

# Conferencing

*Dr. T's  
Professional Pointers*

**No. 33**

Conferences are a fact of academic life. This is especially true for young scholars. Fortunately, most political scientist conferences avoid the funny hats and water balloon stunts that make many other “professional” conferences annoying and distasteful. In reality, political science conferences can be intellectually stimulating and be the perfect platform from which to advance your career. Here are some pointers for successful conferencing.

**Attend.** Try to attend at least one conference each year, preferably the APSA or ISA. The regional political science conferences are good choices as well, especially the Midwest. It would be great to present a paper, but even if you can't it is often worth a trip to see what others are doing, make contacts, and meet up with old friends. Being around lots of other scholars can help prompt your own ideas or create working relationships on joint projects. Warning: Don't overdo it. Attending too many conferences every year is tiring and expensive. Our department won't pay travel expenses unless you are actually presenting a paper at a mainstream conference.

**Presenting Papers.** The best of all worlds is to present a paper at a conference. Here you get to showcase your ideas to an interested audience. Work hard to make it a professionally presentable paper, but don't worry too much if your ideas are not fully baked. Conferences are places to present “works in progress.” You will likely get a great deal of comments/critiques on your paper. Accept those critiques for what they are worth. Some will be great commentary, others will be sour grapes.

**Panel Presentation.** Keep your presentation short, to the point and interesting. Use overhead transparencies, simple diagrams or tables. Never hand out handouts. They make people look down and not at you, and provide them a sheet on which to doodle.

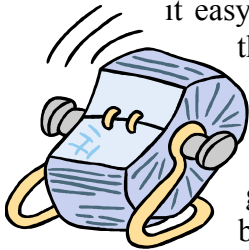
**Poster Sessions.** The APSA and a few other conferences are now using “poster sessions” to allow more people to showcase their work. Paper presenters are asked to post a summary of their paper and supporting argumentation on a bulletin board (roughly 4' x 3'). Since this is a new trend in the social sciences (it has been used in the natural sciences for decades), many scholars shun this form of presentation as being beneath them. Wrong! This is a great way to present a paper, especially if you have diagrams or statistical tables and charts. First, you get to meet people one-on-one. Second, you don't have to sit in a room for two hours listening to other people drone on about their boring crap. If you are a “visual” person this is a perfect forum for you. (Never, ever staple your entire paper on the board. Be pithy. Make a simple, colorful and creative presentation.)



**Deadlines.** Probably the best aspect of conferences beyond attending is that they give us firm deadlines. Due dates force us to get things done. And even the most ambitious among us needs that little extra prodding to do more research and write more papers. If you have a paper accepted at a conference, do your best to make sure you meet the deadline.

**Networking.** When you are at a conference, introduce yourself to people. Following a panel presentation, go up to one of the panelists and ask them a few questions. This is often hard for graduate students who are a bit reluctant to mix it up with strangers, especially the “big name” scholars. But remember a few things. First, academics love to get their egos stroked. There is nothing like having someone come up to you and say they are interested in your work. Even famous folks need this. Two, they were once like you. Part of their success probably depended on their ability to network. Three, the “big names” are really aren’t all that big. Once they leave the hotel with all the academic geeks, they are just schmucks on the street like everybody else. Finally, remember that academia is a small world. You are likely to run into these people over and over again, and you may need them to help you get a job someday.

**Business cards.** Get some. Pass them out. This helps people remember you and makes it easy for them to contact you later. I usually recommend students do this when they are advanced to candidacy so that they can put “Ph.D. candidate” under their name. But all you need is your name and contact information. Biz cards will come in handy if you ever do field work as well. People think you are more professional if you carry cards and are thus more likely to grant you interviews or access to archives. Also, ask for other people’s business cards and keep them in a rolodex.



**Attire.** Many students have asked me how to dress for conferences. This is not a dumb question as your appearance communicates a lot about you. If you dress professionally, then you will be perceived professionally and seriously. Wear what you would to a job talk or interview. Until you write *Bowling Alone II*, leave the torn jeans and tie dye shirts at home (or for evenings out with your friends).

**Nametags.** Take the damn nametag off when you leave the conference hotel. The barista at Starbuck’s doesn’t really care who you are or what university you are affiliated with. However, pickpockets might appreciate you identifying yourself as a dumb out-of-towner with lots of cash.

“Professional Pointers” are a service of Professor Gill. They are meant to help socialize graduate students into the often strange and unfamiliar world of academia. Not all the advice given in these handouts is universally accepted. Successful results are not guaranteed. Use at your own risk.