

# How to Make the Most of an Academic Conference

Advice on navigating professional meetings in all formats — in person, virtual, and hybrid.



OLIVIA FIELDS FOR THE CHRONICLE

ADVICE

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SEPTEMBER 20, 2021

**A**t the first scholarly conference I ever attended, the going rate for speaking was \$2,000. That wasn't my fee. It was how much it cost me — as a then-graduate student — to give a 15-minute presentation on my research at the premier conference in my field. The economics were sobering: I had spent two grand of my own money — on hotel, airfare, meals, cabs, conference fees — to stand at a lectern and read a six-page essay, at the end of which someone yelled, "Time!" How could anyone, I wondered, justify such a small return on such a large investment? Was it even worth it for me to attend? And who pays \$9 (well, it seemed like a lot then) for a hotel-kitchen tuna-salad sandwich?

Now, more than 25 years later, I am happy to admit that just about everything that first-timer me thought about the conference-going experience was wrong — in some cases, wildly and counterproductively wrong.

Hence this guide on how to get the most out of academic conferences. When the pandemic was declared in March 2020, we all took an 18-month pause in our face-to-face conference experiences, and it took us a while to get used to virtual conferences, too. This guide is aimed at helping you to navigate conferences in all formats — in person, virtual, and hybrid. For advice geared specifically to online events, see "[How to Make the Most of a Virtual Conference](#)."

As a rookie, I had assumed that going to conferences was all about presenting, that every conference had to be a mercenary sprint: Make yourself known to the maximum number of big shots in your field who could hire you, and attend every session, meal, and social event in order to pass out as many business cards as possible. My business cards probably still litter the streets of Vancouver, for which I apologize to its citizens.

Over the years, my relationship with academic conferences has evolved. I have played every role there is to play: attendee, presenter, panelist, keynote speaker, organizer, even bouncer (more on that later). Today I am part of a team that puts on the annual [Distance Teaching & Learning](#) conference. So I've learned a lot of good conference-going practices, both from colleagues and from personal experience.

In this guide, I hope to bust some myths and tackle some thorny issues. I will not cover the basics of presenting, since you can already find [plenty of advice](#) on how best to [prepare a presentation](#), [run a panel](#), and [deliver a keynote speech](#).

Essays on this subject have titles like “[Surviving Academic Conferences Without Crying](#),” “[Advice on Surviving Conferences](#),” and “[Avoid Becoming a Conference Zombie](#).” That mind-set of fear and anxiety doesn't serve us well. Rather, this guide is about how to have an engaging, useful, and — dare I say it — fun conference experience. It's aimed at helping you do two things: (1) Make the most of your time before, during, and after a conference, and (2) Get good value out of the meeting. Whether you are a graduate student, a new faculty or staff member, or a road-tested conference veteran, here's what to do.

[Deciding to attend](#) | [Before you go](#) | [What to do during conferences](#) | [What not to do during conferences](#) | [After the conference](#)

## DECIDING TO ATTEND

Early in our careers, we go to conferences for fairly selfish reasons: We want to pad our CVs, be seen as productive members of our fields, and connect to the powerful people who we hope will one day hire us. I, too, was motivated early on by the pressure to “get seen,” as one of my then-advisers urged. I never went anywhere without being on the speaking program, and I approached every conference as a way to show off my own skills. Bzzt! Wrong.

Why should we attend conferences? Because we need help rethinking questions about research and teaching. Because at conferences, we can move beyond academic Twitter threads, email-discussion groups, and one-on-one lunch meetings, and connect in a deeper and more meaningful way with new colleagues or old ones we don't see often. And because we can take time away from everyday routines, listen to others' big questions, and participate in meta-conversations.

In short, to find value in conferences, we have to swap the external expectations and pressures that guide us early on for [internal and utilitarian](#) motivations.

Most conferences, if you go back in their history far enough, started out as small groups of people — of similar interests and problems — getting together to share ideas and find solutions in a concentrated way. Conferences are conversations that have grown beyond those initial cliques. Likewise, if you already have a local network, a conference is a splendid next step into a wider dialogue.

To begin, determine your [primary reason for attending](#) and match it to the types of conferences available. While the following lists clearly aren't exhaustive, they represent common motivations and conference types.

Why are you going?

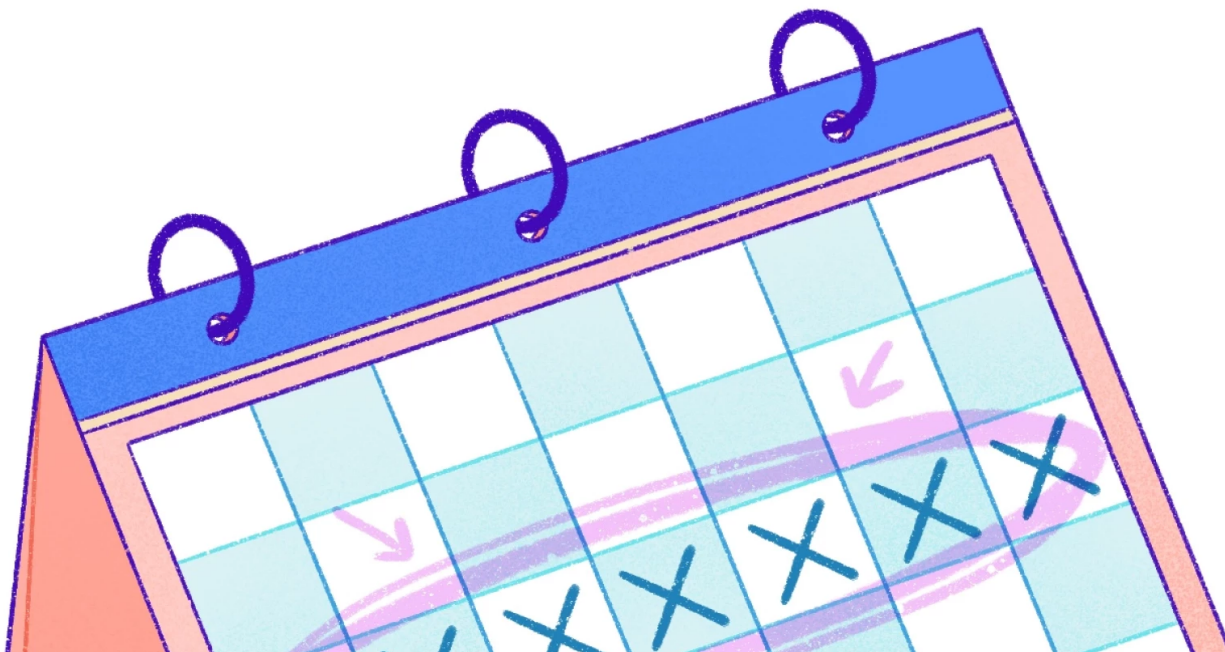
- *I'm presenting.*
- *I'm doing research on a topic.*
- *The conference will be professional development for me.*
- *My boss or adviser said I have to go.*
- *I want to make or strengthen connections in my field.*
- *It's in a vacation spot and I'd like my college or university to pay for it (wink).*

