

How to Get the Most out of a Conference

By Stephen Downes
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EDUCAUSE has this habit of creating placeholders for its posts and then sending RSS feeds composed solely of those placeholders. Maybe the content will be filled later, maybe it's just a program entry and will never be fleshed out, but RSS readers like me will never know; we see nothing but the headlines (and sometimes not even that!) that leave only tantalizing glimpses.

This is the case for an entry that came out today, [How to Get the Most out of the Conference](#). By 'the Conference' I assume they mean one of the EDUCAUSE conferences, but even that useful tidbit is missing from the entry. So I am left to speculate about what could have been.

I once started a post, [How to Attend a Conference](#). It was just a stub of a post. Yet now as I see the headline I am reminded of that unfinished project. I have attended dozens, nay, hundreds! of conferences, a guest, a presenter, a panelist, and a keynote. So I know something about how to attend a conference.

Selecting

The same conference every year? Some people (maybe even most people) go to the same conference every year. I know I was that way with the NAWeb conferences. It's a good thing if you can do it - you get to know the people and know the format. The second time at a conference (or at a venue) is always more productive than the first.

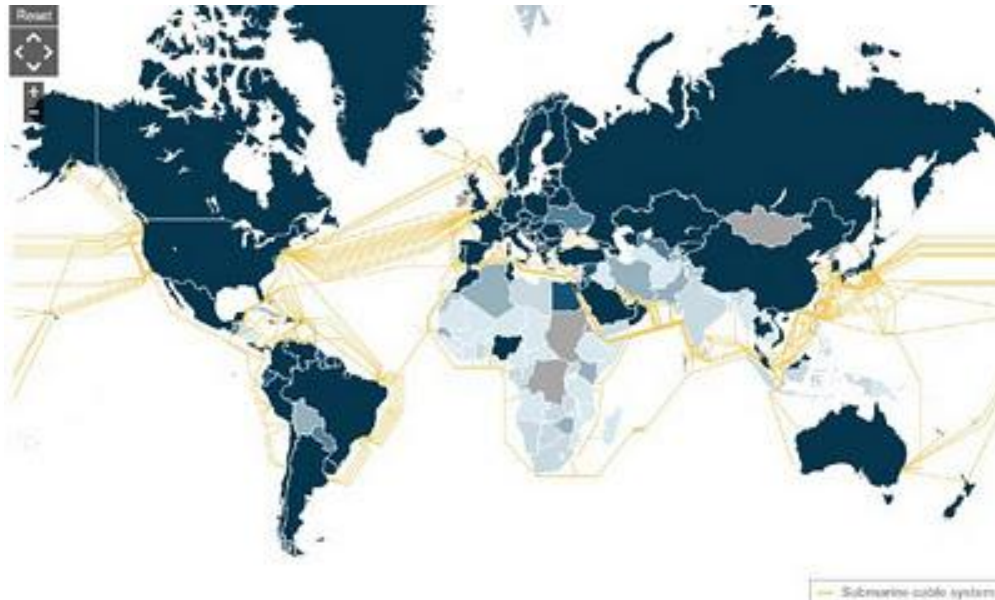
But if you can only attend one conference a year, make it a different conference every year. It's harder and less comfortable, but each conference is its own community and you'll get a lot more out of seeing many different communities than the same community every time.

Keeping track. What conferences are actually happening? It's easy to focus on the content of blog posts and tweets and to overlook the venue (often it's indicated with nothing but a hashtag). It's a good idea to keep track of what contents other people you read are attending. Make a list.

Many fields have someone who keeps a comprehensive list of conferences. In educational technology, [Clayton R. Wright](#) provides this valuable service, issuing a new document every six months. In philosophy [PhilEvents](#) does the job. It's better to find a list specific to the discipline, but if all else fails, [Conference Alerts](#) provides generic versions for many other fields.

How you score these conferences (if you score them at all) is up to you. Some indicators of a good conference for you are:

- the volume of Twitter comments and blog posts from people you know
- presentations from authors you have read and enjoyed
- topics that are fascinating to you (but which you don't know a lot about)



Submitting a Proposal

For many people, the only way to attend a conference is to be presenting a paper or talk at the conference. It's a sad state of affairs, and has resulted in a bloated number of conference papers and talks, but it can't be helped for now.

