagascar@gmail.com

In many neurodivergent communities, the term "masking" is used to refer to neurodivergent people avoiding expressing neurodivergent traits in order to blend in with their surroundings. This can be things like hiding stims (or making them more discreet), trying to make more eye contact than normal if eye contact is expected, making small talk, which many neurodivergent people find unnatural, or staying longer than you actually want to at an event. Masking may facilitate blending in, but it is stressful to mask for a long time, and it burns through social capacity.

Some reasons someone might mask at a conference are that they are on booth duty or in some customer-facing role at the event for work, or because they are networking on a job search. It is unfortunate, but there is still a lot of stigma around being neurodivergent, so there is some risk to showing neurodivergent traits. Conferences are increasingly an inclusive space - there is no expectation that anyone should mask.

5. LGBTQIA+ Attendees

Safety information for all participants should be available from the conference organisers, but some country locations may require that there be additional information provided for LGBTQIA+ delegates. As with neurodiversity, LGBTQIA+ delegates may feel the need to ‘mask’ or hide their sexuality or gender identity. More information and tips can be found in the open access paper Being Out In the Field [Cheyne 2019].

6. Attendees with dependents

Conferences increasingly offer childcare services to support parent-delegates. Check the conference website for information, and if this is not available, reach out to the conference organisers. At IPS-Madagascar childcare service will be available throughout the event, free of charge. To register for this service check the following link:

<https://ipsmadagascar.org/the-congress/child-care/>.

7. Networking – not as scary as it may seem

Conferences are an amazing opportunity to catch up with old friends, make new ones and make professional connections. Remember, your peer group network (those at the same career stage as you) is just as important as networking with more established people.

If you are new to conferences, it can feel overwhelming, especially if everyone else looks as though they are having a wonderful time, like they know everyone and are having great fun catching up with old friends. Please remember you won’t be the only person feeling like this. Some people, however many years they’ve been attending, simply don’t enjoy the networking setting. They make their connections differently, online, or in one-to-one, quieter meetings. Every established career person will have been a conference first-timer in their past; most of us are open, friendly and happy to chat. If the person you speak to does not have time (conferences are *very* busy, it is not personal), just ask if you can email them after the conference. We all have the topic of the conference in common, as a topic of conversation, or your travel/journey to get to the conference or the weather!

If you do want to spend some time networking, try this:

- If your supervisor or an established career colleague is attending too, ask them if they can make an introduction for you.
- Seek out other people who seem to be alone. They will probably really appreciate you saying hello. And if they do already have connections in the room, they'll be able to introduce you.
- Set yourself an achievable target. For example, you may set yourself a challenge of speaking to three people in the room on the first day, four on the second and five on the third. It helps to reassure yourself that you don't have to stay for the entire networking session if you don't want to.
- Have your exit lines ready. If you find yourself trapped with someone for a while, or simply want to move on, have some lines prepared, such as, 'It's been great talking to you, but I'd just like to catch that person over there for a few minutes. See you again.'

8. Asking a question and attending roundtables/discussion sessions

If you have a question for a presenter or feel you can contribute to a conversation during a roundtable or discussion, please do. The moderator of the session should allow everyone to ask questions (time allowing - if not, don't hesitate to approach the speaker(s) later). Everyone's contribution is important, including contributions from people early in their career. If you're not comfortable asking questions in English, feel free to ask the audience for help—someone can translate or rephrase your question. Also, if English isn't your first language, feel free to let others know—you're welcome to ask speakers to slow down or repeat phrases if needed. We're happy to ensure everyone communicates clearly.

9. Take notes and follow up

Whether your conversations were spontaneous, planned, random chance, in a specific networking session or the queue for coffee, you will have lots of conversations. There will be people who you've promised to send papers to, or catch up with after the conference, or who have promised to email you. Keep a note of who you've spoken to, what their contact details are, and what the follow-up actions are.

If someone has agreed to email you, don't expect an immediate reply one day after the conference ends. Everyone will be catching up on emails and other work that has been on hold during the conference, they could be travelling home, they may take some holiday time

(especially if the conference is in a place they have never visited before). So do leave things around 1 week before following up with new contacts.