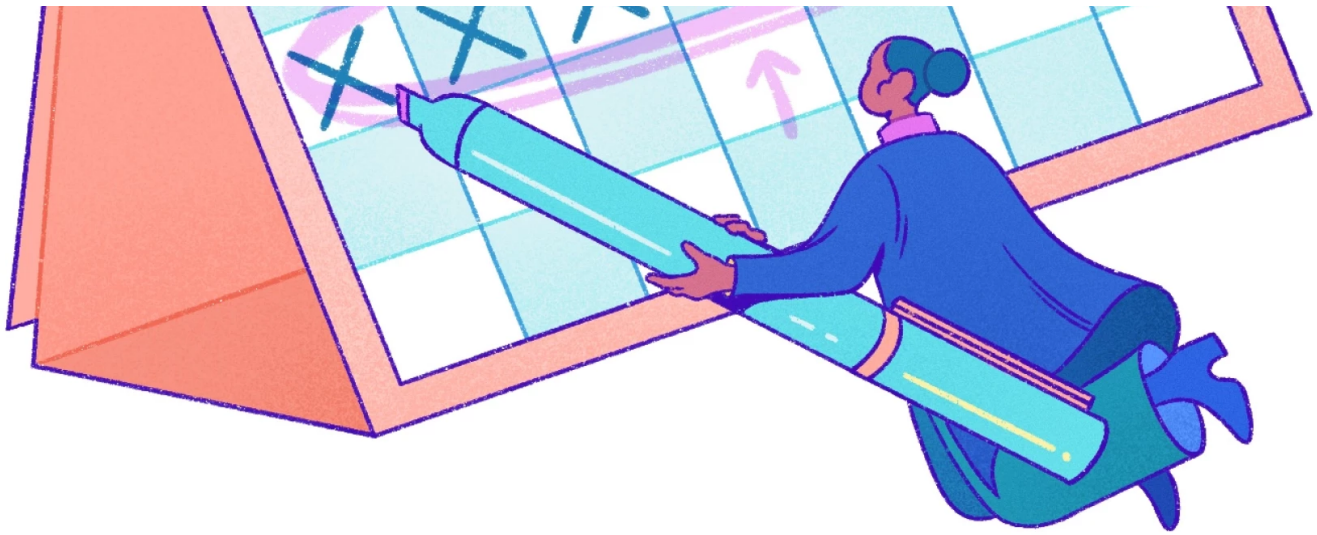
Your choice of conference depends on which aspect of your career you're looking to

share with other people. You might be looking for a meeting in which:

- We all have the same job (e.g., [Modern Language Association](#), [American Historical Association](#), [American Chemical Society](#)).
- We all want to stay current in our sector of higher education (e.g., [NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education](#), [The Teaching Professor](#), [NACUBO](#)).
- We all study the same narrow topic (e.g., [Research Society for Victorian Periodicals](#), [Society for Invertebrate Pathology](#), [International Conference on Materials and Manufacturing Technologies](#)).
- We all advocate for the same goals (e.g., [IEEE: Advancing Technology for Humanity](#), [CAST: Until Learning Has No Limits](#), [Universities Fighting World Hunger](#)).

To get the most out of conferences, your reason for going — whether you are presenting or planning a thinly veiled vacation-by-other-means — has to extend beyond self-interest. It's perfectly OK to want to shine, but if that's all you're doing, you are missing out on the biggest value of all: connection.





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## BEFORE YOU GO

Once you have decided which conference to attend, it's time for a little prep work.

**Clear your calendar during the conference.** This is a best practice that newer attendees often do, but we seasoned conference-goers sometimes forget. We've all had — or been — that colleague who was away at a conference but still sent batches of work-related emails at 10 p.m. nightly. If you can help it, don't be that person.

Conferences are meant to be deep-dive pauses from your everyday work. So set your email [out-of-office notification](#), and block off the time on your schedule. Enlist the help of colleagues to cover your responsibilities while you are attending. Look through the program ahead of time, and send session presenters a quick email or social-media message to say you'll be at their sessions. Most important, download the conference app or bookmark the conference web site that contains the links or instructions for attending programming and social functions.

A special note for virtual conferences: The most common reason people don't get

value out of a virtual event is that [they don't make time for it](#). During an in-person conference, your colleagues don't expect you to be interacting for work purposes (at least, not as much). Set up the same expectations for an online conference. Being able to focus only on the conference will help you to collect more meaningful ideas and practices for yourself and your colleagues.

**Plan to bring back two kinds of souvenirs.** There are layers of privilege inherent in being able to go to conferences, so when you ask colleagues to cover for you while you're traveling, it's kind to ask them what you can bring back for them:

- Think first in terms of [modest gifts](#) — such as food items that you can't get at home. (Almost nobody wants a magnet with a picture of a city they haven't visited, so quit gifting those, already!)
- Ask, too, about what you can bring back in terms of ideas. Share the conference program with colleagues, and ask which sessions and topics they would like to learn more about. Plan to attend some of those, with the goal of doing peer training or at least a coffee-time conversation to share what you experienced.

**Figure out the logistics.** Even though this guide won't go into detail about how to set up your travel, lodging, and finances, it's no fun trying to arrange those things at the last minute. Try to finalize the details, ideally, at least two months before the meeting. Especially for graduate students and contingent instructors, it can be a struggle to [pay costs upfront](#). If your program requires you to prepay and then be reimbursed after the event, ask both your administrators and conference organizers about options. Pro tip: Organizers usually don't put this on the conference website, but they can often offer discounted registration fees, scholarships, or stipends [in return for help](#) during, or leading up to, the conference.

In your planning, don't forget to include some family, friend, or fun time in the city

where the conference is being held. Conference days routinely run from early in the morning until late at night — far longer than a typical workday. It's OK (and even necessary) to plan some [downtime](#). Yes, your goal is to make the most of the meeting, but that doesn't mean burning yourself out trying to “[do all the things](#).”

If the conference is online, logistics and setup are just as important. Once you have downloaded the conference app, the live-session software, and/or the interaction software (things like polling or shared-document apps), practice with them. Find out which tech tools will be used by presenters of your preferred sessions — beyond the shared-session software (you might need to reach out if such details aren't listed in the session description). Make sure your web camera, headphones (*please [use them](#)*), and microphone work with the software, too.

Well-prepared organizers of online conferences will provide opportunities — ahead of the event — for self-guided and/or facilitated practice with the main tools used for sessions, as well as those for social interactions like chat apps. Find and attend a practice session, or request one.

**Select a path ... but not in permanent ink.** The advice you'll find online on how to choose conference sessions and activities is all over the map, ranging from “[catch everything](#),” to “[go to the plenary lecture](#),” and “[coffee breaks, receptions, and group meals](#),” to “[plan every minute out ahead of time](#),” to “[bring food, water, and a good book](#).”

I see four strategic ways to approach the conference program:

- **By topic.** Do a deep dive into [a specific topic of your field](#). This is useful for meeting colleagues who could become research, practice, and communication partners.
- **By a particular work challenge.** Select interactions that speak to obstacles you

are seeking to resolve in your work. Doing so allows you to connect with people who face similar challenges (many a working group has risen from conference conversations).

