

Chapter 10

Preparing for Your First Conference



Abstract In this chapter, we discuss all steps necessary to prepare for your first conference. The first topic deals with selecting a conference and provides guidance on how to find a suitable venue for presenting your work for the first time. Then, we explore the possible topics for a conference paper. Based on the preliminary work you have ready, a number of topics can be suitable for a conference that later on will lead to a journal publication or dissertation chapter. The type of paper to present, as well as the topic, are closely related to the audience of the selected conference. Subsequently, we discuss the different steps to take into account when planning towards a conference, and the total time you should put in your planning when you decide to attend a conference. This scheme looks at all the steps you go through from finding a suitable conference to feeling tired and needing a bit of time after a conference to recover from the trip. Finally, we look at how you can get most out of a conference by preparing well. You might want to get in touch with someone working in your field prior to the conference, so that you can build up your network. We also discuss self-care during a conference.

Keywords Conference · Academic conference · Networking · Presentation · Travel

10.1 Introduction and Learning Goals

This chapter discusses the steps required to prepare for a conference. As conference papers are often submitted about a year prior to the event, preparing for a conference involves a fair amount of planning. The first step is to decide which conference(s) are interesting for you. Then, you need to select a topic to present at the conference so you can prepare an abstract for submission. Once the abstract is accepted, you need to make sure that you plan your preparation activities for the conference as well as the required time for these activities. Before leaving for a conference, it is important to prepare thoroughly, so that you can get the most out of your conference attendance. You need to figure out in advance which sessions, workshops, networking events, panels, etc. you want to attend. At larger conferences, sessions will overlap, so you need to think about your choices. In addition to these activities, you also need to figure out who you want to meet at the conference. Another important aspect is interaction

during the sessions, and you will learn in this chapter how to prepare yourself to ask questions and engage with fellow scholars at conferences. We finish this chapter with a word of caution: conferences are exhausting, so you need to have a plan for self-care during the conference if you want to avoid getting worn out and returning home sick.

10.2 Selecting a Conference

At the beginning of your PhD trajectory, you should outline at which conferences you would like to present your work. Don't wait until you feel "ready" to present something – it is not uncommon for conferences to require an abstract submission 1.5 years before the actual conference. Talk to your fellow PhD students to learn where your supervisor usually takes his/her students, and talk with your supervisor about wanting to present your work at conferences as early as possible.

Ideally, you have been able to discuss travel funding prior to taking up your PhD position, but if you are unsure about what to expect, then bring the topic up as soon as possible. The funding of the project you are working on is crucial here: it could allow you to present at a number of conferences each year, or it could limit you to one single conference per year. If your funding does not include a travel budget, look for other options. Many universities and professional associations provide scholarships for students to travel to conferences. You can also consider participating in student competitions, essay contents, and other competitions which can award you with travel funding.

Now that you know that there are many ways to find funding to travel to conferences, and that you should start building your conference wishlist early in your PhD trajectory, let's focus on selecting the right conference. There are different types of conferences:

- **Meetings of international associations:** The largest conferences tend to be the meetings of international associations. These associations can meet annually, or less frequently. A good place to start looking for information would be on the websites of international associations that you are involved with or that are important in your field. If you are not a member of any international association, start looking for the important players in your field. A good starting point would be the associations that publish the journals you read, for those journals that are not owned by large publishing houses. Keep in mind as well that many international associations offer free or very cheap student memberships. Once you've identified the important international associations, look on their websites for information about their events. Many international associations will also mention events they cosponsor, so you can be informed about meetings you would not hear about otherwise.
- **National meetings:** If you want to test the waters before you take your research abroad, looking into national meetings is a good starting point. While not all national meetings require you to write a conference paper, presenting your work to a smaller audience and perhaps in your native language may be a more com-

fortable first step. These national meetings can be organized by national member groups of the international associations that you follow. Another type of event is organized by research groups of universities that study the same topic, giving PhD students an opportunity to share their work with researchers in the same field. Sometimes, young member groups or student chapters of international organizations organize events in which you may want to present your research.

- **Industry events:** There's a whole array of different industry events that can be particularly interesting towards the end of your PhD trajectory, as you explore opportunities in the industry. Some industry events are gatherings of academics and practitioners in a certain branch of the industry. These events typically have lectern sessions, in which you could present your work. Inquire if there is a possibility, but keep in mind that in some fields these lectures feature only senior professors who give a more general overview of the current state of research. Other industry events are career fairs, and trade shows, which you may want to attend to learn about your opportunities after your graduation, but which do not offer you the ability to present your work.
- **Specialized workshops:** Workshops on specialized topics can be organized by international associations, or on the initiative of a few senior professors. Whereas these events typically tend to gather a small but focused group of researchers, it is more difficult for you during your PhD to learn about these events. Sometimes, these events are announced on the website of the overbearing international association. The presentations can be by invitation only, but if you are interested in participating and presenting your work, talk to your supervisor and see if he/she can get you a spot in the workshop.

Most information about upcoming conferences can be found online, and the internet (including the websites of the most important international associations) can provide you with a great amount of information. Sign up for newsletters of international associations to stay informed about the events they organize or co-sponsor. Tell your fellow PhD students and supervisor that you are looking for information about interesting conferences; they will forward you calls for abstracts when something interesting comes up. Ask your fellow PhD students and supervisor to bring flyers announcing future conferences when they travel to conferences.

Before finishing this topic, I need to give you a word of caution. If you receive an e-mail with an invitation to submit an abstract for a conference, and it looks interesting, make sure you check if the conference is legit. Check their website, and see if the event is endorsed by any international association that you know. Check the organizing committee and scientific committee, and see if there are reputable scientists involved. If you are doubting whether the conference is legit, write one of the members of the scientific committee to ask about the scope of the conference. Some predatory conferences unfortunately just slap some names on a website without asking these scholars for permission. You wouldn't expect it, but some companies have decided to make easy money with the organization of "academic" conferences: they ask high registration fees, and use no academic rigor in the peer review process (or use no peer review whatsoever) to organize conferences with the sole objective of making some quick money. Red flags for these predatory conferences are: poor

English in the e-mail, a promise for fast publication or publication in a journal, or you being invited as plenary speaker or session chair (by someone you don't know at all). If you are doubting whether a call for abstracts is legit, Google the name of the conference with “bogus conference”, “fake conference”, “predatory conference” or “scam conference” added to it to see if others have been fooled by the same organization. For an overview of conferences in structural engineering, see [1].

