

How Do I Get Started? 3

Some of you may be creating a presentation for a class, and your audience will be other students and your teacher. All of the advice in this book will help you. However, we hope that most of you eventually plan to present your work at a conference. To help you down that path, let us remove some of the mystery surrounding conferences.

Choosing a Conference

Conferences can range in scope from local to international. Local conferences include those at your school, where other students and perhaps teachers present their work on the campus or nearby. As you might imagine, local conferences are a great place to begin making presentations. Too often, people shun their own backyard opportunities in favor of leaving town. If you have access to a local conference, attend! You might also have access to a regional conference, where your state or a few states create a region of researchers and offer a conference. The benefit of a regional conference again is the convenience of staying fairly local, perhaps knowing others who are attending the conference, and saving money on hotels or at least travel costs if the conference is nearby. A national conference is defined as drawing researchers from across the United States. Even a national conference may end up being held near you, which is a nice bonus. Finally, an international conference could be held anywhere in the world (even in your own town) and draws people from many countries. As you may have guessed, presenting your work at a national or international conference is most impressive because you will have a more diverse audience, but at this stage in your career, you just need to focus on presenting *somewhere*.

One of the perks of choosing a larger conference geared toward professors is the big-name researchers who will attend and probably give presentations. In fact, a conference features keynote speakers, and hearing a keynote talk is a conference highlight. You might be surprised to see that a keynote speaker is someone you read about in your textbook or someone you referenced in your paper. The author might even have devised a key term in your area of interest or moved the field forward a great deal. And you get to hear him or her speak.

On a related note, well-published researchers will visit poster sessions as well as oral presentations and talk with people who present their work. We both vividly recall a famous author stopping by a poster to chat at a conference early in our careers. What a rush! We imagine it feels like meeting your favorite actor, musician, or politician. Yes, we even made geeky jokes about not washing the hand that we shook.

To be fair, many well-known authors will give keynote talks (*addresses*) at smaller conferences. But overall, the larger the conference scope (e.g., national or international), the more likely you will see, hear, and meet authors you admire.

After you or your teacher have identified a conference, check the conference website to find out if organizers invite submissions. Keep in mind that some conferences only offer invited programming and do not allow researchers to submit their work for possible inclusion in the conference. If the conference does allow outside submissions, find out if you have the option of a poster or paper (also called a *talk*) presentation. Later in this chapter, we discuss what each type of presentation requires from you.

Each conference has a target audience, which means they also have a target for presenters. Most likely, a national or international conference focuses on professors as their presenters and audience. Keep in mind that you could consider coauthoring your presentation with a faculty member. Because your instructor likely did help you with the research, this works well. You and your instructor can decide order of authorship, who will attend the conference (you alone or both you and your teacher), and who will present the work. That said, many conferences are moving toward student-friendly sessions to welcome and encourage the next generation of researchers (students currently in their undergraduate or graduate career). Find out if the conference encourages student submissions, or better yet, ask your professor or mentor. Usually if student submissions are welcome, the conference flyer or website will say so. If you are an undergraduate, know that several annual conferences focus entirely (or almost entirely) on undergraduate research. We strongly encourage you to present at an undergraduate conference before moving on to a more diverse audience. Organizers of undergraduate conferences usually make sure students feel welcomed and encouraged. If you are a graduate student, you should be welcome at any conference beyond the undergraduate level, particularly if your mentor is a coauthor.

Next, obtain instructions on how to submit a proposal. Most conferences have a website that includes details on these instructions. Conference organizers generally require a cover page and an abstract that summarizes your work. Some

conferences also require that you register for the conference and pay when you submit your abstract for review. They do this to make sure you will present your work if they accept it. Even if they do not require registration and payment at the time of submission, you are required to present if accepted. You may find this expectation written on the cover page you submit or on the website. Either way, know that it is highly unprofessional to submit an abstract without a 100% commitment to attend the conference and present your work.

