Conference Presentations

B.G.Wybourne

Instytut Fizyki, Uniwersytet Mikołaja Kopernika
ul. Grudziądzka 5/7
87-100 Toruń
Poland

Introduction

Taking part in conferences and workshops is a feature of being a professional scientist. Participants attend such events to learn of new developments in their field of specialisation and to communicate some of their own achievements to other persons. Much of the material in the set of notes for writing a scientific paper is also relevant to the current topic. Again these notes are purely a guide and different individuals will develop different styles. There is no royal road. Again the primary task is communicating ideas and results. If we fail to communicate clearly we have only ourselves to blame.

Finding out about Conferences and Workshops

There are many sources of information that can help in identifying conferences and workshops of interest to a given person. Posters advertising specific events can often be seen displayed in ones own institute. Listings of forthcoming events are given in journals such as *Physics Today, Physics World, Bulletin of the American Physical Society etc.*. A number of databases exist which carry detailed information. Among those on Netscape are:-

1. http://www.physics.umd.edu/robot/
   Lists many physics related conferences and workshops. Worldwide coverage.
2. http://www.ictp.trieste.it/
   Lists all the workshops organised by the International Theoretical Physics Centre. A large range of subjects - NOT - just theoretical physics.
3. http://www.ioppublishing.com/IOP/Confs/
   A major source of information on all types of conferences, workshops and exhibitions. Worldwide coverage. Often with detailed information including enrolment forms. A UK based data base.
4. http://hq.aps.org/meet/index.html
   As for 3. above. Run by the American Physical Society with worldwide coverage. Detailed coverage of APS Meetings.
5. http://www.ams.org/meetings/
   Run by the American Mathematical Society and gives an extensive coverage of meetings on mathematical topics.
6. http://www.acs.org/symgen/about.sym.htm
   Run by the American Chemical Society - mainly lists ACS symposia and colloquia.

Types of Conferences and Workshops

There are several types of conferences.

1. **General Conferences**
   These tend to cover an entire subject and are usually organised by societies associated with the subject such as American Physical Society (APS), Institute of Physics (IOP, UK), Polish Physical Society etc. There is normally no restriction on the number of participants. Membership of the Society may, or may not, be required for participation.
2. **Specialist Conferences**
   These are devoted to a particular field of research or to a particular set of problems. Often the number of participants is restricted and in some cases are by invitation only. In the latter case it can still be worthwhile enquiring of the conference organisers to see if you could receive an invitation to be a participant.
3. **Workshops**
   These will usually involve a specific subject with limited participation. Often there will be an

upper limit to the number of participants. In some cases they will be restricted to graduate students, in other cases to active workers in the field of the workshop. These workshops are often sponsored by particular agencies such as NATO, ITCP, EEC etc. They may require letters of support from your supervisor.

Financial support

Attending a conference involves costs which should be carefully assessed before finalising your participation. In some cases the organising body *may* be able to offer partial support. Usually there will be a conference fee covering entertainment, materials, abstracts etc. The social programme is usually an additional expense. Likewise you will need to assess your travel and accommodation costs. Many conferences will offer accommodation ranging from luxurious hotels to student dormitories. Estimate your total costs and discuss these with your supervisor. In some cases your institution may be able to make a contribution or there is a research grant covering your project that could provide some support. You will need to arrive at the conference with some convertible currency or traveller's cheques.

Passports, Visas and General Information

If the conference is in your own country there is no problem but for conferences outside your own country you will certainly need, at least, a valid passport and you should check if there are any visa or health requirements. Within the EEC a passport should suffice. Outside of the EEC will probably require a visa and you should attend to this well before the conference (allowing three months is desirable). This may involve you in additional costs. Try to learn something of the life and customs of the country before leaving home. Users of the WEB will find http://www.city.net/countries/ an extremely valuable source of practical information about most cities and countries around the world. The UK guide at http://www..cs.ucl.ac.uk/misc/uk has a clickable map so that, if for example, yourconference is at Oxford and you click on Oxford you will be able to find lists of hotels, restaurants, bus timetables to Heathrow etc. The CIA Factbook at http://www.research.alt.com/cgi-wald/dbaccess/ can also be a source of useful information.

Customs and Passport Control

Always treat customs and passport officers with respect. Do not enter into arguments and answer all questions factually but giving only requested information - nothing more than you are asked. Do not try to conceal things and certainly stay away from drugs. In some parts of the world this can result in execution which spoils the enjoyment of the conference. Do not offer to carry anything for anyone else unless you are completely certain of what you are carrying.

Types of Conference Presentations

1. **Review Talks**
   These are usually given by established leaders of fields of research and are often of about one hour. Often they can give a useful overview of a field or of new developments but will not concern us here.
2. **Contributed Papers**
   These are usually short talks ranging from 10minutes (typical of APS meetings) to 30minutes and normally involve brief accounts of new work.
3. **Poster Sessions**
   These are increasingly a part of modern conferences and workshops. They involve the announcement of new work in the form of posters which particpants may casually review.

Conference Abstracts

Most conferences expect participants to give prior notice of their intention to give a contribution and will expect a title and abstract to be sent to the organisers before a deadline set often months before the meeting. The organisers will often plan to have these printed as a book of abstracts prior to the conference. The format of the abstracts will often be specified and you must submit it in the appropriate format. The choice of title and the content of the abstract should follow the same lines as indicated for writing a scientific paper. In some cases the organiser may select only some of the submitted abstracts for presentation at the meeting.