- **By longevity.** If you are a new or midcareer member of your field, find ways to interact with the people who have been around for a long time, or those who are publishing and sharing approaches related to the kind of work that you do, or hope to do. Evolve [your own approach over time](#), using conferences as opportunities for peer learning and professional development.
- **By things you don't know.** Been there, done that, seen it all already? If you are an expert practitioner, find conference sessions outside of your lane, led by people you don't yet know. Just be a humble newbie, and not a "[this is more of a comment than a question](#)" sort of attendee.

Conference organizers often schedule some [open time](#) during meeting days. But if they haven't, plan to skip some sessions for down time or [social interaction](#) (impromptu conversations, calls home). Write your session selections [in pencil](#) (either literally or metaphorically), so that you don't feel honor bound to attend everything.

Many conferences have downloadable mobile apps that [you can use](#) to select sessions and create a custom schedule. That way, you don't have to wade through a lot of information to see where you are going next. A longstanding part of my conference prep, even today, is to create an analog version of my custom schedule on scrap paper. I write the conference Wi-Fi code, session start times, and the names and locations of events. My handwritten schedule doesn't require a Wi-Fi connection, is easy to adjust, and is the fastest way I know of to see where I'm headed next. OK, so I'm a [Luddite](#). Don't @ me about this, though: The real takeaway here is to use whatever planning tools work best for you.

**Do some pre-networking.** I don't mean the oily schmoozing that many people

think of when they hear the word “networking.” And I don’t mean re-creating my 1998 rain of business cards over Vancouver. Rather, scan the program for familiar names, look at [an attendee list](#), or ask [people in your various networks](#) if they are attending.

Then, based on your goals for the conference, ask to meet up with a select few. Ask [ahead of time](#) to catch up with colleagues whom you haven’t seen in a while; connect to people whose work you have read and want to explore; or offer to be a [conference buddy](#) for an acquaintance you hope to get to know. It can be this easy to set up:

- Dani Sanchez [tweeted](#) to Kevin Gannon, “@TheTattooedProf hey! I saw that you are on the DPL program! I plan to attend your workshop. Want to grab a beer, meal, or coffee at some point?” That’s pretty much how you do it. For the record, Kevin said yes.

The key words here: *select few*. Over a three-day conference, you’ll get more out of 30-minute conversations with five people than you would rushing through 10-minute chats with 15.

**Pack like a pro.** The temperature in conference rooms will vary from tropical to arctic. There are never enough wall outlets for charging your devices. The plated lunch will include garlic, onions, asparagus, and liverwurst. Your pen will run out of ink. A colleague who has just sneezed will try to shake hands with you. [Be prepared](#). In addition to the usual phone charger, notepad, and other everyday items, pack for the possibilities, too:

- A roomy tote bag for all those handouts. (I usually bring one from previous conferences — it stands out from the event bag that most everyone else is carrying. Plus, I get to choose its size and features ahead of time.)

- Business cards (more on this below).
- A power strip (you will make friends just by having this).
- A charged-up portable power bank (often available as a freebie from a conference vendor).
- Extra pens.
- A notepad or other method for note-taking.
- Gum or breath mints.
- Hand sanitizer.
- Mask(s).
- An empty bottle for water.
- Light snacks.
- A sweater, shawl, or jacket that you can layer over other professional attire.
- Comfortable walking shoes.
- Small adhesive bandages for potential blisters.
- A foldable hand fan.

Conferences are one of the few places where all attendees are expected to be carrying around large bags, so take advantage of that fact. Don't overstuff your tote bag, though: Leave space for books you pick up in the exhibit hall or literature you collect at sessions.

## WHAT TO DO DURING CONFERENCES

Like any other gathering of diverse people, conferences have a shared set of behavioral norms. You may be the recipient of a variety of purposeful and unintended behaviors — from the socially graceful and supportive to the rude and exclusionary. Beyond everyday politeness, you can best prepare for conferences by being intentional about where you go, how you draw your boundaries, and how you choose to connect with others.

## Finding Your Way

Sometimes everything falls into place at a conference, and a beautiful attendee Zen allows you to be in the moment, fully present, and part of the conversation. Most of us never reach that enlightened state, however, because we've sabotaged ourselves — by, for example, reading and replying to work emails during conference sessions. Paul Hanstedt, director of Washington and Lee University's teaching center, summed up this problem nicely [on Twitter](#): "I'll never learn: Never ever ever ever ever never ever check your email while you're away at a conference. Never. Ever."

We grumble about distracted students in our classrooms, but look around the next time you are at a conference and notice how many of your colleagues appear to be dividing their attention. Don't be one of them. Here are strategies to help you focus on the conference and navigate this strange environment with a measure of grace:

### **Know when to stick to your plan and when to follow your gut and veer off course.**

Remember my advice to select sessions ahead of time — but in pencil? Only when a conference is underway do you find out if the sessions you thought were going to be useful actually are. Sometimes the particular activity just isn't as advertised; sometimes it is but is simply not that well done. It's useful to "[have a Plan B](#)" for just such occurrences.

**Keep your ears open.** Are colleagues talking excitedly about a speaker or a workshop that you'd planned to skip? If the thing on your schedule is a "maybe yes, maybe no," then be curious and follow your instincts.

**"Wait, where is Hall of Ex-Presidents 403F?"** Many conferences are held in massive multi-purpose venues. Where possible, find or create a printed map of the space. Trying to figure out room locations on a mobile-device screen can be a frustrating exercise: Zoom and scroll, resize and scroll some more.

The ninja-level version of this: Plan your agenda in a way that avoids zig-zagging from one end of the venue to the other. Yes, faced with two tempting sessions, I've opted for the one closest to the talk I just attended. And yes, I've selected an 11 a.m. panel just because it was close to the room where lunch was going to be held. Little known-secret: Conference organizers often schedule in-demand topics and speakers closer to meal spaces and times.

## During the Sessions

**Enjoy the Q&A (but in the right way).** The sad-but-true stereotype features a (often-senior, often-male) colleague who takes up all of the Q&A time with long-winded puffery. There is a better way, friends:

- First, write down questions for presenters while they're presenting. You will remember your questions better, and ask them more succinctly. (And if a presenter or a "questioner" takes up the entire Q&A time, you will have a record of what you wanted to ask.)
- Use the humorous-yet-useful flow chart "[Should I Ask My Question](#)" to guide your decision.
- Pay attention to the scope of the presentation, and ask questions that tie back to the aims of the presenters in some way.
- Don't ask speakers to defend or revise their entire approach in five minutes. Write down such questions, too, but save them for an email or a one-to-one conversation after the session.

**How to take notes and remember things.** Academics [continue to debate](#) whether students learn better when they take notes by hand or on a laptop. What isn't in doubt is that the act of [taking notes](#) — of any depth, format, or type — helps us to stay engaged, take in and remember key ideas, and take action later on. When I asked colleagues on Twitter for their one biggest piece of advice for conference

success, the most common tip was to take notes.