Let us take a minute to talk about your submission. Most conferences include a submission process that includes evaluation of your proposed presentation. That evaluation will then determine if your submission is accepted for presentation at the conference. So you need to make your submission competitive. It goes without saying (but we will say it anyway) that you need to write coherently and avoid typos. You should also focus on active voice and avoid passive voice whenever possible. Although APA style does not emphasize references in an abstract (because they will occur later in the paper anyway), it is perfectly acceptable to include references and a brief APA-style reference section in your abstract submission. In fact, we have even appended a graph to depict a main result in our submissions, just to give conference organizers a better feel for what we would present, if accepted. We are not suggesting that you overwhelm organizers by sending a long abstract; one single-spaced page is plenty, and half a page is fine too as long as you cover the information. Check for word limits the conference organizers might set, and do not go over the limit. A general rule of thumb is two sentences to summarize each main section of a paper: Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion. You end up with an eight-sentence abstract with a few key references and a reference list at the bottom of the abstract. Sure, you can deviate from this formula, but the approach works well when you need a place to begin.

Many conferences—particularly those that cater to student researchers—will ask your professor to serve as a mentor and sign off on the cover page that he or she approves of the submission. Even if the form does not require a teacher mentor, it is always a good idea to get feedback from someone who knows about research presentations.

As one final conference note, when proposals have been accepted and a program is complete, most organizers will post details on a website. You might want to check the final program to see your name there. A complete program, likely with even more detail, will be available at the conference, so remember to go the registration desk when you get to the conference. You can pick up your program and name badge. Larger conferences may also offer a small gift such as a bag or backpack. Be sure to keep your program after the conference ends so you can have evidence that you attended and presented. And you can show your mom, dad, grandmother, or children how impressive you are. On that same note of evidence, be sure to save all receipts if you will be reimbursed by your school. Most institutions will not reimburse any expense without a receipt.

Poster or Oral Presentation?

Usually you will be able to choose whether to present your research in poster or oral format. After identifying a conference that you can attend and getting an okay from your teacher, the next step is to let the conference know whether you would like to present a poster or an oral presentation. This decision needs to happen when you submit your work to a conference. Conference organizers can only accept a certain number of posters and papers given the time frame and space available for the conference. In general, it is easier to get a poster accepted than an oral presentation. The conference cover page usually asks you to indicate which type of presentation you prefer.

We suggest that students present in a poster format first because it is a bit less stressful and provides more interaction with the audience; however, your professor might encourage an oral presentation, or the conference may only accept oral presentations. If you get to choose, we still encourage a poster first. In this chapter, we provide an overview of the two kinds of presentations to help you decide which one you want to do. Later chapters provide many details on how to accomplish each type of presentation.

Poster Presentations

A poster presentation involves summarizing the material you want to present. Your summary will be visual and usually includes sections that match up with an APA-style manuscript (e.g., introduction, method). Your instructor might be willing to help you get started and might even have an example poster or digital template to share with you. With a poster, preparation is the biggest part of a smooth conference experience. Work hard (and early) to create a close-to-perfect poster, and you can look forward to displaying your research in a fairly low-stress setting. At the conference, you will pin up your poster and refer to it as a visual aid while you chat with people who stop by.

During a poster session, you generally will present your poster in a session where many other researchers present their posters as well. The room likely will have several bulletin boards in it, and you will use pushpins to secure the poster to the board.

Then you will stand near your poster (and others presenters stand by theirs) for 1 to 2 hours and answer any questions from conference attendees who visit your poster. Think of a poster session as a drop-in function. People come and go in a fairly casual manner, and you talk with them about your research. Although we will provide much more detail on how to create a poster and discuss it (see Chapters 4 and 5), this summary should indicate how low stress a poster presentation can be.

Poster Timeline and Tasks

If you decide to submit a poster proposal, your research should be complete. In other words, researchers should not submit a conference proposal based on what they hope to accomplish; submit finished research. After submitting a proposal of completed research, follow the table below to prepare for your poster presentation.

We realize that if you are presenting a poster at the end of a term, you will not necessarily have long periods of time to prepare. Often students are asked to give a presentation based on recent work. That is just the nature of the academic year. It takes time to put together a literature review or conduct an experiment, and you likely used most of your term to accomplish the research project. In the table below, we present the best-case scenario to prepare your poster. If you do not have time to prepare months in advance, change *months* to *weeks*, and change *weeks* to *days* in the table. The main message here is to avoid procrastination and address the steps outlined in the table. Preparing your presentation in advance is particularly important if you are interested in getting feedback from your instructor. It is not fair to ask your professor to review your work within a day or two. Give your teacher as much time as possible to provide valuable feedback. If you wait too long, you will be asking for feedback that you do not have time to use in your presentation. The last thing you want to do is get feedback and ignore it. We have seen that happen, and it is not a good situation.