10.3 Selecting a Topic

10.3.1 *The Right Topic for the Conference*

The type of paper to present, as well as its topic, are closely related to the audience of the conference you have selected to attend. First of all, you need to verify that the topic you have in mind for your presentation and conference paper fits the list of topics of the conference. If that's not the case, you need to either change your topic (if you have already quite some work done, and can select from a number of different topics to present), or consider another conference. If you are not sure if a topic you have in mind is suitable, ask a senior colleague about it, if he/she has traveled to this conference in the past. He/she will be able to give you an idea of the audience of the conference, so that you can evaluate if your topic would fit into the scope of the conference and would be of interest to the audience. If you don't know anybody who has traveled to this particular conference before, try to find the proceedings of a previous edition of the conference, or check the schedule from a previous edition. Do you think your work would fit in there? Take some notes about what you learned about this conference from talking to colleagues or from looking up information of previous editions – this information will be useful when you start to prepare your presentation. You can add these notes to your research journal.

For your presentation, you'll have to tailor your story even more to the audience of the conference. Only if you are presenting at a very specialist gathering will it be fine to spend most of your presentation on your data and results. In all other cases, you need to spend most of your time on explaining the background of your research, and how your findings may impact the daily working practice of your audience, or how it could be important for their research.

10.3.2 *Ideas for a Conference Paper*

Ideally, your conference paper is a first start for what later will become a journal paper and/or a dissertation chapter. But when you're earlier in your PhD trajectory, and still have several open question marks in your research, you can still present a smaller piece of your work at a conference, see Fig. 10.1. All practice of presenting at conferences is valuable, and every opportunity to discuss your ideas with peers

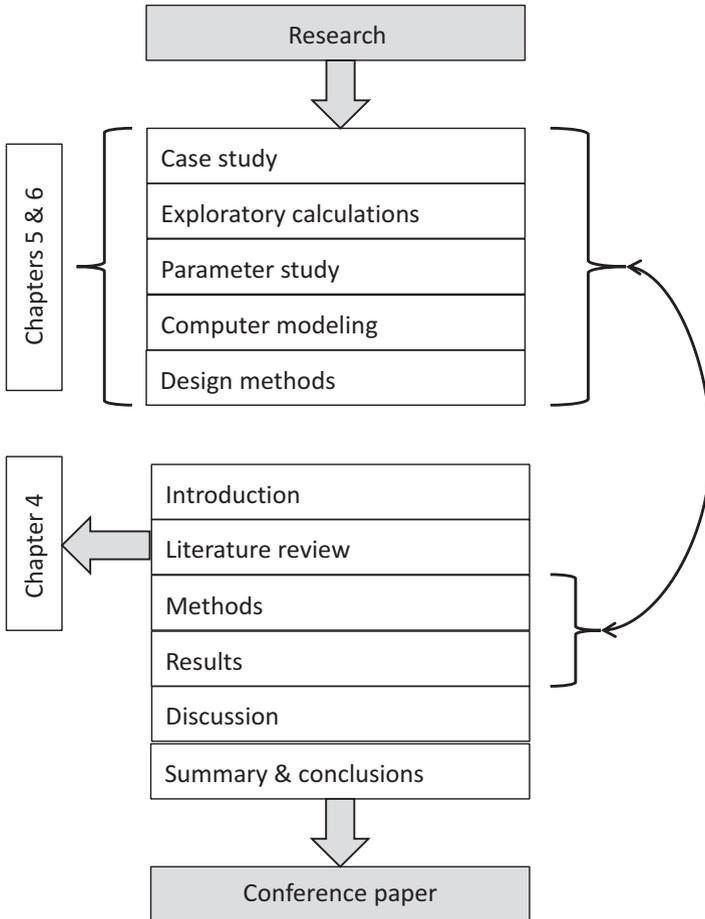


Fig. 10.1 From research to a conference paper

and senior academics will prepare you for your defense. Don't say that you have nothing to write a conference paper about. If you are doing research, you should have some material and the skills to develop something that is worth showing to the international research community. If your experiments aren't finished yet, you still may have learned something that is worth talking and writing about [2]. If your work isn't finished yet, you are in the perfect situation to ask for feedback from fellow researchers. Here are some examples of smaller research ideas that you can write about early in your PhD trajectory and present at a conference:

- **Case study:** Take an example from practice, and use the knowledge you obtained while carrying out your literature review to delve deeper into this case. Besides standard calculation procedures, you can test the outcomes of the case study with newly published theories. While carrying out this small exercise, you may either

find that the proposed theory “works”, or you can run into the boundaries and limitations for the application of the proposed theory.

