



A postgraduate's guide to conference attendance - Survival tips for getting through you through the process.

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This guide on conference attendance is broken down into tips to consider before, during and after the event. Here is an overview of the contents in each section.

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Introduction

Usually quite early into the PhD journey, we're faced with the prospect of conference attendance. A flurry of anxiety inducing questions will quickly come to mind: What exactly is a conference? What is it like to present at one? What conferences are relevant for me? Do I have something interesting enough to present? Is it ok to just present my literature review and research questions or should I be waiting until I have some concrete findings from my fieldwork? Perhaps I would be better off attending some low key graduate student events to



get some experience presenting in front of my peers first before I leap to the more senior academic conferences? What should I wear?

Sound familiar? Well if so you are not alone; these feelings are completely normal. Now in my third year of study, I have come a long way from my frightened first year self, having had the opportunity to attend and present at least two senior academic conferences every year since I started. One overarching lesson I have gained from this experience is the sooner you make it to conferences the better. Conferences are a rich environment for accelerating your learning and development within your field and should be embraced from the earliest stages of your PhD. However, they represent a bewildering and scary environment for even the most confident PhDers. But fear not. There are many useful points to consider that will help you navigate this high powered terrain as unscathed as possible. Here are some tips and words of wisdom to guide you on your conference journey into the world of academia.

Pre-conference

Choosing a conference

Having decided that you're going to present at a conference, your next step is find a conference that is right for you. In choosing a conference it is useful to bear in mind that the type, size and scope of the conference will determine the breath of sessions offered. The bigger Geography specific conferences, such as the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) and Association of American Geographers (AAG) annual events, will hold sessions on a huge array of themes across the discipline and generally offer a number of postgraduate sessions which may offer a more supportive environment for PhDs at earlier stages of study.



Postgraduate only events, such as the RGS-IBG Post graduate Forum Mid-term Conference, also represent a supportive peer context for geography students at any stage of their PhD journey wishing to present. More specialised thematic conferences on the other hand are usually of a smaller scale, offer fewer sessions and represent spaces for presenting to a more specialised, subject-specific audience. The majority of these sessions will be relevant to your subfield and as such these events offer a useful space for opening up your work to the critique of peers working in your area. If you're unsure about what to attend, talk with your supervisor(s) and colleagues about it. They will usually be able to direct you. In addition, a number of online resources represent useful avenues for keeping abreast of conference calls. Geography and subject specific mailing lists and webpages regularly circulate conference updates and beyond these conference search engines are useful for searching wider afield (e.g. findmeaconference.com or allconferences.com).

Responding to paper calls

Conference season usually kicks off about three months or more before a conference takes place, beginning with the dreaded paper call. Organisers of thematic sessions will begin to send call outs for paper (and sometimes poster) abstract submissions that fall within the subject area outlined. These will be listed on the conference website and also circulated through relevant mailing lists, so it's important to stay connected. This is the time when you start considering various calls and decide which one you will be preparing and sending in an abstract for consideration.



When responding to a paper call, take time writing your abstract. Don't try to present your whole thesis in one paper. From my experience, the most succinct and memorable papers focus on one main idea or aspect of study. Consider how much time you will have to get your point across. Most conferences allocate between 10 and 20 minutes for presentations, so it's important to keep this in mind when considering your scope. Your abstract should aim to situate your paper within the context of the session/conference theme and outline your paper in as succinct a way as possible. Keep an eye on the word limit which, although usually around 250 words, varies according to different calls.

Once you're happy with your abstract, share it with your supervisor and colleagues for feedback and then submit it in advance of the closing date for the call. I generally try to respond to calls as quickly as possible. However, don't expect to hear a response from the organisers for several weeks or more after the closing date. If you do receive a negative response, try not to let this de-motivate you. Yes, it can be very disheartening to be rejected especially if you feel the call was particularly relevant for you. However, try to keep upbeat and approach it as a learning experience. If they haven't provided it already, ask the organisers for feedback on their decision and move on to the next call.

Preparing your paper presentation

If, however, your abstract has been accepted, then congratulations! Your next step is to prepare your paper presentation. The term 'paper presentation' can confuse novices as it seems to imply that you have something in written form to present. While this is not the case, some conferences do actually require you to write and submit a written paper to adjoin your



presentation. In my experience, this is usually for more specialised thematic conferences. However, the majority of them don't require you to submit written work. Either way, it's good practice to get into the habit of writing up your paper presentations; it can increase the quality of feedback you will receive and your likelihood of expanding your paper into a published article.

