

# Attending an academic conference

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## Goals of conference attendance

Attending a conference is a professionally rewarding experience. In addition to socializing with colleagues from other institutions and a trip to a possibly exotic locale, the two main reasons to attend a conference are to hear presentations and to converse with other researchers.

Listening to presentations will inform you of what others are doing (sometimes more clearly than the paper, and in any event with a slightly different spin and the ability to ask questions), will inspire research ideas of your own, and will expose you to different styles of presentation. (You will see examples of both excellent and terrible talks.)

As your career advances, you'll learn that even though listening to the talks is extremely valuable, hallway conversations can be even more fruitful. Do everything you can to cultivate such conversations: that is one of your chief jobs at the conference. (But don't be annoyed if it takes a little while, or a few conferences, before the task becomes easy.)

Some people are naturally gregarious; some people have trained themselves to be that way; and others can be shy about approaching people they don't know at a conference. Gather up your courage and do it anyway; you'll learn a lot, and eventually you will get better at it. (Most other people in the room were once in exactly that same position.) See below for some [suggestions on meeting other researchers](#).

You should also tell others about your research. Think about how to frame your work to convey how interesting it is. This is an important skill not just for a conference but in general. Plan your pitch, practice it with your friends, then further refine it through interactions at the conference. (Beware the trap of knowing your work so well that it doesn't sound interesting, or that you can't tease apart the interesting big issues from the details! I always return from a conference more excited about my research than when I left: it had become stale to me, but the excitement and admiration of others upon hearing of it reminded me how good it actually is.) Remember to talk first about the *goals* of your research, and only then about the *techniques* you are using. You have to convince others that the work is worth hearing about before they will be willing to listen to the technical details.

You'll learn a lot from talking about your work — seeing what confuses people and receiving their ideas and suggestions, for example — but remember that no one likes to be in a conversation in which they only listen. You need to always tell people about your work, but also be sure to ask others about their work (even doing so first). You'll also learn a lot by listening and by asking questions. Keep an open mind, and try to deeply understand their research.

## Meeting other researchers

Here are some ways to meet people at a conference. They are particularly useful for those who are shy or who are just entering a research community.

1. If someone gave a talk, then introduce yourself and ask a thoughtful question about some issue that you are curious about or found interesting.
2. Use a mutual acquaintance. It is easier to walk up to a group if you already know one of them. Making some contacts early on eases meeting people during the rest of the conference. Even just listening can help you learn. If there is something that confuses you, ask (or at the very least write down the question to ask your friends later — but typically you should just ask).
3. Use others in your group to make introductions. It's your advisor's job to do so, but he or she may often be busy (such as being involved in other conversations or making other introductions). However, it is *not* acceptable to hang out just with other people from your own institution. It is your responsibility to talk with people from other institutions. A good rule of thumb is not to join a group if that would make it half or close colleagues of yours. Another rule of thumb is that it's fine to travel in pairs — have a buddy to help you meet others — but not to hunt in larger packs. It's fine to check in with people from your group once in a while — to take a break from being social, to learn about someone you really ought to meet, etc. But use such time to recharge, not as your standard mode at the conference.
4. Talk with people at meals. Show up early to get breakfast and especially to schmooze. Going out for dinners is good, too. At lunch, meet everyone at your table, find out what they are doing, and tell them what you are doing. At conference lunches, I often sit at a random table with people I don't know, which has led to valuable new contacts.
5. You may find talking with other students less intimidating than talking with more senior people. Feel free to approach other students to learn what they are doing and to spread the word about your own research. This is an easy way to expand your circle of acquaintances and eventually meet the more well-known researchers. As a side benefit, in a few years, the students will themselves be more senior and may even be famous, and you'll already have a relationship with them.  
Being a student volunteer at a conference is a great way to network with other students. As a secondary benefit, it also stretches your advisor's research funding. It does require you to spend time on tasks such as checking participants' badges, staffing registration and information tables, etc., and to go to all the student volunteer meetings. You should try hard to get jobs that won't interfere with the conference — the best jobs are checking participants' badges outside the sessions that you want to attend, since once the talks start, you can slip inside and listen to them.
6. If there's someone on your “hit list” of people you want to talk with at the conference, just go up to that person and join or start a conversation. If you have a topic to discuss, the person will be grateful to you for broaching it, and that person is unlikely to have known to approach you.
7. Help others: make introductions and tell others of related work or people they should talk to. Not only is this the right thing to do, but others will remember and will do the same for you.

I'm sure you will come up with additional techniques of your own: use whichever are effective for you and fit in your style — but make sure that you do mix and mingle.

## David Notkin's "Advice for first-time conference attendees"

*[This is a revised version of a message that [David Notkin](#) sent his graduate students in 1993. The text is available duplicated here because it is hosted on a flaky server that is often unavailable.]*

Why are you going to the conference? The major reason is that it's good for you:

- to see the people who've written papers you've read,
- to see what's current in software engineering research,
- to start to build relationships with other researchers in the field,
- to tell people what you're doing and to find out what they are doing, and
- to find out that you're at least as smart and good as many of those researchers.

So, you should work hard to attend lots of sessions and read lots of the papers. But it's unlikely that you'll go to every session: some will be genuinely uninteresting to you. In addition, the most important part of a conference is "schmoozing", standing in hallways talking to colleagues (satisfying most or all of the items in the list above). You'll see lots of people doing this.

It's scary trying to meet "famous" people. It's usually best to get an adviser or a colleague to introduce you to others. But you shouldn't rely solely on this: it's OK (actually, it's more than just OK) to be a little (or a lot) pushy. If you see people you want to listen to having a conversation, feel free to move on up to them and try to listen (unless for some reason it seems like it's a personal conversation and is thus inappropriate). Sometimes they'll acknowledge you, sometimes they won't. But it's worth trying to get involved in these conversations when possible. (Even listening by itself can be valuable.) Of course, the best way to get involved is to ask a question: it flatters people and makes them respond to you. And you learn something.

Trying to have meals with folks is a really good way to meet them. Some people you know probably know other folks; make sure to remind them to bring you along if they set something up. There are occasionally womens' lunches, which I recommend that you join (if eligible); watch the bulletin board for announcements.

Hang out some with the folks you already know. But don't do this exclusively, since you can do that elsewhere, but you can only schmooze with other folks here. Debriefing with each other on sessions, papers, interactions with others, etc. is of value, though, and you should do this with each other on occasion.

I hope you will find the conference enjoyable and professionally satisfying.

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