- **Review paper:** The review paper is a classic, and certainly something that can be developed further into a journal paper. Often overlooked by PhD candidates, writing a good review paper is an essential skill. If your research has only focused on reviewing the literature, you can already develop your review paper for a conference. While writing a solid review paper for a journal is challenging, and perhaps a task to keep for the last years of your PhD trajectory, developing your first review paper for a conference is good practice for getting acquainted with the concept of writing a review paper. If you’ve done a thorough literature review, you should have the right information to write a solid and critical review paper that can be of value to other researchers. Focus on pointing out the lacks in the current knowledge in your field, and highlight possibilities for future research. Use your conference presentation then to bounce some of your research ideas off your audience.
- **“Mix & Match” paper:** This type of paper you can write when you have been making small calculations while preparing your literature review and/or developing your research question, as we talked about in Chaps. 4, 5 and 6. While this type of paper does not have sufficient substance to become a fully-fledged journal paper, it is a starting point for sharing your research. In such a paper, you can compare the test results from researcher X with the theory proposed by researcher Y. For a full journal paper, you would have to develop a full database of experimental results from all available literature, but for this first exploratory calculations, you can focus on a deeper analysis of a single series of experiments. The advantage for you is that you gain practical skills you need for your research: you may want to apply the theory of researcher Y to your future experiments. By practicing with an existing set of data, you will gain a deeper understanding of the theory of researcher Y, and at the same time you will gain new insights from the existing data. You develop spreadsheets or program tools to apply the method from researcher Y, which will be useful when you predict and analyze your experiments. Your understanding of the topic will deepen, and you may even find ideas for your future research.
- **Parameter study:** Parameter studies are the type of work that you can carry out in the beginning of your PhD trajectory to prepare small documents for discussion with your supervisor, as described in Chap. 5. Playing around with the effect of different parameters on different theories gives you a solid starting point for developing the required ranges of parameters that you need to test. Something as simple as using Excel to study how a certain parameter is represented in different theories, and how this variation corresponds (or not) to observations in experiments can be a valuable starting point for your research, and an interesting small study to share in a conference paper.
- **Boundaries and assumptions:** The study of the limitations and boundaries to assumptions that are at the basis of existing theories is an important step between your literature review and your own research. In your literature review, you should focus on the limitations and boundaries to the major existing theories in your field. Now you can take this work one step further, and study the assump-

tions that are at the basis of the existing theories in more detail. Ask yourself what these boundaries and assumptions exactly mean. Then, discuss in your paper what the research community should do to verify if these bounds are correct, or if the theory can be expanded to include cases that lie outside its originally defined boundaries.

- **Comparison of design methods:** This idea is deeply rooted in my structural engineering background. In my field, it is interesting to compare different codes and design methods. Take a simple case, and see how different the resulting design would be if you use different codes. Again, it is important here to discuss the boundaries and assumptions of the codes that you considered.
- **Computer modeling:** Advances in computer modeling certainly are a topic that is worth of PhD research. However, for a conference paper, you can focus on the tried and trusted methods for computer modeling. You can for example start modeling an experiment from the literature, and discuss your results as a function of the different input parameters that are required in the computer model. Practicing computer modeling is also valuable when you need to model your own experiments in the future – you will have already experimented with the software and gained some insight in the different input parameters that need to be assumed.

Exercises

1. Make an overview of conferences that can be of your interest. Start by looking at the events organized by international associations.
2. Look at your planning, and try to limit yourself to maximum four interesting conferences per year to attend (if your funding and supervisor allow). Check the due dates of the abstracts. In your first year(s), you won't be able to travel much because the abstract deadlines may have already passed, but plan ahead and see where you want to go in two years from now.
3. Make an overview table of the conferences you want to attend, the topic(s) you want to present, and the necessary budget. Discuss this table at your next meeting with your supervisor, and prepare a justification of why the selected conferences are interesting for you.

10.4 Planning Towards a Conference

10.4.1 Plan Your Time

If you've decided on attending a conference, and decided on the topic for your paper, it is time to start planning, see Fig. 10.2. Thinking about the required steps to get you to the point of success is part of success itself. Have a good look at all the

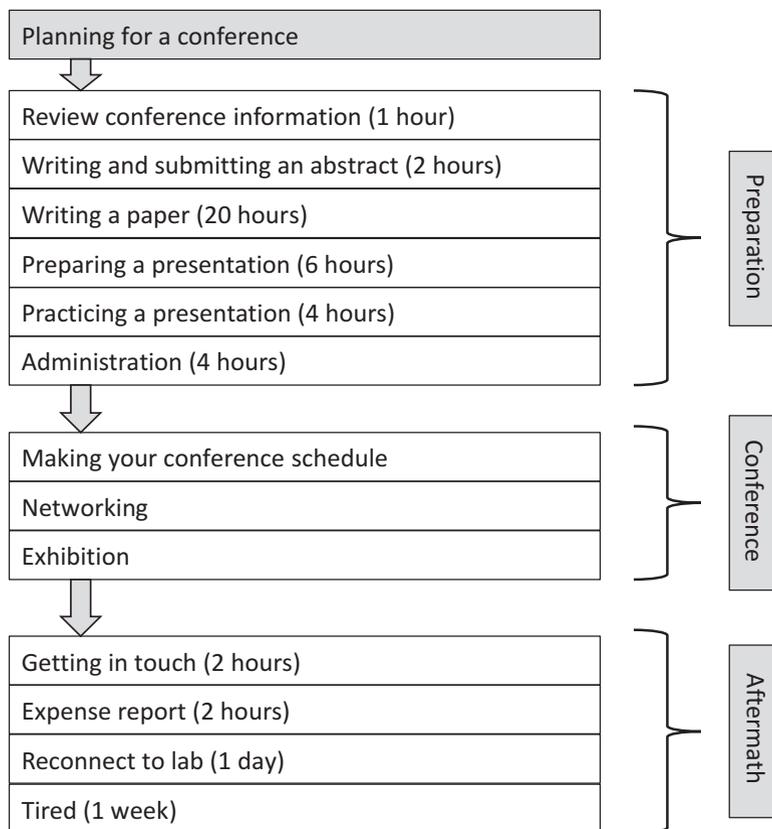


Fig. 10.2 Planning for a conference: before, during, and after

deadlines for the conference (abstract submission, full paper submission, registration, and the actual dates of the conference), and put these on your calendar. Plan in such a way that you can make it to each deadline, with still sufficient air in your planning to deal with any curveball life may throw you.

In this section, I give you an estimate of the minimum amount of time that you need for each step in your preparation for a conference based on my experience. Adjust the time estimates based on the results of your time tracking where possible to get a planning that suits your working style. Make sure you add enough air and space for interruptions in your schedule. Here's an overview of all the steps you go through in the process of preparing for a conference, so these are all the steps you should add to your planning.