10. Look after your health and safety

Get enough food and sleep, don't skip meals and assume you will function on endless coffee! Most conferences plan coffee/tea breaks into their schedule, sometimes with snacks, but this will be on their schedule, not yours. Their timings might not suit you. Carry snacks and reusable water bottles, and take breaks whenever *you* need to.

You may want to take your own reusable hot drink cup, cups at conferences are often rather small and you may want a larger tea/coffee!

It's also important to pay attention to the safety guidance on offer. Many conferences will have a code of conduct and be proactive in letting you know how you can seek support if you need it (different coloured lanyards/t-shirts etc). Check the travel guidance from the conference organisers if the conference is in a different country.

Many conferences now offer quiet rooms for a bit of downtime, parent rooms if you bring your kids, and prayer rooms. Ask one of the organisers for help if you need to use these spaces. Otherwise for a break, simply stepping outside of the venue can help. You are often indoors for hours so some fresh air is needed! Mental health is often overlooked at conferences but increasingly is a topic of discussion as it should be [Setchell et al. 2023].

11. Practise your presentation

If you're presenting, you're likely to feel nervous, especially if it's something you don't have much experience with at conferences. Nerves are normal!

Try to make sure your presentation is ready well before you travel to the conference, so you can practice plenty of times. Have a look at the open access Studying Primates book for more advice [Setchell 2019]. If you are struggling with language barriers, reach out to the EDEI committee well ahead of time to get advice or help with slide translations

If you are unsure about the use of key words and current wording updates, after centuries of 'colonial' terminology - you can read ongoing discussions [e.g., Bezanson et al. 2024], before preparing your slides and notes.

There are numerous resources about presenting skills, and most likely training you can access via your organisation, but the number one tip is practice with a trusted audience! In front of friends or colleagues, on video, speak your presentation out loud a few times before your session time. Learn your speaking rhythm (don't talk too fast) and time yourself. If your presentation slot is 15 mins, check if this is a 12 mins presentation and 3 mins questions, and stick to that. Sticking to time means we can have time for good questions.

Particularly, make sure you have your opening and closing sections rehearsed, so they're as familiar as they can be.

Answering difficult questions! Someone may ask something you genuinely did not consider in your work or don't know the answer to. This is **OK**. Always try to be polite and say thanks for the comment or question, you would like to follow up with the person who asked, and could you catch-up at the next break? A good way to network and get contact details! If someone asks a question you don't understand, feel free to ask if someone in the audience can translate or rephrase it. You can also have a colleague help translate your answer.

12. Be poster-ready

Before you start preparing your poster, check the conference format (size and orientation of poster). There is nothing worse than spending ages preparing your poster only for you to realise that the size is wrong and the display space at the venue is too small for your A0 landscape poster. You could also add your preferred languages (and ones you are comfortable with speaking) to your poster.

Presenting a poster at conservation conferences can be a more relaxed experience than giving a presentation to a room full of people, but it still needs preparation. People are likely to engage with your presentation in one of four ways:

- Only wanting to read: don't be put off if people don't look at you or seem interested in making conversation at all. Many delegates go to the poster session during breaks to take time out of the conference, so it's not personal!

- Wanting an overview: have a 60 second summary ready. You can print A4 copies of your poster to hand out or have pinned near your poster for people to take away. Or you can put a QR code on your poster that leads to a downloadable pdf file and more information.
- Wanting the story: have a five to ten minute story of the why, what, how, who and so what of your research. Point to the relevant areas of your poster as you talk.
- Wanting more: welcome all questions and take contact details of potentially helpful new connections.

13. Final Thoughts

Some conferences are expensive once you add up registration, accommodation and travel (plus visas and vaccinations if needed).

Look for scholarships and additional funding.

If you are a student, think seriously about entering the student competition for the best poster and best oral presentation. Winning looks great on your CV and may involve a certificate and/or small prize!

Conferences can give you a boost, the energy, new connections, collaborations, and ideas conservation conferences offer can provide a much-needed boost to our work and sense of purpose, plus the chance to catch up with old friends, and often to explore a new city!

Each of us has to make the assessment for ourselves about whether to attend conferences, and which ones. But hopefully this guide can help you decide and alleviate some of the conference worries you may have.

References

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