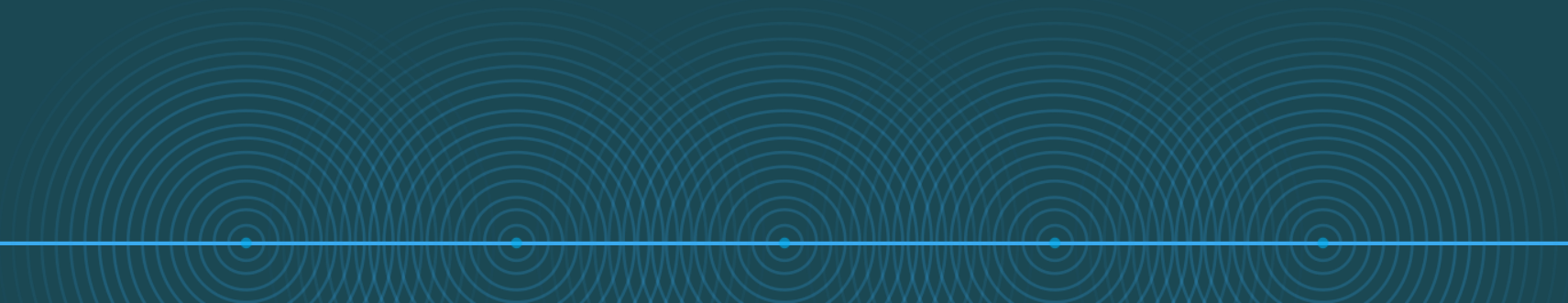


# Conference Skills for Researchers

## Tips for Early Career Researchers

Taraka Dale

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## About the speaker

- Taraka Dale is a Scientist 3 and Principal Investigator in the Bioscience Division at Los Alamos National Laboratory. She is a biochemist with expertise in the design and development of mid- to high-throughput assays for applications ranging from nucleic acid:protein interactions to exploring algae and other microorganisms as platforms for making cost effective biofuels and bioproducts. In algae, Dr. Dale's team is improving the productivity and environmental tolerance of microalgae strains, with an effort towards translating these results to outdoor cultivation. In non-phototrophs, Dr. Dale leads a team focused on the development and application of high throughput tools for optimizing metabolic flux towards new target molecules. Dr. Dale is also the Algae Platform Lead/Program Manager for the Bioenergy and Bioproducts Program in the LANL Applied Energy Office.

## Outline

- Why go to a conference?
- Core elements for a successful abstract
- Preparing for a conference
- Presentation content and formatting to effectively tell your scientific story
- How to maximize your time at a conference
- Tips for interacting with other conference attendees
- Key takeaways

## Why go to a conference?

- To share your work/results (and to get feedback!)
- To better place your work in the context of your field
- To hear the latest updates in your field
- To visit with collaborators (or find new ones)
- To network/find a job
- To learn about a new field

## Which conference to attend?

- Traditional/core meetings in your field
- Newly established meetings
- Meetings of different sizes and formats (large/small, concurrent sessions)
- Meetings in a field that is new to you

## Core elements for a successful abstract

- The goal of the abstract is two-fold
  - Get your work accepted to the meeting
  - Get people to come see your presentation (poster/talk)
- Communicating your scientific results is similar to telling a story
  - Logical flow, clear and concise
  - Keep the reader interested – explain the “so what?”
- A general formula to follow
  - *Big Picture Goal*: “\_\_\_\_\_” is of interest because “\_\_\_\_\_” ; “So what?”
  - *Challenge*: What are the barrier(s) to realizing the big picture goal
  - *Project Goal*: A smaller goal focused on one of the challenges
  - *Approach*: How you will achieve your project goal
  - *Results*
  - *Conclusions and Future Directions*