1. Step 1: Preparation – 37 hours

- 1.1. **Reviewing the conference information – 1 hour:** I'm assuming here you have already figured out which conferences are important in your field – otherwise you should set aside an afternoon to browse the websites of inter-

national organizations and look for interesting events, as we discussed before. Say that you have decided on a conference and on a topic for your paper, then you still need at least one hour to familiarize yourself with all conference information. This information includes all the important deadlines, and the formatting requirements for your abstract. Have a quick look at the location of the conference, the airfare, and other practical elements to update your budget and to know which administrative issues you need to take care of. In case of doubt, check if you need to apply for a visa. Add all these activities to your planning and list of tasks.

- 1.2. **Writing and submitting an abstract – 2 hours:** The first time you write an abstract, you will need more time, and you probably will want to discuss your proposed abstract with your supervisor. Make sure your abstract contains the four (six) basic elements: (background), problem statement, (scope), methods, results, and conclusions. To include all important information, my favorite method for writing an abstract consists of copying the following questions into a new document, and typing the answers to these questions, which I originally found in an article on how to write an abstract [3]. Then, I delete the questions and revise the text for consistency. The questions are the following:

- *Why are the problem and the results important and why should they be studied?*
- *What problem specifically are you trying to solve?*
- *How are you trying to solve the problem? Which methods did you use?*
- *What’s the answer of applying these methods?*
- *What are the implications of this answer?*

This method is discussed in more detail in Chap. 11. Submitting your abstract itself can be a separate and time-consuming task. You’ll need to enter all information of your coauthors and yourself, select keywords, and you may want to check and double-check to make sure you filled out every step correctly. Plan enough time for the actual activity of submitting your abstract.

- 1.3. **Writing a paper – 20 hours:** If you have all research ready, and depending on how much or how little you struggle with academic writing, the task of writing a paper will “only” involve the activities of making your outline,¹ writing the text, updating your figures, updating your references, proofreading your work, discussing it with your supervisor and/or coauthors, and making changes. If you’re not sure about how much time certain activities take, then track your time. On average, I needed about 20 hours to write a conference paper, and 40 hours to write a journal paper and/or special publication during my PhD. In my post-doc years, and with more practice, these numbers have gone down. Of course, everybody is different, and you may need only 12 hours for writing a conference paper, or maybe you need

¹If outlining works for you.

100 hours the first time you write a conference paper. If you have no idea how much time you need, err on the safe side and assume you will need two to four hours each day for six weeks to write your first conference paper. Start developing the paper as soon as possible after you receive your abstract acceptance. Then, track your time while you are developing this conference paper to get a better estimate of how much time you need to write a conference paper. Certainly, unless you isolate yourself from the rest of the world and your teaching and research duties, you can't devote eight hours a day to writing your conference paper. Try to reserve a time slot of two to four hours in the early morning or late afternoon, when chances of disturbances are the lowest, to write your paper. If you don't have a comfortable writing space, try writing in the university library, from home, or from a quiet coffee shop.

- 1.4. **Preparing a presentation – 6 hours:** If you have no material available, the rule of thumb is that a minute of public speaking takes an hour of preparation. For research presentations, and especially if you already wrote your paper, you will have the contents and figures ready, and your time and effort will go into designing your slides. Be careful with figures: if the font in your figures from the paper is small, you will need to adjust the figures so that they are readable for the audience.
 - 1.5. **Practicing a presentation – 4 hours:** To make sure that my presentation fits within the allotted time, I practice my presentation a number of times with a stopwatch to check if I am on time, or if I need to cut out material. Don't make the mistake of waiting until the day or night before your presentation to make your slides, and completely forego practicing your talk. A well-rehearsed presentation, that stays within the time limits, will leave a favorable impression on your audience.
 - 1.6. **Administration – 4 hours:** This part is not fun, and it has nothing to do with science, but unfortunately it is necessary to make all your arrangements before a conference. Administrative tasks include: requesting a travel budget, registering and paying for the conference, or arranging with the department of finance of the university to pay for your registration, booking the flight, booking the hotel, booking train tickets, and figuring out how to get from the airport to the hotel and from the hotel to the conference venue. If you are traveling abroad, you may also need to go to the bank to get foreign currency, and perhaps you need to apply for a visa.
2. **Step 2: The conference – 3 to 5 days**
 - 2.1. **Making your planning – the night before the start of the conference:** While I like to have my conference schedule and an idea of who I want to meet at a conference ready before I leave, many conferences make last-minute changes to their schedule. Check the final conference schedule the night before the conference, if you've managed to register and pick up your conference bag the day before the actual start of the conference. Always try to travel early enough, so that you can register the day before the start of the conference. If for any reason, something went wrong with your registration

and/or payment, you still have enough time to take care of it. If the conference bag contains a book of abstracts, you can use both the program and book of abstracts to find the most interesting talks for you, and set up your itinerary for the next days of the conference. Sometimes, the topic of a session and the actual titles of the presentations don't fully match, so make sure you check the titles of the presentations. Allow some time as well to attend sessions you would normally not attend, to learn about new topics. Find time to network or rest, or go for a walk in the conference city, if your schedule allows.

- 2.2. **Networking – 3 days:** When selecting a conference to attend, you will have had a look at the organizing and scientific committees of the conference. These people are likely to attend the conference. Moreover, have a look at the list of attendants (if available) to identify who you would like to talk to. Check for interesting presentations, and try to talk to these presenters after their presentation. Allow plenty of time to meet new people: PhD candidates who just started their research, professors with years of experience, practitioners from the industry – try to get a good sample of the population of the conference. If you travel with a number of people from your research group, resist the temptation to only hang out with people you know. Avoid the trap of only interacting with other PhD students. Sure, some senior professors can be snobbish (I've had a fair amount of belittlement at conferences because of my gender), but the vast majority of professors are actually very accessible, and happy to talk about their work – just as we all are passionate about our research.
- 2.3. **The exhibition:** Conferences that have strong ties to the industry feature an exhibition hall with companies presenting their work. Most conferences with an exhibition bring their coffee breaks and lunches into the exhibition hall. Use this opportunity to get an idea of what is happening outside the walls of academia, and to get in touch with industry partners (always good for after your graduation, or if you need contacts for ordering lab equipment or software licenses). Some conferences also provide a space in the exhibition hall for presentations from the attending companies. Try to attend some of these presentations if your schedule allows, to get an idea of the applied research many companies carry out. Talk to industry representatives to learn about the main challenges your industry is currently facing, and to get some ideas for future research projects to address these challenges.

