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How to make the most out of an academic conference

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Are you attending one of your first conferences this year? I very vividly remember the first conference I attended in my subfield in astronomy. It was a stellar streams and satellites conference Santiago in 2015. To be surrounded by peers and senior academics, who were all interested in the exact same topic as I was, felt incredibly exciting. Here's some advice on how to make the most out of conferences. This advice is much easier to implement if you're somewhat extroverted, and I definitely don't do all of these things for every conference that I attend. But these steps really did help me build a strong network as an astronomy graduate student back in the day.

This blog post is really useful if you're more introverted and about to attend a conference:

<https://www.thecreativepenn.com/2019/06/14/how-to-survive-a-conference-even-if-youre-an-introvert/>

1. **Who's coming?** Look up who's coming. If there's someone in particular you want to connect with, it's a good idea to look up some of their recent papers and prepare a few questions for them. This could be a professor you want to collaborate with, someone you might want a job from, or simply a peer you'd like to get to know better. The questions you prepare can be things that you didn't understand in their paper, or concepts you'd want to know more about. If you end up in a conversation with this person, you'll have something concrete to talk about, and since the subject matter is their work, they'll most likely want to talk to you.
2. **Introductions.** Ask your advisor, peer or other people you might know well at the conference to introduce you to other scientists. If you don't know anyone who can introduce you, coffee breaks are a

good time to informally chat with people. Join a circle, even though it feels super awkward at first.

3. **Notes.** Taking notes during talks won't only make you seem engaged and eager to learn, but it'll also help you stay focused on each talk and help you remember the talks better.
4. **Ask questions.** It can be very intimidating to ask questions during a talk in a conference session. As an alternative, you can write down any questions that you might have and ask the speaker in the coffee break or email the person after the conference.
5. **Practice presentations.** Giving a talk or poster presentation? Practice, practice, practice. Make sure you're on time. I like having the first 30 seconds memorized to get going. Practice facing the audience (not your slides) as you speak. I forgot this last point at my most recent conference. Be aware of your hands: Don't fidget with keys or other noisy objects.
6. **Feel nervous?** A trick I like to use is to "pretend that the nerves are actually excitement" since the two emotions feel quite similar. It doesn't always work, and sometimes I resort to "at least it'll be over very soon".
7. **Have fun!** Conferences are mainly about networking. I felt too overstimulated to network very much at my last conference, so I mostly hid in my room between talks. But if you feel up for it, conferences are a good place to get to know people in your field a bit more informally.