Conference Guides. Many conferences will have detailed guides on how to submit a proposal. *Read them.* They will help even if you are looking at a different conference. The [ASCD conference](#) proposal guide, for example, offers review guides that will apply to almost any conference you apply to:

- how well does the proposal relate to the conference theme and strands?
- is the proposal content of current interest or a hot topic?
- has the proposal content been implemented?
- is the proposal an innovative solution, or does it offer a fresh treatment?
- does the proposal address or support solving significant problems in education?
- is the outcome or takeaway clearly defined?

Often, conferences will look for proposals in a specific format. The [Pythian conference](#) proposal guide, for example, specifies a list of sections your proposal must contain. So follow the list! The same guide also points to a number of reasons proposals fail:

- the title and/or abstract too vague, ambiguous or unclear
- the premise is unbelievable
- the abstract is too short and doesn't describe the talk
- too much material has been presented for a single talk
- it's a sales pitch

- it assumes reviewers are familiar with your work

The proposal. It's actually pretty easy to get a proposal accepted. But (to my mind) the trick is, *make the proposal specific to the conference.* Don't just submit some paper you've written. Taylor your proposal to the needs of the conference. Then, in your proposal, *talk specifically about the proposal.* Don't try to 'set the stage' - the conference theme does that.

Typically, a proposal follows the format of 'problem-response':

- *problem* - draws from published literature relevant to the conference theme, identifies a question to be answered, identifies a 'pain point' reported by customers or clients, or describes a proposition made by someone else you wish to refute. *The more specific the better.* Don't just give a generic description; identify *instances* of the problem.

- *response* - responds to the problem. There are many ways to do this; the best is to offer some concrete evidence of a solution. For example, you may have developed a tool that addresses such a problem. The response will consist not only of a description of the tool, but also an account of how the tool was employed in practice, and evidence from that experience that the problem was addressed.

Test your proposal with your colleagues (I don't recommend putting them online ahead of the selection process because it may impede the process - I personally prefer openness but many conference organizers do not, and may react badly).

Submission: Submit several proposals but be reasonable. It's better to submit several proposals instead of just one in a season, to ensure that you are accepted. But don't submit dozens if you're only going to one conference; it takes time and effort to review a proposal and it's unfair to organizers if there's no real chance you'll actually attend the conference.

Invited Speakers

If you are an invited speaker, *do the same thing.* There's nothing worse than a speaker who gives the same canned presentation to every conference they attend. I've seen a number of talks like that, and though they are very polished, they're sterile. The presenter hasn't talked *with* the audience, he or she has talked *to* the audience.

Any speaker will have a repertoire of content they rely on - I'm not going to go into a conference and do a completely original work on constructivism - it's just not part of what I do and would require several years to develop the expertise before I could talk on it. So there are slides I will use more than once, themes (like 'groups and networks') I will return to and discuss. That's expected (and if you are being *invited*, people will be disappointed if you don't do the thing that got you there).

But - as they say - *localize.* How does what *you* offer tie in to the theme the conference presenters want to talk about? If you are an invited presenter especially, you have an obligation to do some research ahead of the talk - what is the topic, who are the 'big names' in that topic

(and who may also have been invited to speak alongside you), what specific objectives are the conference organizers trying to achieve?

[Here's an example](#) of a talk I gave in Mexico. Notice that the slides address the conference theme exactly. I am telling the conference organizers I am taking their needs seriously and trying to address them. I describe my own work in the field, and then at the end, show how it meets their objectives.

[Here's another example](#). I was asked to speak at a conference in Belgium, at the Flemish Parliament. I took the venue as my starting point; the organizers wanted a talk on openness, and the audience consisted of managers and decision-makers, so I described a policy framework for open learning.

[One more example](#). I was asked to do an online presentation on the topic of student engagement. I didn't really know the group I was talking to, so I did some background reading on the topic engagement itself. I discovered that the conference organizers had written and presented on engagement. This gave me a basis in literature I could refer to. I found a problem related to engagement in my own work, mapped it to what the organizers had written in their paper, and made some comments.

[Here's a case where I dropped the ball](#). I was invited to speak to Empire State College, in Saratoga Springs. Really nice people, very dedicated and very engaged. I didn't realize that the college was already committed to open and online education, so the first part of my talk, where I presented the standard advocacy argument, was unnecessary and (frankly) a bit insulting to them. If I had done my research ahead of time, I would have found the considerable common ground we have, and been able to craft a much more compelling presentation.

Invited speakers will also have to prepare an abstract and specify any special requirements (regular speakers are generally stuck with a small room and a standard issue digital projector). I *always* ask for internet access at the podium (because I like to be able to show people things). I rarely ask for sound, but if you plan to play videos, ask for room sound - people will *not* be able to hear your laptop speakers.