3. Step 3: The aftermath – 1 week

- 3.1. **Getting in touch – 2 hours:** Place all the business cards you've collected at the conference on your desk, and go through these. See if you can find your new contacts on LinkedIn for an easy way of connecting and staying in touch. If someone is not on LinkedIn, send him/her a short e-mail to let them know you enjoyed getting to know them, and perhaps to follow up with a technical discussion you had by sending some of your recent material. LinkedIn makes keeping in touch easier, as it will remind you of birth-

- days and job changes, which are a good time to get in touch and ask how your contact is doing. Staying in touch by e-mail can be a bit more challenging, but typically the start of a new year or the start of a new academic year are good times to write to people you haven't heard from in a while.
- 3.2. **Expense report – 2 hours:** Depending on the system your institution uses for financing conference travel, you will have to do administrative work of some kind after the conference to justify the advance payment you received, or to receive a reimbursement. Some fun tasks here include pasting all your receipts on paper, scanning these pages, and sending the overview to the finance department of your institution for reimbursement.
 - 3.3. **Reconnect to the lab – 1 day:** Plan one day to test the waters when you return. Catch up with all people involved in your projects to see what you missed. If some elements need your immediate attention, solve the problems as soon as you can. Talk to your fellow PhD students to see how they've been while you were gone. Share your conference trophies with your colleagues: announcements for conferences and workshops, the conference proceedings, and any interesting information you learned about at the conference.² Start cleaning out your mailbox.
 - 3.4. **Tired? – 1 week:** Conferences are exhausting: you are learning and studying many hours a day, with limited time to reflect on all the new material, and then your evenings are booked full with either more sessions or with social events. Traveling to conferences, especially when having to take red-eye flights and/or traveling to different time zones can be an additional burden on your body. You'll notice that you are just a bit more tired when you return from a conference, and that your head may feel really full. Allow yourself some rest, keep some evenings to yourself, and take time to let all the new information and impressions sink in.

10.4.2 *Plan Your Activities to Get Ready*

Let's look at all the steps you go through when planning to go to a conference. You may think that all you need to do is book your ticket and go. But in reality, there are a few more steps to think about. Keep in mind for your planning that you will need time after the conference for the aftermath we discussed earlier [4]. As part of the preparation before a conference, and the unavoidable administration related to all this, there are a number of activities you should keep in mind – you don't just “show up” to a conference and assume it will all work out:

- **Request a travel budget:** A conference is work, and there should always be financial assistance for traveling to, and assisting conferences. While the idea

²And if you want to make everybody happy, share some of the free pens you scored and typical candies from the country you travelled to.

persists in some institutions that conferences are just academic holidays, and that you should fork out most of the money yourself if you want to attend a conference, most universities provide their students and faculty with financial support to attend conferences. By all means, I think it's almost criminal to ask an underpaid PhD student to pay a registration fee of 1000 USD at a conference. Every university has a different system for providing financial aid to assist conferences. Some universities have an online system in which you request permission if you can show that your project has travel funding, other universities require you to write a letter to an Important Person in the institution to get funding, and then you need to hope that this person likes you and/or is having a good day.

- **Book in advance:** Most conferences have reduced early-bird registration fees. If you have all your permissions on time, try to book as early as possible. Flight tickets and hotel registrations are also cheaper if you book in advance, and you will avoid the unpleasant surprise that all flights and hotels close to the conference are booked full. Booking early is part of being well-prepared; but sometimes it takes months for your travel budget permission to come through and you have to improvise last minute. Such is the reality of the bureaucracy of academic institutions.
- **Plan your downtime:** As mentioned before, conferences are exhausting. Traveling can wear you out physically, and all the new information tires you mentally. When you set up your conference schedule, make sure you plan some downtime.³ See where you can fit in a run or walk, or when you can try out the swimming pool of the hotel. Outline a few fun activities for the place you will be visiting: look up restaurants to try out, select a museum to visit, or plan to spend an evening catching up with friends who went to study elsewhere and who happen to attend the same conference. If your conference is organized in a beautiful historical city, don't pack your schedule so tightly that all you'll be able to say afterwards is: "It looked like a nice place – I'll have to go back there in the future with more time." Trust me on this one, you'll never have "more time". Some conferences do their best in taking you out to dine at a beautiful location, so you get a taste of the city. Even if your schedule is tight, try to find a few hours to see something of the city you are visiting. A good strategy is to arrive early: having a bit of air in your travel schedule can be a lifesaver in case you miss a connecting flight, and if all goes well you'll have some time to recover from the long flight, register for the conference, and walk around the city. Especially when you need to travel long distances or during winter months, make sure you have a day of buffer. I once almost missed the first day of a three-day conference because a flight delay made me miss my connection. I was then placed on a waiting list, and was lucky enough to get the last spot on the last flight of the day. As a result, I had to pick up my badge on the first day of the conference, where I discovered something went wrong with my payment and I was actually not registered. The whole mess of figuring out with my university what happened, and then paying the on-site registration fee myself made me lose the entire first morning of the

³We are all different and our needs for downtime differ.

conference. Let my bad experience be a lesson for you: always plan a buffer day when you have to travel a long distance. Think cost-benefit: paying one night extra in a hotel is still cheaper than missing a day of conference.