In preparing your paper, start as early as possible. I generally aim to have it fully prepared a week before the conference, although sometimes of course this is not always possible. There is nothing worse than arriving at the conference and still having work to do on your slides. Be prepared! And be sure to practice. Aim to run through your entire presentation verbally at least once in full before the conference. In my experience this will greatly reduce your likelihood of messing up on the day and helps to calm performance anxiety. The bottom line is that you need to be prepared. If you arrive at a conference with slides to finish it will upset your whole conference experience and interfere with valuable networking opportunities.

Register and book early

Most conferences have an early bird registration price at a substantial reduction to the full rate. As such I generally try to book as early on as possible, usually when I find out my paper has been accepted or before this if I know I will be attending the conference regardless. Upon booking you will need to decide whether you will go to the conference dinner or not, which is usually an additional cost on top of registration. In addition, some conferences offer extra seminars or training workshops that are usually held the day before the official conference commences. An example of this is the Postgraduate Forum Annual Conference Training



Symposium (PGF-ACTS), a one day event before the annual conference, offering postgraduates a supportive environment in which to network, attend workshops and develop a range of transferable skills. Events such as these usually require booking at registration and come at an additional cost. Beyond registration, you should of course aim to book your journey and accommodation as early as possible to ensure the best value for money. Most conferences will offer recommendations regarding the best way to get there and generally offer university-based accommodation options, which I tend to go with because they are generally located in close proximity to the venue itself. Also, if you want to add in some sightseeing and explore the area, plan to arrive a day or two in advance or stay on after the event. Finally, it's worth getting in contact with people you've met at previous events to check whether they will also be attending, and, if so, to arrange meeting up over dinner or some other social activity.

Make time for pre-conference reflections

In addition to preparing your own paper presentation, it's also advisable to take some time *before* the conference to reflect on what you would like to get out of the conference; for example, do you have some problems in relation to your research concept or methodology you would like to solve? Do you have anyone in particular you would like to meet? Read through the conference program and highlight the sessions you wish to attend. Setting yourself pre-conference goals in this way can help to keep you focused, minimise feelings of being overwhelmed and enhance your overall experience and sense of purpose.



Deciding what to wear

When packing your suitcase you'll be deciding what to wear. While different conferences have different styles, there generally aren't any hard and fast rules. In my experience, geography conferences are very laid back; I have seen top academics present in jeans, sneakers and t-shirts! Overall, I would say smart casual is the safest bet - you won't be too over or under dressed and will maintain a professional air. The important thing is that you feel comfortable. For the ladies, in my opinion, flat shoes are a must! Conference venues can sometimes be pretty huge and there can be a lot of walking to get from one session to the next. In addition, you might find yourself needing some fresh air and a walk around the block or nearby park. Wearing comfortable clothing will enhance your overall conference experience.

Getting through the conference

Checking in

When you arrive at your conference, the first thing you will need to do is check in. Here you will receive your name badge, conference program and any other important information relating to the event. While most conference check-ins run smoothly, they can sometimes be a little disorganized. In these circumstances it helps to be patient and nice to everyone. Often the conference welcome area will be managed by influential people in your discipline so you don't want to give a bad impression.

Choosing sessions

While smaller conferences or workshops generally only have one stream of sessions which all delegates attend together for the duration of the event, bigger conferences will offer two



or more streams of parallel sessions. In these circumstances it is especially helpful to take some time out to examine the program and take note of the sessions you will be attending. The RGS annual conference offers a huge array of sessions with themes spanning the discipline. Don't worry if you can't find something which seems relevant to your PhD research; throw the net wider and go to sessions with interesting theories or methods. Often innovation with ideas happens when we are exposed to work in sub-disciplines which we then apply in novel and interesting ways to our own field. So don't be afraid to go to sessions just because they sound interesting or fun or because you want to see a certain academic present; keep an open mind and remember that these could offer potential sources of inspiration for your own work. Ultimately, it doesn't have to be specific to your PhD to be an important developmental experience; in my experience going to something completely different often leaves me with new avenues or framings to take back to my own research. Finally, during sessions, don't be afraid to contribute to discussions – if you feel you have something to say it usually means you have something useful to contribute so don't be afraid to say it!