Listen for things that confirm, challenge, or add to your understanding. Most of the time, I create space in my notepad for the name of the presenter, the session title, and the eight or nine most-pertinent (to me) things I hear. That forces me to be brief and to listen for the most important and relevant material. I draw a box around things that I suspect I will want to learn more about. This active-listening note-taking process gets me away from my phone — even during online conference sessions, taking notes separately from the conference interface does the trick. I know that I’ve done a good job when I can summarize the presenter’s argument or idea on the last line of my notepad.

Here’s a good strategy used by [Laura MacKay](#), director of Capilano University’s teaching center: “I write reflections on my experiences and the sessions. What ideas captured my interest? What might be scalable at my institution? What were common ideas everyone was talking about (even if they weren’t as interesting to me)? What’s one action I can take from what I learned?”

At virtual events, two things can make the ideas you’re hearing stick: taking notes and talking with others during and right after sessions. To make the most of those opportunities:

- Before you attend a virtual conference, find out, follow, and use the special conference- and session-specific hashtags.
- Tweet, post, and chat in the meeting’s primary and side channels.
- The conference app almost always has a “connect” feature that allows you to extend the live-chat conversation beyond the session itself.
- If you meet someone whose ideas are engaging, know how you’d prefer to create a side conversation. My own preference is to set up 20-minute phone calls or live-video conversations to hear people’s stories after the conference

has ended, but you do you.

Oh, and you may be tempted to skip the real-time version and just watch the recordings of virtual-event sessions later. There will never be a “later.” Few of us can schedule time to watch the videos afterward. Rather, try to get someone to fill in for you so that you can take an active role in live conference events. You will get so much more out of the experience, and you will be in a good position to bring ideas back to your colleagues and become an advocate and trainer for those who could not participate.

**It’s not me, it’s you (or, how to leave conference sessions gracefully).** It’s happened to me at many a conference: I’ve just gotten settled into my stackable, not-quite-comfortable conference chair, and about five minutes into the presentation, I know that it isn’t what I was after. The speaker is reading bullet points off the screen to us. The session was advertised as expert-level but it’s an introduction to the topic. I won’t go so far as to say “always sit near the door so you can bail,” but I do think it’s appropriate to have an exit strategy for a session that is not what you expected, want, or need. For virtual conferences, it’s of course easier to click the “leave” button and ghost out. Consider only that you’re more likely to be missed when there are fewer than 10 people in the virtual room.

I asked fellow academics on Twitter about the etiquette of attending sessions, and many people responded similarly to what [Heather Simmons](#), a law librarian at the University of Georgia, said: “If a program is not as advertised, or just not very good, it’s perfectly OK to get up and walk out.” You might be thinking, “But that’s rude,” or “What will other people think of me as I walk out?” Your mom was right, friends: In social situations, almost no one is thinking about what you are doing because they are too busy paying attention to how *they* might be perceived.

Imagine that, during a conference session, your phone buzzed, alerting you to an

urgent medical issue at home. I suspect you wouldn't think twice about standing up and walking right out. Here's the secret: From the outside, that looks exactly the same as someone leaving because the session doesn't meet a need. People won't judge you (and if they do, tell them I gave you permission to leave).

Be sure about why you want to bail from a presentation, though. Some of the best sessions I've attended have come from people new in their field who had really interesting ideas but were either very nervous about being onstage or were just monotone speakers. Neither of those are good reasons to walk out on a speaker; they're good reasons to be supportive and stay seated. At an Educause conference a while back, a speaker confessed how nervous he was, and we in the audience called out, "We got you," and "You can do it." And he did, splendidly.

One last note on this: Don't be a jerk. Make your exit toward the side of the room that will be least disruptive to the speakers. If it will help you save face, go ahead and pretend to have that urgent phone call (really, no one will be watching you), but be quiet about it. It can be tempting to express disapproval in your facial expression or aloud. Don't. Give others in the room the respect they deserve, too. And then go find another session, or enjoy a little unexpected downtime.

**Respond to misinformation, inaccessibility, bias, and other just-wrong things.** In all of the conferences I've ever attended and helped to organize, my only real regrets are the times when I didn't advocate for the rights and voices of people at the margins of our conversations. You may have had an experience like one of these:

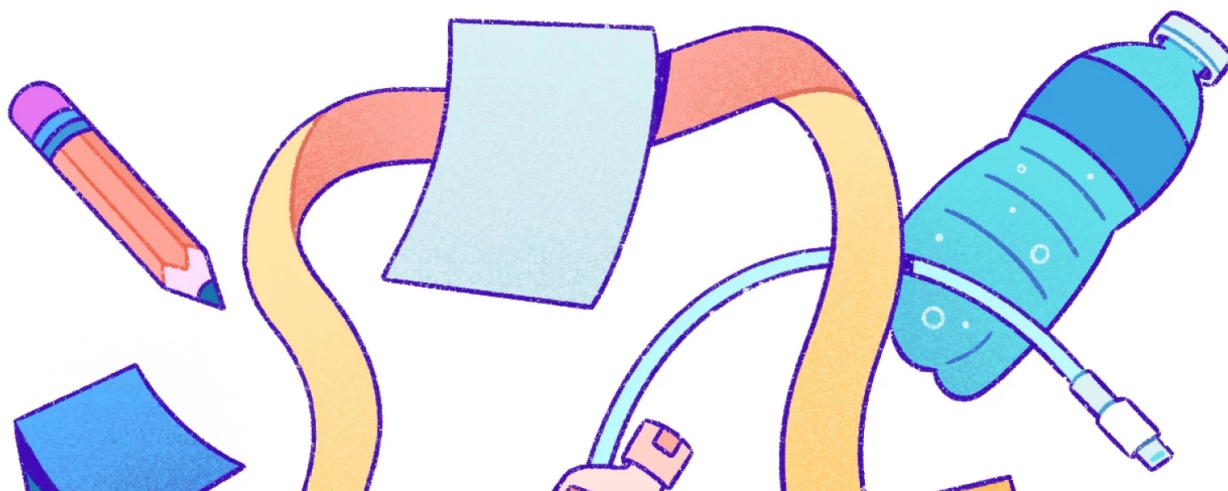
- Presenters are asked to use the microphone but insist they don't need it because they have loud "teacher voices."
- Participants in a session talk over one another, do not allow others to finish their thoughts, or monopolize all of the speaking time.