Time Before Poster Presentation	Task
3–6 months	Conduct your empirical research or literature review.
3–6 months	Write your manuscript, including an abstract.
3–6 months	With the help of your instructor, identify a conference and submit an abstract of your work for consideration. If your poster presentation is in class, move to the next step.
2–3 months	Create a first draft of your poster, and ask your teacher for input.
1–2 months	Choose the format of your poster. Be sure to use a font large enough to read from a distance. Carefully proofread your poster multiple times.

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Table 3.1 (Continued)

Time Before Poster Presentation	Task
1–2 months	Discuss your poster with a few people who are unfamiliar with your topic. Make changes to clarify as needed.
2–3 weeks (procrastinating can cause a problem when the copy shop has a broken printer or several jobs ahead of you)	Take a digital file of your poster to a copy shop. Be sure of the correct size. Decide if you want to print in full color, which might be pricey.
1–2 weeks	Read over your poster in the larger size. If you locate an embarrassing mistake, rush back to the copy shop.
1–2 weeks	Make one-page copies of your poster for handouts. Usually 25 copies is a good number. Be sure to include your name and contact information.
1 week	Practice what you will say when people stand in front of your poster. Be able to summarize the project within a few minutes.
1 week	Put everything away neatly and relax!

Oral Presentations

A paper presentation requires a summary of your paper in PowerPoint format. One good alternative to PowerPoint is Prezi, and Keynote is available to Mac users. We cover how to use each program later in the book. A talk is brief; you usually only get 15 minutes. In those 15 minutes you have to present your entire paper or study, which means you have to make those minutes count. If your study involves a method and your own results, audience members do not want to hear a great deal about your literature review. They want to learn about your personal addition to the literature.

Spend a few minutes setting the stage with your literature review. What are you studying? What is already known on the topic? In other words, use your introductory slides to bring attendees up to speed on your topic. Quickly. Briefly. Then give a good deal of detail on your own method. What was your independent variable (IV), if you had one? What are your outcome measures? You might even want to provide a handout that summarizes the measures you used and offers references to locate them. Again, be brief in a handout. A handout should

only be a page or two. Next offer your results in detail, but rely on figures if possible. People love pictures! The next section is the discussion, and it should merely put your results into the context of the larger literature. Briefly indicate how your study extended knowledge of the topic. End with a list of key references, thank people you worked with on the project (especially your instructor), and thank the audience.

If you have a minute or two left at the end of your talk (and you should), you can ask the audience for questions, or the moderator of the session may do that for you. We will talk about handling questions in Chapter 11. You will find details on preparing an oral presentation in Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9.

Oral Presentation Timeline and Tasks

Below we offer a timeline for tasks to accomplish and when to complete them. Some tasks will be similar to poster preparation, but take a look to make sure you get everything done on time. Although we offer the best-case scenario with a wealth of time to work, adjust times as needed for a single-term project. Just as in the poster timeline, we suggest changing *months* to *weeks* and *weeks* to *days* if you are working within one term.

Time Before Oral Presentation	Task
3–6 months	Conduct your empirical research or literature review.
3–6 months	Write your manuscript, including an abstract.
3–6 months	With the help of your instructor, identify a conference and submit an abstract of your work for consideration. If your oral presentation is in class, move to the next step.
2–3 months	Create a first draft of your oral presentation, and ask your teacher for input.
1–2 months	Practice your talk in your head, then aloud, then to a friend, then to your teacher, making changes as needed each time.
1–2 weeks	Read over your presentation again; make small changes as needed.

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Table 3.2 (Continued)

Time Before Oral Presentation	Task
1–2 weeks	Make copies of handouts (about 25). Handouts might include your abstract or an important table, graph, or survey (as examples). Be sure to include your name and contact information.
1 week	Make a clean hardcopy of your presentation to take with you. Write notes on the hardcopy if you would like.
1 week	Put everything away neatly and relax!

Now you know how to choose a conference, submit your work for possible inclusion, and consider a timeline to prepare a poster or oral presentation. You are ready to learn many details about building a poster, creating visual aids for oral presentations, considering behavioral choices before, during, and after your presentation, and even thinking about steps toward publishing your research!