Conference Proceedings

Often the detailed proceedings of a conference will be published as a book. In that case the organisers will expect you to contribute a written version of your talk or poster. For some conferences a written version may be expected prior to the conference and distributed at the conference. In other cases a written version may be required within a certain period of time following the conference. The written versions are often shorter than a normal scientific paper. If the proceedings of earlier conferences have been published it might be useful to consult them in matters of style and format. In many cases the written version will be subjected to a refereeing procedure.

Giving a Conference Talk

Be sure you know how much time you have been allocated for your talk and whether you allocation includes time for questions. Most presentations are under the control of a chairperson who is under instructions to see that you do not exceed your allocated time. This means planning your talk carefully. Most of what has been written about preparing a scientific paper holds for giving a talk. You have chosen a succint and informative title and an abstract that emphasises the main points of your presentation. You will get little sympathy for exceeding your allocated time or for cramming a large amount of detailed material into a short time.

If an overhead projector is available then use it. You can prepare your talk as several transparencies emphasising the main points of your work. Transparencies crammed with equations are unlikely to impress. In a sense you are advertising your work - excessive details are not needed nor helpful. There should be time over coffee to discuss things in more detail. If you like take along some preprints or reprints of your work to give to interested persons seeking more information. See that the print on your transparencies is clear and LARGE so that people at the back of the hall can read them. Each transparency should give emphasis to just a few points - perhaps just a few headings. Some colour can make your presentation attractive but avoid indistinct colours and remember that a significant percentage of your male audience has difficulties with reds.

The first transparency might include your title, name, location and set of headings outlining the plan of your talk. The second transparency should include an introduction placing your contribution in context. Don't skip the introduction, this might reasonably take up 20-25% of your allocated time. Everyone should be able to get some idea of the nature of your contribution from your introduction. Remember, you are there to communicate not to bedazzle the audience with your brilliance. Don't be overly serious - a little humour can help. Don't start with a large stack of transparencies. A few well chosen and informative transparencies are best. A few graphs are likely to be more informative than a set of closely packed tables that noone will be able to read or comprehend. If you have more than eight transparencies then you are probably overdoing it. Try to have a trial run in an empty hall or among a few chosen friends and check your timing. Expect to be nervous - experienced speakers will confess that is a normal part of giving a presentation. Talk slowly and clearly and watch your audience making eye contact. You'll probably be able to assess your audiences reaction and to adjust your talk as you proceed. If the hall is large and your voice is small use a microphone, if available

At the end of your talk you might briefly, and gracefully, acknowledge any support you have received and name any relevant collaborations. Perhaps even a note of thanks to the organisers of the conference.

Your talk is over and you should now be prepared to receive questions. Some of these you may be able to readily answer. Others may be poorly put - ask the questioner to rephrase his/her question. In some cases you may not know the answer. Better to say "I don't know" than to attempt a cover up. There is nothing to be ashamed of in confessing ignorance - its simply a matter of being honest and you will be respected for your honesty but not for dishonesty. Sometimes it is appropriate to say something like "I think Dr .. in the audience could answer your question" being of course sure that is the case and not simply to embarrass Dr ... Occasionally someone in the audience will wish to demonstrate his/her own importance by asking a question to which they obviously know the answer. In that case one might say "You can probably answer that question better than me".

Poster Presentations

Poster sessions are an increasing feature of conferences and workshops. You are normally allocated a space of about $1m^2$ on which to place the sheets of your poster. The temptation is to fill the space with closely typed information - **DO'NT**! Try to make your poster eye catching so people will be attracted to look at it and read it. If you have a measure of artistic ability use it. In many respects the construction of your poster should follow the same procedure as for the preparation of transparencies for a talk. Your title should stand out and the first page should give an introduction to your topic. You might consider attaching a photo of yourself so people can pick you out as they may wish to speak to you about your poster.

Each sheet of your poster should contain just some main idea with a large heading. In most cases extensive equations, packed tables and large amounts of closely printed text should be avoided. Concentrate on the essentials. Imagine yourself as a participant wanting to find out about your subject but also interested in looking at all the other posters in a crowded room. Would you stop and look at your poster?

Use **LARGE** print that is easily read at a distance. You might take along reprints and preprints for people wanting more details. Perhaps a piece of blank paper that people can give their name and address (e-mail if you can distribute Latex or TEX versions) with a promise to send them further details. This will give you an indication of the amount of interest in your topic.

There will probably be specific times allocated for poster sessions and you will be expected to be near your poster to answer questions and give further details to interested viewers.

Concluding Advice on Conference Participation

Attending a conference can be both stimulating and exhausting. For a large conference with parallel sessions you will have to make a selection of talks to attend. You do not need to feel obliged to attend every single talk. You may wish to skip a talk and have coffee with another participant to discuss in more detail topics of interest. Part of the function of a conference is to bring people together and to set up interactions between people. You should take it as an opportunity to make contact with people in your field of interest - these contacts may prove valuable in terms of future employment. Seek out opportunities - they will not usually come to you uninvited. If you are interested in a future post-doctoral position or job conferences can be excellent opportunities for making relevant contacts. Of course future employers will be heavily influenced by the quality of your work AND your presentation. Join in the social activities as much as possible and enjoy yourself! Conferences should not be all work and no play.