Attend a Research Group Meeting

Large geography Societies such as the RGS and the AAG house an expansive breadth of Research Groups. These Research Groups bring together active researchers as well as those with a professional interest in an aspect of geography or related discipline to focus on a particular thematic area of study (e.g. Social and Cultural Geography Research Group, Climate Change Research Group etc). Research Groups meet and hold their Annual General Meetings (AGMs) at the Annual Conference events, the time and location of which will be



scheduled in the conference program. If you are interested in joining a group it is useful to attend these meetings as a means of finding out more and perhaps even introducing yourself to others in the group. You might also consider going a step further to join the Group's committee as a postgraduate representative. Either way, joining a research group enables you to network with colleagues in your specialised field, keep up to date with emerging research and debates, and receive information on workshops, conferences and funding opportunities throughout the year.

Presenting your paper

Arrive at your room early and ensure that you have your presentation uploaded and ready to roll before the session starts. Depending on the chair's preferences, the session will be organised in such a way that questions come immediately after presentations or else are funnelled together in a sort of panel discussion at the end. Your nerves will most likely have started to get the better of you at this point. Breathe deeply and try to concentrate on the other paper presentation until it is your time to present. Paying attention when your nerves are rife might seem difficult at first but it will help to keep you relaxed and you will also be in a position to make connections between the papers and contribute more meaningfully to the discussion afterwards.

When starting your own talk, don't be afraid to mention you are a PhD student. It sets the scene for your audience. They will understand what it was like being a PhD student and where you are at with your academic career. If you plan on having notes in front of you, it's advisable to keep these in bullet points on one or two note cards. Having pages and pages of



print out can confuse you on your feet and gives off a less professional air. Be sure to keep an eye on the chair who will be keeping check on your time and you will want to leave space for question time which is often the most useful part. Delegates attending your session will have come because they have an interest in hearing your paper. They will often have published work in the area and hold a range of perspectives on the subject. Question time therefore provides a chance for real discussion of the sort akin to a mass supervision. Be open and try not to see critical comments as an attack; when embraced they will ultimately help you bring a new, more critical perspective to your work. As researchers we are always growing and developing our ideas. On the other hand, don't worry if you don't have any questions asked at the end of your presentation. The key point of giving a paper presentation is getting your name and ideas out there. You will most likely find that people will speak to you about your work at other times. It also helps to remember that having no questions implies that you haven't said anything totally off target or incorrect, because if you had people would tell you!

Keep connected and up to date via Twitter

In our social media saturated age, Twitter has become a key way of keeping connected and update during conferences. Conference organisers are increasingly using it as a means of connecting to the widest audience possible, and it is fast becoming an effective real time communication medium for conference goers. Conference organisers using Twitter will create a hashtag using the conference name, slogan or a short phrase to begin trending about the event. Delegates are encouraged to use the hashtag freely throughout the conference to link all conference-related tweets so that readers can access all related tweets in one place. Following these hashtags is an excellent way to keep up to date about schedules, sessions



and conference highlights. Twitter also represents a useful networking tool, enabling you to identify, follow and connect with colleagues in your field. You can tweet about your paper and highlights in the sessions you attended as well as tweet directly to colleagues (which can be a great way of letting them know you liked their talk). The more you tweet during conferences, the more you will increase your online visibility and presence. However, remember to put your phone away for periods of time as well so that you can engage with people in person too!

Networking

A key part of the conference experience is meeting and interacting with people to develop work related links and meet people who will become long lasting friends in the academy. However, this networking element is not always easy and there are times when you will feel like you just want to sneak back to your room or go home! Don't worry, you are not alone in feeling this way, it's completely normal! At a postgraduate level, networking can appear daunting. However, some tips and insights can help you along your way:

- **Networking spaces:** Coffee/tea breaks in between sessions are essentially spaces for “networking”, as are conference dinners and drinks receptions. While conference dinners usually entail an extra cost, drink receptions are events anyone can go to. They are usually hosted by a particular research group or in relation to a book/journal launch. You don't need to know anything about the group or book launch you can just attend, listen, learn and network over a drink or two.
- **Going it solo:** Sometimes when we go to a conference alone it can appear like everyone already knows each other and already have their clique groups. In these



circumstances you may find yourself standing solo during the supposed “networking sessions”. If you find yourself in this position you need to pluck up some courage to go up and approach someone on the edge of a group. As awkward as it can feel, once that initial contact is made everything else will flow. A good way to help prevent feelings of isolation is to engage in some chit chat with whoever is sitting next to you during sessions. That way you will already have someone to make a beeline for during the break! Attending postgraduate only events, such as the RGS-IBG postgraduate forum mid-term conference, at an early stage of your PhD journey can help you start growing and expanding your networking circle in a supportive environment. Conferences are as much a social event as a learning one and as you develop networks over time they will become as much about catching up with friends and colleagues you met at previous events as they are about developing your knowledge and skills!

- **Keep your name badge on:** Name badges are provided to make networking easier for obvious reasons. Be sure to keep yours on and visible throughout, even towards the end of the conference.
- **Learn some conversation starters:** It’s useful to have a few simple conversation starters to hand to help you initiate conversation, such as: What did you think of that session? What are you planning on going to next? What’s your main highlight of the conference so far? Where are you from? Etc.
- **Thesis pitch:** Be able to sum up your research in lay mans terms in 2-3 sentences max. Don’t assume that everyone at the conference will be a geographer or familiar with your field. It’s no harm to practice your pitch in advance. Believe me there’s



nothing worse than being asked what your research is about and finding yourself going on for five minutes trying to get your point across!

- **Business cards:** Now that you're a PhD student it is advisable to get some business cards so you can easily hand them out to interested parties at conferences and other networking events. This saves the hassle of scribbling down on a piece of paper every time you want to give someone your contact details and leaves a more professional and lasting impression.
- **Build your confidence:** Approaching those big shot Geographers whose work we admire, follow, and indeed are building on, can be extremely intimidating at first. However, it always helps to remember that they are just normal people like us (think about how much you admired PhD students as an undergrad and now you are one!). Yes, some people are more inclined towards the social and networking element of conferences than others. However, we all have potential here. Working on your confidence in approaching people in your field will bring enormous benefits for you in terms of your long term career development and the types of contacts you meet and connect with along the way. If you feel daunted by approaching a certain academic, go and see their paper and use this as a way to initiate conversation afterwards. In this way you can show your active interest in their work and ask how they might be able to advise you with any related issues you have. Remember everybody likes to talk about their research in one way or another especially to a postgraduate student who is interested in it and who would like to do something similar or related.



Taking time out

Conferences, especially the large ones like the RGS/AAG, can be very exciting, busy and dynamic affairs. Sometimes, however, it helps to remember that you don't have to go to everything and that it's ok to take time out. If you find yourself flagging or getting tired it is fine to miss out on a session and head to that nice coffee shop you spotted nearby to relax, recoup and reflect. Also, you'll find that conferences will take you all over the world so don't overlook opportunities to embrace the city you're in and experience some of the sights, sounds and tastes on offer.

Post-Conference

Making time for post-conference reflection

Many people write notes during conferences and do little with them afterwards. To really make the most out of the conference and enhance your learning experience it is advisable to set aside time to reflect after the conference (I like to call this "post-conference harvesting"). If you travelled to the conference, the train trip home could provide the perfect context for this. Your post-conference harvesting can include reflecting upon and processing new conceptual and methodological ideas you have encountered that you can relate to your research in novel and interesting ways, but it should also include more personal reflections on what you felt you did well and what you would like to improve upon in the future. You could also consider turning your reflections/notes into blog posts for the postgraduate forum website, something that could further increase your learning and raise your profile too!



Connecting after the event

The more you take advantage of networking, the more business cards/contact details you'll gather during a conference. Some of these will be people you want to develop further connections with and potentially pursue work relationships with in the future. As such, it's advisable to stay connected and send an email after the event to highlight that it was great to meet them and hear about their research or simply chat over lunch together. You can of course also email people you did not actually meet in person but whose presentation you attended and found relevant; in these instances introduce yourself and let the presenter know you were influenced by their paper. You can also inquire as to whether they have published anything in relation to it. Finally, if you joined a Research Group there will be ample opportunities for you to network with colleagues throughout the year. Connecting after a conference is a good way to keep in touch, exchange further information and strengthen your networks further.

I hope these tips and insights have shed some light on the praxis and politics of attending (and enjoying) conferences. Best of luck on your conference journey!