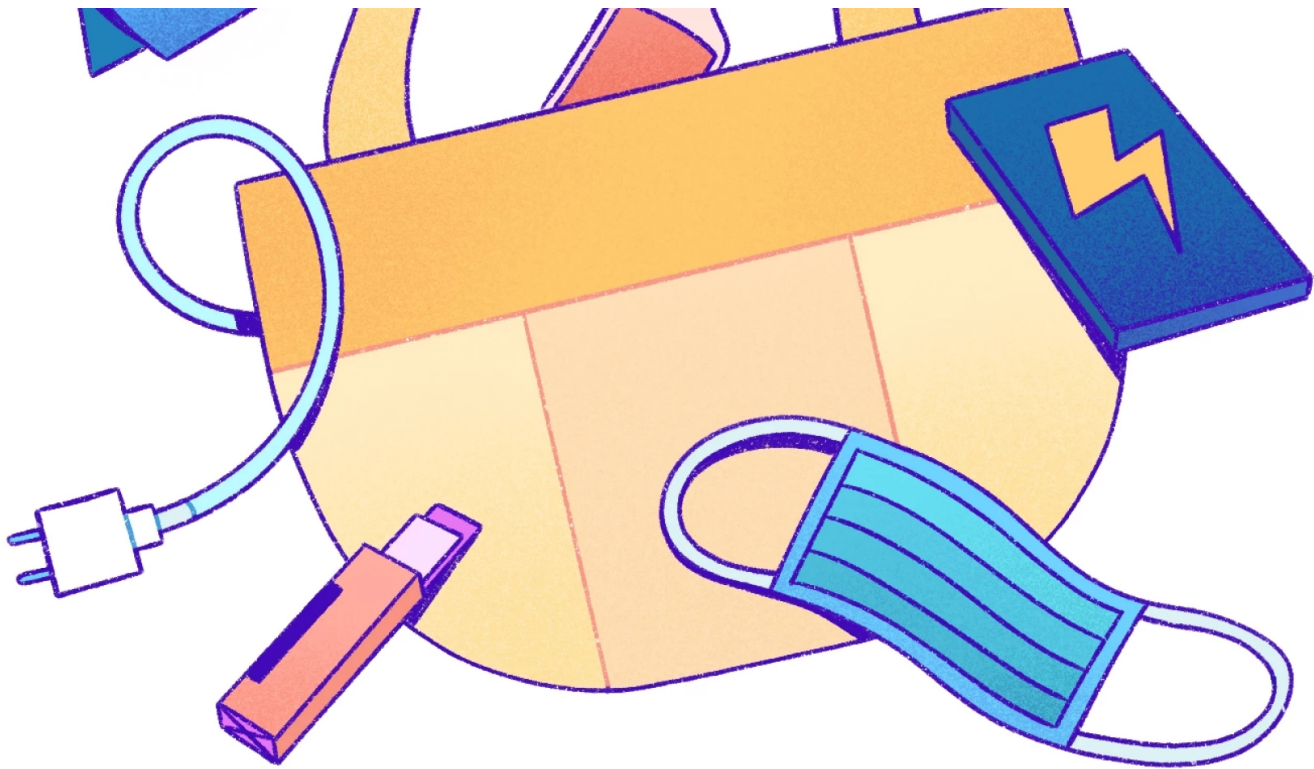
- A colleague makes a remark that offends some people in the room.

I used to let these things slide because I felt it wasn't my place to say something, especially when I wasn't part of the conference team. It didn't seem worth the risk to possibly hurt feelings or derail a conversation just to fix, correct, or advocate. These days, though, I do speak up — usually to say, “Oh, bad form” (I love that British expression), or “Hey, that wasn't a supportive thing to say/do.” I recognize that many factors of privilege support my decision to be vocal in calling out bad situations and behaviors, even gently.

So, when you feel able, please stand up for what you feel is the right way of acting, being, and communicating, especially where you can support colleagues who may have fewer options to respond. Even if you are uncomfortable speaking up in the moment, don't let wrong situations just slide. Call them to the attention of conference organizers when you can. They want to know when things aren't meeting your expectations.

Also, resist the urge to complain about things that are beyond a presenter's control. Things like a weak projector bulb, inconveniently placed electrical outlets, no microphone (note to conference organizers: [Give everyone a mic](#), already!), or inaccessible physical locations? Save those for comments to the conference team.





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## Self-Care, or How Not to Eat the Elephant

Conferences are packed full of things to do, see, and experience. Most organizers actively try to bring in ever more participants, too, as fields of study grow. Especially for events that started out as a few dozen people connecting and creating community together, growth can present its own challenges. Even for “regulars,” it becomes next to impossible to connect with or know everyone at events with more than a couple of hundred participants.

Whether you are attending a huge event with thousands of attendees and dozens of options in every time slot, or one in which the organizers have [purposely limited](#) the number of people and sessions, the best advice is to narrow your scope, create your own conference-within-the-conference experience, and practice self-care routines just like you would at home.

**Most conference schedules are not meant to be individually achievable.** They are like marathons, starting from informal, super-early meetups to social events after dinner. The latest scheduled event I've ever seen was an 11 p.m. open bar sponsored by a vendor at a conference on learning-management systems — and the next day opened with 5:30 a.m. yoga.

I recently read [a blog post](#) advising that “you will have paid an arm and a leg to attend this conference, so get every learning opportunity that you can out of it.” My advice, however, is that you try not to cram every possible minute of the day with events. You will burn out. When presented with an elephant, a knife, and a fork, do not try to eat the elephant. As one blogger put it: “Even if you went to [every single talk](#) that you could possibly go to, the existence of parallel sessions means that you're going to miss a ton of stuff anyway.”

**Pay attention to your nutrition, fitness, and sleep.** My fitness routine involves running outdoors and cross-training in a gym. I sit in front of a computer all day long, so fitness is important to me, whether I am leading up to a race or just maintaining my everyday level of activity.

When I first began attending conferences, I would wonder why my energy level, mood, and mental health would suffer toward the end of the conference and in the few days after I returned home. Then it dawned on me: I never brought my running shoes with me to the meeting, never made time for exercise, ate richer foods than usual and in greater quantities, and slept fitfully and less than normal. D'oh!

It is fine to stretch your boundaries around eating, physical activity, and sleep at conferences, but set some intentional limits. Once I started declining super-late-night conference events, saying no to desserts, requesting healthier meals where possible, and using the hotel gym, I felt better and had more energy — and I started to meet others who were making similar choices. They became my support and

accountability groups.

**Find your people (but don't go too deep yet).** Conferences are microcosms — terrarium worlds that model social interactions in miniature. In my early conference-going years, [Frank Riga](#), a former professor of mine, told me that conference presentations should never try to share all of the details of someone's research, that conference conversations should never aspire to be the entire communication between two researchers, and that the real purpose of conferences was to set up longer-format inquiry and collaboration later on.

He was right: "[Conferences aren't forever](#)." Use your conference interactions as a way to move beyond the meeting. Meet a colleague at a local restaurant for coffee. Call presenters in the weeks after the event to see if they'd like to collaborate. Find out who else is wrestling with a knotty challenge, and create a group to outlive the conference.

It can feel like you have to dive deeply into your field during a conference, but the opposite is a better approach: Just whet your appetite and snack on various topics. The real meal, so to speak, comes afterward, so let yourself be a little relaxed about your interactions in the moment.

**Check in regularly with a buddy.** Use check-ins to stay accountable to your conference goals and to support your well-being. If that's a phone call to your partner once a day, splendid. It could also be once-a-day chats with a longtime colleague, a new acquaintance, or someone you've been paired with in a formal conference-buddy program. Some people [advise against having a conference buddy](#) (the risk being that you will spend too much time with the buddy and not enough meeting new people). But so long as you and your buddy aren't attached at the hip, you can provide mutual support.

## Networking

Networking is a lot of work, and I have one overarching secret to share: Learn and practice the difference between communicating and connecting.