## Preparing for a conference

Apart from your actual presentation, you can prepare in several ways

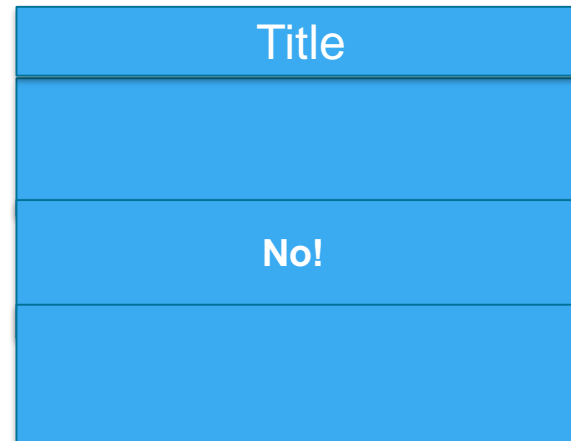
- Read, read, read – do your best to understand the field, the history, the major players, the key breakthroughs (new and old), challenges. At minimum, read seminal review and high impact papers.
  - Helpful in framing your work to your audience, answering questions, feeling confident in the questions you are asking others, as well as participating in discussions at the meeting
- Prepare/practice your 1-line and 3-5 minute “elevator” speeches
  - This makes chatting with new people easier
  - Who are you, what’s your big picture goal, what approach are you taking
  - Often people meet at meals and the 1<sup>st</sup> questions are – “what do you do?” or “what are you working on?”
  - Revisit and evolve this, tailor to different audiences

## Preparing your presentation - Content

- Follow the same logical progression as the abstract, only now there is more detail
  - Big Picture Goal (“so what/why do we care”), Challenge(s), Project Goal, Approach, Results, Conclusions, Future Directions
  - Acknowledgements
  - Abstract may be included on a poster, depending on instructions
  - Balance across headings may vary, depending on state of research
- Consider conference format
  - Will the poster be up at times when you’re not standing there? Then you may need more text/detail to walk people through in your absence
  - Likewise for slides if they will be made public
- Consider being as open as possible in sharing your work
  - Some people may photograph your presentation without your consent

## Preparing your presentation - Format

- For posters, split your poster into 3 columns (*not* rows)



- Do not overload your slides – 1 minute/slide is a reasonable guideline
- Print out your poster for review in advance/Practice your talk
  - Practice in front of colleagues/friends at home
  - Be sure you stick to the time requirements



## How to maximize your time at a conference

- Review the abstract book (or app) and lay out a plan for which talks you'll attend – critical for meetings with concurrent sessions
- Attend as much of the meeting as you possibly can
  - You will gather overarching themes and trends in the field, which will be good take home messages
  - You'll be able to more easily talk to other attendees if you've really listened to the talks and attended the poster sessions.
  - No working/using a phone/laptop as much as possible during the talks
  - Consider going “old school” and take paper notes (bring a notebook!).
  - Practice writing down at least one question per talk.
    - A good exercise for staying in the moment of the presentation, encourages you to tie the presentation to your expertise when possible, may lead to an actual question you want to ask at the end of the talk, and may help with talking points if you bump into the person later in the conference.

## Tips for interacting with other conference attendees

- Be friendly/make eye contact.
  - Use observations/questions about the meeting or the person's work to start conversation
  - Use your “elevator” speeches to give brief descriptions of yourself
  - Don't be afraid to ask for a business card or to offer one (do follow up)
  - Do connect with people on LinkedIn, etc. quickly.
- Don't be afraid to ask your colleagues for introductions if you are nervous about just approaching someone –
  - But approaching someone new is much easier if you have seen their talk/work and can ask them a question about it.
- If you are totally new to a field, don't be afraid to say so. Often people are happy to discuss their field with a new person.
  - Having done some reading will help you keep up
- On average, the more open and interested you are, the better your interactions will be.

## Key Takeaways

- There are many reasons to go to a conference, and often several types of meetings from which to choose
- Leverage both modern and traditional networking tools (take care with personal social media sites)
- Read in advance
- Understand your scientific ‘story’ and practice communicating it (abstract, “elevator” speeches, actual presentations) – evolve often
- Attend the whole meeting
- Talking with new people is easier when you have discussion fodder and are comfortable sharing your work

# Thank you.

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