- **Have your presentation ready:** If possible, upload your presentation to the conference website before you leave. Then, check your presentation on the day of registration in the speaker ready room to verify if everything is functioning properly, especially video material. If you made your presentation in an older software version, or in a different package, your slides suddenly may look as if everything has been moved around – always check your presentation in the speaker ready room before you face unpleasant surprises on stage. You don't want to spend valuable conference time in your hotel room while you are making your presentation. Go to the conference with your presentation ready and practiced. After all these years of conferencing, I still make my presentations at least three weeks in advance, so my coauthors can check it, and so that I have time to talk through my presentation a few times before traveling. Check and double-check the amount of time you have for presenting – nothing is as annoying as a speaker who seriously runs over time, for the audience, the next speakers, and the session moderators. It gets even more annoying when everybody is looking forward to the coffee or lunch break to relax a bit. If you have four presentations in an hour, don't make the rookie mistake of thinking you have 15 minutes for your presentation – go for 10 to 12 minutes. You need to factor in the time required between speakers for announcements and introductions, and enough time for questions after your presentation.
- **Back-up all your material:** On your last day before traveling, reserve some time to print out all your confirmations: boarding pass, travel insurance information, hotel reservations, and conference registration confirmation. Figure out how to get from the airport to the hotel with public transportation if possible, to avoid the cost of a cab. Print out your slides and a copy of your paper to revise your material. Copy all information you have (e-mails about the conference, your paper, presentation, and all relevant documents) to a flash-drive for emergencies. Make a cloud backup additionally if you can. Decide which device you will take with you (laptop and/or tablet), and see if it can fulfil all the tasks you need it to perform during the conference. These tasks usually are limited to taking notes, replying e-mails, opening PDF files, and looking up directions and places to eat.

10.4.3 Prepare Your Outfits

The opinions on how important your outfits are during a conference range from “nobody cares” to “first impressions are everything”. Especially for graduate students it can be difficult to balance professional attire and wanting to be taken seriously at the game of academia with personal taste and youthfulness. And honestly, if you are a young woman in STEM, people will judge you. I'm writing this

paragraph not to tell you exactly what to wear, but to help you navigate personality and professionalism in a way that makes you feel comfortable and confident at a conference.

When you pack your bags for a conference, travel as light as possible: your conference clothes, a spare shirt in case you spill your coffee, workout clothes (an extra motivation to really squeeze in a bit of movement while you travel), and comfortable clothes for your flight. If you need to sleep on a flight, think comfort above everything else. Avoid anything with buttons that can push into your skin, and avoid short shirts – they’ll hike up during the flight, you’ll get cold, and the cold can wake you up.

If you are traveling abroad, check the weather forecast to know if you should pack an extra coat or an umbrella. Keep in mind that conference venues can have a very different climate than the outside world. If you are traveling to a snowy city in January, the heating may be switched on, and you get grilled alive. On the other hand, traveling to the desert in summer does not mean the conference venue will be hot inside; the AC might be set on arctic. When in doubt, take layers of clothing [5].

The clothes you need for a conference depend on your field. I’ve read that it is common in a number of research fields to show up in shorts and flipflops at a conference. In my field, on the other hand, it is mostly suits (not always ties). If you’re not sure how formal the dress code of your conference will be, ask a fellow PhD candidate who went to the conference before. If nobody knows, look at the website for photographs of previous editions to get an idea of the atmosphere. By all means, when you are a young graduate student, don’t dress like someone in their forties, but also don’t give the impression of being the lost student. Advice on what to wear in academia and at conferences is scarce, but many younger PhD students have taken me aside to whisper in my ear “What should I wear to this conference?”, so it’s a topic we should address. The few articles online with advice on what to wear in academia and at conferences focus on being neutral, and on almost disappearing into the background. While black, navy, and grey are safe choices, I’m not convinced that they are the best choices or the only choices you have.⁴

Your conference clothes should be comfortable. You shouldn’t be wearing something because you think you have to fulfil a certain ideal. You should wear something because you like it. Use the colors you gravitate towards naturally. If you think you should stick to a suit in a neutral color, you can still wear something more colorful underneath if you usually prefer colorful clothing. If you are in full doubt about what works for you, borrow some clothes from a friend, parent, or sibling (if you wear the same size, of course) to try out some more professional clothes. If you live on a limited budget, go to a thrift store and sift through the items to find some great conference picks.

Let’s now look in detail at a few basic pieces that you will need as a male graduate student when you travel to a conference:

⁴An excellent source is the website “Stylish Academic”.

- **Dress shoes:** Unless your conference is full of people on flipflops, you will want to wear a comfortable, clean⁵ pair of dress shoes at a conference. Dress shoes look better under slacks than sneakers.
- **Belt:** Avoid the sagging pants problem and wear a simple belt. Bonus points if your belt matches your shoes.
- **Socks:** You'll need them; especially if your walk from the hotel to the conference venue is about a mile long and you haven't been wearing your dress shoes much before.
- **Pants:** Either suit pants or slacks work. A nicely fitted and tailored pair of jeans (not the jeans you wear to the lab, of course) can work as well. Have your pants hemmed if they are too long.
- **Shirt:** Be authentic in your choice of shirt, and select a color that feels good for you. As long as your shirt is the right size and properly ironed, it will look fine.
- **Tie:** Only if you like wearing a tie should you wear a tie. If you're not into ties, you still have over 40 years of career in front of you in which you, at some point, may want to wear a tie.
- **Jacket:** Go for something you like, whether that be a suit jacket, a suit separate, a corduroy jacket, or tweed with elbow patches. The most important part here is the fit. If the fit is right, it will look and feel right. If you are not sure about your fit, go shopping with a friend to ask how something looks on you, or, if you can afford it, go to a boutique store and get something that fits and is altered to your body. If you don't want to wear a jacket because it is warm enough, then just a shirt is fine. If you are not so sure about wearing a jacket, a classic sweater can go a long way as well.
- **Bag:** Invest in a good bag for your laptop if you want to use your laptop at the conference. Your old and torn backpack is fine for the flight, but may not be the right item to wear with a suit at a conference.