**You don't have to schmooze.** Remember my ill-fated attempt as a conference rookie to give everyone my business card? I assumed that quantity of connections was my goal. I probably came off as overeager and a tad desperate. It was a waste of cards and didn't do me any favors in the "I want to call you later and chat" department, either.

Regardless of your level of experience or your social inclinations, prepare an "[elevator pitch](#)" to use when anyone at the meeting asks you about yourself and your work. I've honed mine down to, "I teach teachers how to teach." If people are curious for more details, I say that my research and work revolve around issues of quality in tech-enhanced teaching: copyright, evaluating online teaching, academic integrity, and accessibility and universal design for learning.

The best way to approach networking is to try to communicate with many people — but *connect* with only a few. As [this blogger put it](#): "What's the value in meeting 1,000 people over a two-day period?"

Now, I'm always pleased to meet new people at conferences. Introductions happen, and I ask people to tell me about themselves. Most of these interactions are pleasant, brief, and don't lead to anything. They're just nice, friendly exchanges, and I don't have any expectations for next steps. My business cards only come out when:

- Someone mentions work that is related to one of my own projects.
- I know a colleague whom that person might benefit from knowing.

- I am able to help the speaker in some way.
- I am intrigued by that person's remarks and curious to learn more.

That's when I ask to connect with the person later on.

**Be clear about why you want to connect.** I share my university business cards when I want to learn about someone's research. But I also speak and consult as a sideline, so when I meet people interested in hiring me for such freelance purposes, I carry personal cards — that way, it's clear when folks are connecting with academic me versus for-hire me.

You probably don't need separate personal cards if you don't do any [freelance work](#). But [if you do](#), keep in mind: It's an icky feeling when people you've met at a conference later add you (without asking) to a mailing list for their company, or send you an email to request a phone call that turns out to be a sales pitch. This happens more often than it should, so if you have any commercial reason behind your effort to connect with someone at a conference, be upfront about it.

**Work the room.** Most conferences have events for the purpose of mingling and connecting: meals, receptions, social hours. The best ways to [make the most](#) of this scheduled socializing:

- Ask mutual acquaintances to make introductions.
- Talk with people at meals. You often [learn more](#) by sitting with people you don't know.
- Volunteer at the event. You will meet lots and lots of people if you're wearing an "ask me" button or conference-staff shirt.
- Join conversations already in progress. It's totally OK to say, "Pardon me, are you talking about [whatever topic]?" They're not going to say no.

Don't forget to help others, too: Make introductions and tell colleagues about people to whom they should talk. It can be nerve-racking trying to meet "academic famous" people; having a friend who can introduce you is splendid social support.

**Did I mention business cards?** Even in the digital age, the humble paper business card is still a useful tool for connecting after the conference ends. In the 1990s, we envisioned a future in which we would exchange contact information by [beaming it from one device to another](#). Yeah, that didn't happen unless you owned a PalmPilot. Until a better thing comes along, physical business cards are the thing.

Be selective in handing out your own cards, and take a second every time you receive one to [write on the card itself](#). I always jot down [the name of the conference and the year](#) in the corner of the card, and make a note about the person to jog my memory later on (the topic of that person's presentation, what we talked about in the hallway, or why I want to follow up).

**Tweeto, ergo sum.** Ordinarily, networking means paying attention to the people in the room, and ignoring any and all distractions on your phone — work email, Facebook feed, and your Pet Rescue Saga win streak.

The one shining exception: Twitter, and specifically, the conference's Twitter feed. Nearly every published piece I read in preparing this guide included tips like, "[Don't neglect Twitter](#)," "[Use Twitter](#)," "[Follow conference Twitter](#)," and "[Make good use of Twitter](#)." Why such love for one specific social-media tool?

Because Twitter is now the de facto back channel for communication at most academic gatherings. Conference organizers will ask you to share your ideas via the conference hashtag, and tweets are often the best way to gauge which sessions have been the most useful. For instance, Jessamyn Neuhaus, a professor at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh, uses the platform for many tasks: "[I highly](#)

[recommend #AcademicTwitter](#) for both conference pre-meetings & navigating the conference itself. Great way to be involved without constant, draining IRL [in real life] interacting.”

Proclaim yourself to be a member of the Twitter crowd. Lauren B. Collister, director of scholarly communication and publishing at the University of Pittsburgh’s library system, writes her Twitter handle [on her nametag](#). As she puts it: “I’ve met more people and colleagues, gotten the best ideas, and made the longest-lasting connections via Twitter at conferences.”

Whether you are just lurking — reading along without posting — or an active voice on Twitter, here are a few things to look for during your conference:

- **Key points.** Audiences know a pithy insight when they hear one, and you’ll see a flock of tweets from different people all quoting the same takeaway.
- **Unofficial gatherings.** At a conference earlier this year, Joshua Eyler asked his Twitter friends to meet one evening at a local pub. More than 40 of us showed up, and I met a number of colleagues whom I had known only from online conversations. This is what conferences are all about: expanding your circle of professional connections in a meaningful way.
- **Schedule changes.** Organizers will tweet about canceled and moved sessions. Publishers and exhibitors will share the times and locations of receptions, or tip everyone off to discounts at their booths.
- **Takeaways.** Individual presenters will often tweet links to their slide decks, handouts, white papers, and research sources (especially at those conferences where there is no proceedings paper or conference repository).

You might think that online conference organizers and participants would use Twitter differently — or more — than their in-person counterparts. But because Twitter is external to the programming and tools that we use during both in-person

and virtual conferences, its role is remarkably consistent: It's a "third-place" communication and sharing space.

Whatever the conference format, though, watch for how the organizers make use of side channels like Twitter. That might involve special hashtags to ask for help, Twitter handles that connect you directly to the conference team, or even custom hashtags for daily contests. Twitter is a way to expand your engagement and connections.

**And now, a special word for introverts.** Full disclosure: I am not one. Still, I find it curious that much of the advice given to introverted colleagues on how to handle academic conferences — perhaps the most intensely interpersonal social events in all of our academic work — is basically to ... fake it? Here is a sampling: "[Try not to be awkward](#)," "[be social, even if you are an introvert](#)," "[overcome your fear](#)," and "[it's worth putting yourself out there for a bit](#)." Easy, right? Conference introverts, unite! But quietly, and in small groups, perhaps?

Nah, forget that advice.

Here is my hot take for anyone who does not thrive on large, crowded, noisy gatherings: Don't feel that you have to turn into some hard-shelled battle-bot version of yourself in order to survive (there's that word again) your conference experience. Most of us in higher ed are shy when we go to giant events where we don't know anybody.

Go ahead and skip that late-night mixer in favor of alone time and a movie. When I asked colleagues for their single biggest piece of conference advice, the *Chronicle* columnist Jim Lang's entire response was "[plan my alone time](#)." Bonni Stachowiak, dean of teaching and learning at Vanguard University, printed bookmarks about her [Teaching in Higher Ed](#) podcast to use as conversation starters for "[helping my](#)

[introverted side step out a bit.](#)”

Remember, too, that the value of your conference experience is not measured in how many business cards you collect, but rather, in how connected you feel to your field and your colleagues. You control how that connection happens. If the mediating filter of Twitter provides a reassuring distance, use it. Bring one friend. Make one connection. Find one group for support. Be yourself, introverts.

## WHAT NOT TO DO DURING CONFERENCES

Certain conference practices that used to be pretty standard in decades gone by have now become more fraught or even offensive. Most of them are slowly being phased out of conference life, but a few areas remain minefields.

**Alcohol in professional settings.** Most conferences either include or allow vendors to host cocktail hours. Beyond the obvious “don’t get drunk” advice, the way to approach conference events where there is alcohol is to stay within the boundaries that you would normally observe among co-workers.

There has been a [generational shift in attitudes](#) toward alcohol at professional events. When I started attending conferences, I sometimes wasn’t even asked what I wanted to drink: Booze just appeared and I was expected to indulge. The only way I could politely decline was to say I was driving. Thankfully, that is [no longer the expectation](#). Preferring nonalcoholic drinks is more and more socially acceptable, so enjoy a drink or two with your colleagues — or don’t.

It is also entirely appropriate to decline to attend events in which drinking will take place, and you do not have to explain your reasons. Likewise, do not pressure people to attend a happy hour and/or partake when they signal discomfort around alcohol.

**Sexual attraction.** On this subject, too, attitudes have shifted significantly over time. In the era of [#MeToo](#), and with a heightened focus on equity and inclusion in higher ed generally, seeking a “[conference fling](#)” risks creating hurt feelings, deep offense, and worse. As this [academic blogger](#) put it: “The conference presents a space where academic bodies come into proximity, which too often produces climates of sexual harassment and abuse.”

If you are attending conferences and looking for a romantic partner, [there are apps](#) that allow you to signal your availability. Beyond those sure signs of mutual interest, however, it is best to adopt a practice of treating everyone — even those to whom you may be attracted — as professional colleagues. Full stop.

Coming on to another person in an atmosphere designed to be about professional interactions is inappropriate and creepy. Witness the [experience of a colleague at a recent conference](#):

“If you are a dude & notice that the woman seated next to you keeps moving her chair away from you (over and over again), perhaps, stop moving closer to her. Clearly, she doesn’t like it. Yes, this is something that just happened to me. No, I’m not happy about it.”

Respect the conference and your fellow attendees by keeping things professional while you are there. Most people *aren’t* there [to hook up](#), but to make connections based on shared knowledge and work.

That said, I know four colleagues who met their life partners at conferences. Romance — of the temporary or longer-lasting sort — is always a possibility wherever people gather. Just do yourself and your colleagues a favor and:

- Save the romance talk for places and times outside the conference proper.

- Don't disguise flirty interactions as business or professional ones.
- Make your intentions explicit, clear, and direct.
- Handle negative responses with respect for the feelings of others.

We should all contribute to a conference environment in which people feel free to enjoy the company of others in a supportive way, so be an ally and help to provide safe spaces for everyone.

**Be on your best behavior.** Remember when I said that no one is really watching and judging your behavior if you choose to leave a conference session before it's over? While that is true, it applies only to behavior that falls within the boundaries of social norms. A big part of self-care is acting within your own set of ethical boundaries, and being sensitive to the response your actions and words are generating from those around you.

As a conference organizer, I will let you all in on yet another little secret. Most conference teams have a file — my group calls ours the “Newman” list (for [the nemesis character](#) on *Seinfeld*) — of names of people we will never invite or allow back. Here's how to stay off the Newman list:

- **Remember that the staff members at the venue are human beings.** Treating them or volunteers rudely is an easy way to end up wondering why your conference proposals aren't accepted anymore.
- **Don't pull the ladder up behind you.** For all of you seasoned conference veterans out there, avoid talking down to newer members of the field and graduate students. We were all in their shoes at one point, and dunking on or complaining about less-experienced colleagues is patronizing. That's bad form, to say the least.
- **Separate the commercial from the professional.** Exhibitors, vendors, and sponsors have paid for the privilege of sharing their products and services with

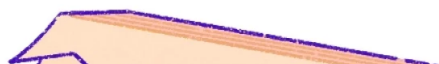
conference attendees. If you provide products or services, too, keep any mention of them brief, and don't use the conference space for sales-y talk. When in doubt, check with the meeting organizers. Remember when I said that one of my conference roles was as a bouncer? Yeah, I have quietly escorted people from the premises. More than once.

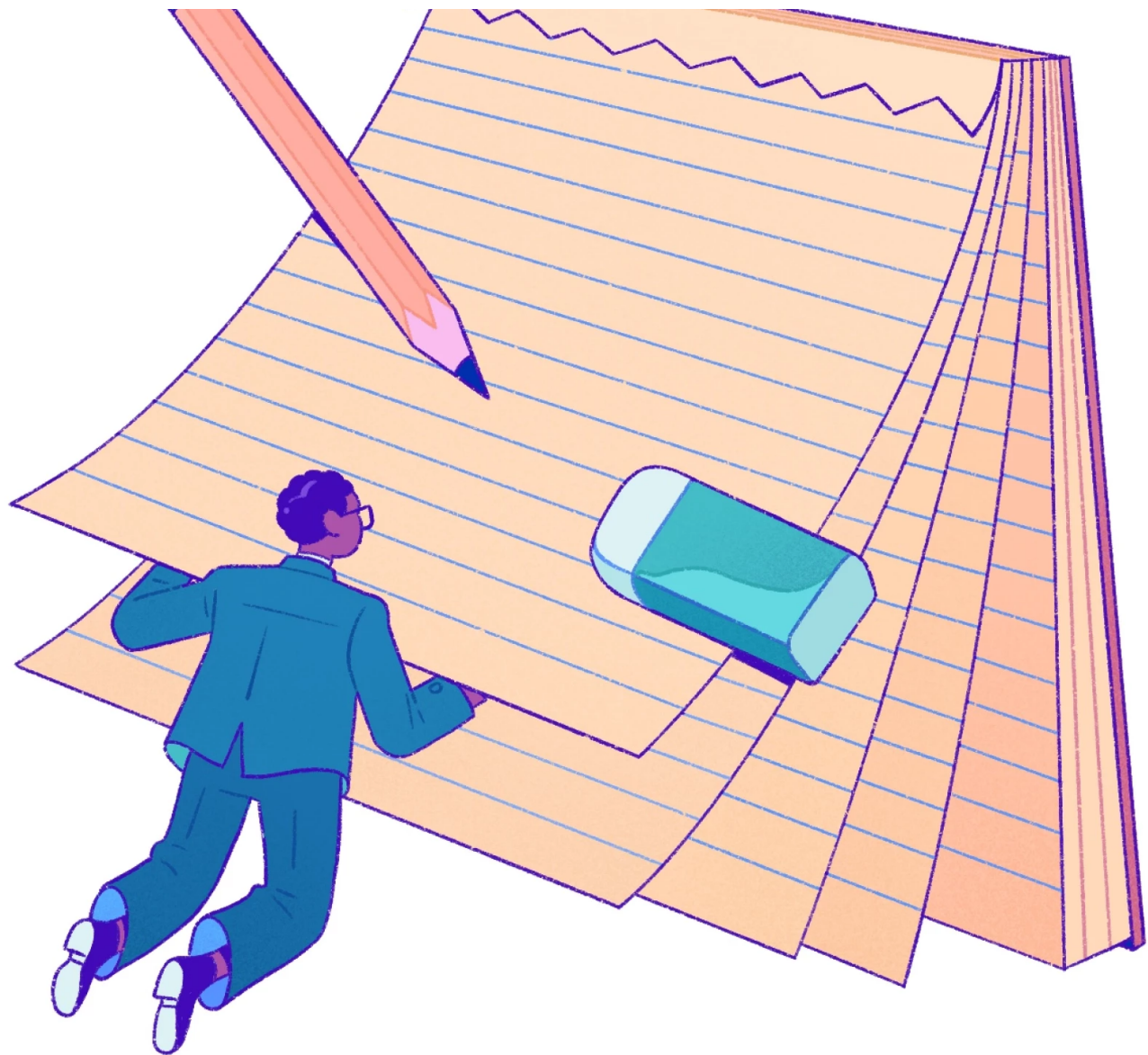
**Don't Be That Person.** Here are a few additional don'ts:

- **When you are networking, avoid monopolizing the conversation.** If you know that you tend to be long-winded, practice your elevator pitch, which should always end with “now tell me about yourself.”
- **Don't latch on to one person for the entire session, reception, or meal.** Even at dinner tables, help ensure that the conversation is shared (and pass the bread first, even before the salad comes).
- **Don't hang out just with your friends and colleagues whom you know.** If your goal is to network, [head out in pairs](#) to find and learn more about other people.
- **Don't forget to listen.** People enjoy when others are genuinely curious about them and their work, and they will usually respond positively to your inquiries.

Those “don't” situations, I'm happy to note, are relatively rare occurrences. When conversations or interactions go awry, most of us maintain a professional approach and focus on getting things back on track. So if you do end up having too much to drink, pursuing a romance that isn't mutual, or making a faux pas of any kind, please speak up, apologize, and learn for next time.

And speaking of next time . . .





OLIVIA FIELDS FOR THE CHRONICLE

## AFTER THE CONFERENCE

Once you are back in your everyday world of academic work, all of your newfound inspiration and ideas can quickly fade unless you are intentional about integrating them into your day-to-day practices. This is the part that many people skip. Why? Perhaps you're too busy. Or maybe you think you will just naturally employ everything you learned at the conference. You won't.

Instead, take the time to create value out of your experiences. Professional

development is an important component of academic careers. In the weeks after a conference, [set aside specific time](#) to incorporate in your own work what you've learned, to strengthen connections you made, and to share what you heard that might help others.

## For Yourself

- **Review your notes.** The first thing I do after a conference is go back through my handwritten notes and look for any bits I've highlighted. (My signal to follow up on some idea is to draw a box around it on the page). You will get more use out of your notes if they are in a coherent format. Try typing them up and organizing them into major themes. "Summarize important [concepts, ideas, results, and references](#)" so that they make sense for you.
- **Reach out to continue conversations.** Your stack of business cards should have quick-scribbled notes on them already. Within a couple of weeks of the event, email those people. My favorite subject line is "Great to Connect at the ABCD Conference!" Remind them of your conversation, and ask if they are interested in a 20-minute meeting, call, or video chat. I learn so much about my field on these calls, and I have made connections not just for myself, but for colleagues, too. Be selective and connect where you want to — not where you feel you are obliged to.
- **Drop the organizers a thank-you while you're at it.** We remember those messages. When we have an opening on our conference committee or advisory board, we select from the list of people who are Friends of the Conference.

## For Your Colleagues and Institution

- **Enlist the help of your colleagues and chair.** Talk with them about how to turn your conference experiences into professional-development

programming, blog posts, articles, quick-idea videos — anything that allows you to share what you’ve learned.

- **See one, do one, teach one.** That’s the mantra of many surgical training programs, and it’s useful for conference follow-up, too. In other words, learn a new strategy at a conference. Test it out in the classroom or in your research. And then, if it’s working for you, share it with your colleagues. Especially if your college or university supported you — with non-vacation time away from work, money, or both — treat your notes and follow-up conversations as [preparation for peer teaching](#) on your home campus. Brown-bag lunches, learning circles, informal talks, and communities of practice are all excellent ways to move the conversation from conference to campus.
- **And don’t just teach your colleagues.** Ask them to teach you, too, after they return from conferences.

## For the Profession

- **Share back to the world.** Make a regular habit of sharing one idea you brought back from the conference with your network on social media, discussion groups, or via your campus or department newsletter. For example, I share a weekly “[moment of #awesome](#)” message on Twitter highlighting another Twitter account to follow or a story about a positive practice in my field.
- **Find opportunities for service, volunteering, and paid work around conferences.** Once you have attended a particular conference for a while and get to know its organizers, you’ll realize that it takes a huge number of people to put on successful events. Whether you volunteer to review conference proposals, serve on a committee to publicize the event, or step up to help steer the conference, [any contribution is valuable](#) — and organizers can often reciprocate with free or discounted registration, comped hotel nights, or a stipend for your work.
- **Share your views.** Carve out time to write a review of the conference for a

journal, news outlet, or affinity group. Get meta, too. Talk about your experience of going to conferences: What do you wish were different? What do you know now that you wish you had known when you began attending? This guide is itself an example of such writing: It is based on my own experiences, the advice that dozens of colleagues have written over the years, and tips from hundreds of friends who took a minute to share their One Big Thing about conference success.

- **Mentor one another.** After you have been to just one conference, you are now a mentor. You've been there, done that, and you have valuable insights. Share them with colleagues who could use a listening ear, some moral support, or even examples of what not to do. Embrace how you can lower barriers for others.

## FORGET EVERYTHING YOU JUST LEARNED

This conference-going guide is, to quote Captain Barbosa of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies, “[more what you'd call 'guidelines' than actual rules](#).” The most important takeaway from this guide is to set attainable goals for your conference experience. Address one big issue. Find out more about one topic, area, or question about which you know little right now. Bring back one new idea, practice, or process to share with your colleagues.

Taken together, all of the practices in this guide could easily be overwhelming, so don't try to implement them all at once. Rather, select a few that speak to your experiences and test them. Build up your own best practices based on your experiences, observations, and preferences. Then share your approach with others, and hone it over time.

We are all human, and when we get together in our tens, hundreds, and thousands, things will inevitably go differently than we had planned. In my conference-going

life, I have been That Guy — through ignorance, a lack of reflection, or the addition of whiskey. As I have grown in my career and professional practice, though, I have shifted my conference focus away from my own climbing and striving and toward celebrating the connections among us as researchers, teachers, and scholars. I hope that you will join me in the spirit of supporting one another through open, honest, and searching conversations.

You will encounter people who are there only to express power, to puff themselves: Ignore them. You'll find colleagues who want to confront and examine big, tough, challenging issues: Help them. Seek out people who not only have the great answers, but also are asking the great questions: Support them.

*We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.*

GRADUATE EDUCATION

THE WORKPLACE

LEADERSHIP & GOVERNANCE

INNOVATION & TRANSFORMATION

TEACHING & LEARNING

SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

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