Let's look at some basic pieces for female PhD candidates. First off – you have a lot of options. Start from what you like wearing. Are you usually in jeans, then go for pants. Do you prefer skirts and dresses, then stick with skirts and dresses. Look for items in colors that you like, so that you can feel comfortable and at ease. Here are some basic pieces to look for when shopping for conference clothing:

- **Comfortable shoes:** If you always wear lab shoes or sneakers, don't assume you will be able to run around for days at a conference on high heels. Look for something comfortable and stylish: either a fine pair of flats (as long as you've been wearing them before to avoid blisters), or a pair of moderate-height heels.
- **White blouse:** If you like wearing colorful skirts, you can combine this with a classic white blouse. Make sure the blouse looks crisp and has no signs of wear and tear, fits properly at the shoulders and waist, and does not bulge at the buttons. Getting the right fit can be quite a challenge.
- **Suit:** If suits are the staple in your field, invest in a good suit. Choose if you prefer pants or skirts, and get the right alterations. If you're in doubt about what

⁵Shine your shoes.

to wear for a conference, take a suit. You can always style it in different ways: more conservative with a standard white blouse, and more personal with a colorful top and chunky jewelry, or a colorful scarf.

- **Jackets:** Jackets are the workhorses of my wardrobe at conferences. Add a jacket to an outfit, and it's immediately more dressed up. As always, pay attention to get the right fit at your shoulders and waist, and avoid bulging at the buttons.
- **Cardigan:** In warmer weather, or when you don't feel like putting a jacket, a cardigan can be the necessary layer for going from outside temperatures to AC-cooled inside temperatures. Alternatively, a large scarf can have the same function.
- **Tops:** As a graduate student or young professional, a more casual or colorful top can look great under a suit or with slacks and a cardigan. If you usually like clothes with print, look for printed tops to add a pop of your personality to your outfit.
- **Conference dinner dress:** Fancy conference dinners with a dress code have often driven me to despair. Am I supposed to dress like the men who attend to conference and stay in my suit for the evening, or am I supposed to dress like the wives who show up in their long gala dresses? Sometimes, I don't have time to change and simply go in the suit I was wearing the entire day. Sometimes, I pack a separate dress for the conference dinner. If you want to pack a conference dinner dress, follow your personal taste. I like knee-length printed dresses, as this style compares best to my regular clothes.
- **Opaque tights:** If you wear a skirt or dress, you'll need tights. Depending on your field and the weather, bare legs typically are uncommon. Opaque tights have the benefit that they are a bit warmer and less transparent.
- **Big purse:** Unless you want to carry your purse, and the conference bag, and a laptop bag, all at the same time, look for a big purse or tote bag. Make sure your purse fits your laptop, the book of abstracts, the program, and all the other items you want to jam into your purse.

10.5 Getting Most Out of a Conference

10.5.1 *Navigating the Conference Schedule*

Learning how to make sense of the conference schedule can be an important part of preparing for your conference. The largest conference I attend annually draws about 11,000 attendants, and has a conference schedule the size of a book. As you can imagine, at such a conference you don't just show up and wander into a random room to see what's up. Read the conference website carefully – many conferences offer smartphone applications or applications on their website to help you create your conference schedule. If that's the case, then by all means take advantage of these tools. If you haven't traveled to a certain conference before, and there are a multitude of parallel activities, then you will need to sit down for an afternoon and

look through everything that is happening at the conference. When you return to this conference, you will know which technical committees organize the events you are interested in.

When you are looking at lectern and poster sessions, don't only read the description of the session. Often, the conference organizers identify the session topics first, and then fill these with papers as they see it fit. As mentioned before, sometimes the paper topics divert from the main topic of the session. Always check the paper titles and abstracts to select which session you want to attend.

If a conference combines sessions and workshops with their technical committee meetings, and if these meetings are open to the public, take advantage and attend such meetings. As you learn about the work of the committee, you may feel like you have interesting material to share. Don't interrupt during the meeting, but talk to a committee member after their meeting if you want to share some of your material with them. These interactions often can be the beginning of your future involvement with these committees.

When you are traveling to a conference for the first time, try to leave some air in your conference schedule to rest or explore the city. While your main goal of attending a conference is of course being at the conference, days from eight am to ten pm of technical content can be brutal. Enjoy a bit of air when you are still a PhD student – as you start to return to conferences and advance your career in science, your schedule will only be more and more packed, as you will need to squeeze in more scheduled meetings, catching up with colleagues of other universities, and perhaps even using the opportunity to work on something with a collaborator who lives on the other side of the world.

10.5.2 Navigating the Attendants

If a conference publishes the list of attendants, go through this list to identify who you want to meet. If you want to meet a senior scientist from the scientific committee to discuss your work with him/her, see if you can ask for a short meeting by sending an e-mail. If you never get a reply, don't feel offended – you wouldn't want to take a look into a professor's overflowing mailbox where everybody is demanding actions and reactions from him/her. If you do get a reply, try to schedule just a short meeting, for example during a coffee break, so that you don't demand a too large time investment. If you want his/her feedback on your work, prepare some short information to show during the meeting. A few slides, or a short overview document could be useful here.

Avoid only hanging out with your friends and peers at a conference. Try to sit at a table where you don't know anybody for lunch or for the dinner to meet new people. Sometimes, you'll find that you ended up in the middle of a group of colleagues who only interact among each other in their native language, but most of the times, you'll get the opportunity to make new contacts. During the coffee break, look for somebody who is standing alone at a table to have a chat. If you enjoy a

conversation with someone, then tell him/her that it was a pleasure to talk to them and give your card to stay in touch.

If the conference has an exhibition, don't forget to stop by and get in touch with people from the industry. Striking up a conversation with exhibitors is always easy, as you immediately see what they work on, so you have a topic to ask questions about. If you are reaching the end of your PhD, you can mention this. You'd be surprised to hear how often to exhibitors will tell you that they have job openings, and that you should have a look at their website or send them a follow-up e-mail.

10.5.3 Interacting During Sessions

If the imposter syndrome has you in its claws, you may feel insecure about asking questions during sessions at a conference [6]. You may worry that you are perhaps asking a stupid question, that you may sound aggressive or belittling, or that you will leave a bad impression on the senior scientists in the room. If you are an introvert, you may prefer written interaction over talking. I prefer to grind away in the shadows and remain unseen, but I've learned that this approach can get in my own way. Therefore, I developed a strategic plan on how to get better at speaking up and asking questions during sessions. If you feel an interior barrier to asking questions, here are three things you can try:

- **Practice small:** if speaking up and asking questions comes to you as a challenge, then start small. Don't try to force yourself to raise your hand during a large annual symposium in your field. Start by getting comfortable asking questions during presentations at your own university, and at meetings of groups in which you feel at ease. By starting small, you will learn that you won't get decapitated when asking a question. Based on this experience, you can slowly start to build up the confidence to move forward and raise your hand at larger gatherings.
- **Interact after the session:** If raising your hand during a Q&A session is not for you, you can approach the presenter after the session to ask your question. You can interact with just the presenter, away from the piercing eyes of the audience. It can happen that the speaker brushes you off, which mostly means he/she is rushing to another meeting. But most of the time, you will be met with enthusiasm, and end up chatting with the speaker for a fair amount of time. I personally prefer this type of interaction with a speaker over asking a question for a full room, but I know that both ways of interacting with speakers are necessary, and I myself equally enjoy receiving questions during the Q&A session as well as after the session.
- **Join panel discussions:** Sheryl Sandberg [7] invites women to "sit at the table", and likewise, I'd like to invite you to break out of your comfort zone and join panel discussions at conferences. Speak up based on what you have learned over the past year(s). If you've been putting in the time and work to do your research, then you know enough to participate. Don't belittle yourself: it's not because you

are just a student that your point may not be valid – in the end, you are studying a certain topic for the vast majority of your time. Participate instead of sitting and soaking up all the information. If you feel intimidated, practice by trying to speak up more at any meeting you attend.

10.5.4 Essential Self-Care

Some conferences run from eight am in the morning until midnight, including the social events, or to ten pm, with just technical content. As we've discussed a number of times already, conferences are exhausting. I typically notice after a conference that I suddenly need an alarm clock to wake up, just because I am more tired than normal [8]. With that said, if you've prepared months in advance for a conference, you don't want to miss out on the action because you're suddenly too tired and too overwhelmed. Try to support yourself as much as you can to get through these extra-busy days, so that you can get out of the experience what you need. Avoid placing extra stress on your body, and make a few conscious choices that enable you to go those few extra miles before your gas tank runs empty. As always, the key here is a good preparation:

- **Go prepared:** Don't arrive to a foreign airport all stressed out, trying to remember your hotel name, and needing to figure out how to get to the hotel. Have all these practical issues sorted out, and, if needed, come with printed maps to navigate your way from the airport to the hotel, and to the registration desk. Make sure you have your presentation ready – you don't want to spend the nights in your hotel room finishing up your presentation. Prepare everything you can in advance, so you can focus your concentration and energy on learning, delivering your talk, and networking.
- **Prioritize:** Prepare your schedule before the conference, and make sure you have a realistic schedule. Nobody can attend lectern sessions from eight am to ten pm, meet all the people, and visit the exhibition to network with the industry. Before traveling to the conference, take a few moments to list your priorities. Who do you need to talk to? Which company should you visit at their booth in the exhibition hall? Which sessions do you want to attend? When should you schedule to go for a drink with acquaintances? You can also add different levels of priority to your schedule. For example, you can give top priority to the session that you really want to attend, and a lower priority to sessions where you would like to go, but that you can skip if you feel a bit tired and need to recharge.
- **Make conscious food choices:** If the conference offers a buffet, try to compose a nutritious meal for yourself. I've once been to a conference that offered a desert buffet for breakfast, lunch, and dinner – and I simply prioritized cakes over nutrition. Needless to say, I stormed through that conference on a sugar and caffeine high, and crashed like no other afterwards. Don't overdo it with coffee at a conference. I'm not saying you should only sip herbal tea and green juices, but replacing a coffee once in a while with a healthier choice will go a long way. You

don't have to steer away from the dessert buffet, but make sure you get in your nutrients from the appetizers and main courses first. By all means, a conference is not a place to put yourself on a strict diet and live like an ascetic (unless you have to do so for health reasons). Just make sure you get your required (micro) nutrients before you dive into the coffee, alcohol, and sugar.

- **Exercise:** Pack your sports clothes, and exercise! Look at your conference schedule, and try to identify when you have time to squeeze in some exercise. You don't need to wake up super early, or forego the conference dinner to work out – any time of the day when you can free up some time will do. A conference involves a lot of sitting, so the best treat you can give yourself is exercise. Remember that you are not limited to the treadmill in the hotel gym – you can go for a run outside to see more of the city you are visiting, do an interval training on the treadmill in the hotel gym, compose a varied strength-training workout with the limited equipment in the hotel gym, do a bodyweight workout or a yoga sequence in your room, or go for a swim in the hotel pool. Make sure you find time for movement for at least 15 minutes every day.
- **Find some quiet time:** If you feel that fatigue and overwhelm are starting to get a hold of you (and remember, each of us is different in that regard), try to withdraw from the noise and hustling for about half an hour to read, sit in the sun, take a nap, or do whatever feels right for you at that moment. Half an hour is a short amount of time, but taking this time for yourself may be exactly what you need to keep going again, and may work better than another double espresso and forcing yourself to push through.

10.6 Summary

In this chapter, we looked at all the aspects related to preparing for, traveling to, and attending conferences. We first looked at which conference you should attend, and which topic you should present there. If you think you have nothing to show at a conference, we've looked at a number of topics that are suitable for a conference paper, and that you could develop for presentation at a conference. Once your abstract is accepted, it is time to start preparing for the conference. We've discussed all the elements that are part of preparing for a conference that you should add to your schedule. Additionally, we've looked at all additional (administrative) tasks that you need to consider so that you can plan all the activities involved with preparing for a conference. We also discussed what to wear for a conference. In a next topic, we looked at how you can get the most out of your conference attendance. Again, good preparation goes a long way. Prior to the conference, you should make your planning, and identify the people that you need to talk to. For those who feel intimidated by raising their hand and speaking up during sessions, we've discussed some strategies to tackle this fear. Finally, we discussed how you can use self-care strategies to get the best out of your conference experience.

Further Reading and References

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