Planning Your Travel

So your proposal has been accepted (I knew it would be!) and you are planning to attend the conference. You will want to plan your travel as far ahead of time as possible. This is not so much to save money; you can get good fares and hotel rates almost up to the point of departure. It's to give you options and choices that may not be available closer to the event.

If you have to fly to the conference, book this first. If you're taking the train, you also want to book this first. If you're driving or taking the bus you can basically skip this step.

Arrival. When I plan airfare I always plan to arrive a full day ahead of the conference. That is, if the conference starts on the 10th, I arrive in the city and at the hotel the evening of the 8th. Yes, it's an extra day. But in my mind, it's the most important day, and especially if you're travelling

internationally, a day you can't afford to skip. Here's why:

- it's "jet lag day". I actually call it that. The first day in a new city is rough, even one just a couple time zones away. It gives you a chance to at least begin to get your sleep schedule on track. If you're lucky, the conference will begin the afternoon or evening of the first day, which gives you a bit more time.

- it gives you a chance to get to know the area, to find convenience stores, good pubs, rail and bus services, attractions you may want to visit. You should also explore the conference venue.

- this is an excellent time to localize your presentation. Now that you're in the city, you can get a feel for the place, take photos, and try to get a sense of where your organizers are coming from.

- and *most importantly* - if you miss a connection or your flight is delayed or cancelled, you won't miss half the conference! You are *much more likely* to be there when the conference starts (with all your luggage, which might also take an extra day in transit).

Departure. When you leave is up to you, but unless you absolutely have to, leave no sooner than the day after the conference ends, rather than the day of the conference. This is because conference participants often have *ad hoc* post-conference meetings, and if you have a planned tyo catch, you won't be able to take part in them.

I also prefer to leave one or two days in the city for myself (if it's a city I visit often, this doesn't really apply). It's really nice to be able to explore a new city, and best to do it after the stress of the conference has passed. *This is typically done at my own expense.* Your employer should never be asked to pay for these extra days, and most all employers will refuse to pay the amount. But if you pay the extra expenses (which won't be that large) yourself, few employers will say no - especially when they realize you can save hundreds of dollars on airfare by staying a couple of days.

Flight times: Do not schedule morning departures. I repeat, do not schedule morning departures. I *never* leave sooner than 11:00 a.m. or so. Airports are an absolute *zoo* in the morning, because most travellers get up early and travel first thing in the morning.

And when you're returning home from a strange country in an airport you've never been to, you don't want to be getting up at three or four in the morning, *hoping* you get a cab or a train, going to an airport in chaos, and trying to get onto your flight without losing half your stuff. Book a noon flight, have a nice breakfast, pack at a leisurely pace, arrive at the airport awake, and - this is the best part - you *still* arrive at your destination at a reasonable hour.

The Hotel. Stay at the conference hotel. Yes, it may be a bit more expensive. Maybe even a lot more expensive. But it's many times more convenient:

- You won't be paying extra money for a taxi, or spending time walking back and forth
- You can take a nap, take a break or get some work done in the space of a 1-hour period
- You can charge your gear without having to stand guard over it
- You have a place for meetings or after-hours gatherings

Book your hotel as soon as you can, so you can get space in the days before and after the conference. Often other conferences will occupy the hotel, and space may be at a premium. But

if you book well ahead, you can get a room at a reasonable rate. Also, when booking, be sure to mention the conference, and attempt to get conference rates.

Travel Agencies. If your organization has a travel agency, use that agency, because your organization may require it, but also because they may have bulk purchasing arrangements with airlines and hotels. But be careful - they may also work within constraints, such as the cost of a hotel room. Don't let them put you in a box on the outskirts of the city! (Yes, it *has* happened to me). Pay the extra your self, if you have to, to be put into the right hotel. Also, be very clear about your departure time preferences and seat section preferences (I really recommend window seats, because you're never disturbed, and you have a bulkhead to lean on and use as a pillow).

If you're not using a travel agency, check seat prices at both the airline and a agency site like Expedia (I always use expedia.ca when I book my own flights, and in Europe I've found lastminute.com has excellent rates, far cheaper than anything I can get in North America). If you can, try to use an agency to book the hotel. Booking directly is often a lot more expensive than booking through an agency.

Fly economy. Your students or employers are paying for the flight, and even if some company is paying for it, they're writing it off as tax deductions. I call business class '*subsidy class*' - the rich receiving subsidies from the poor in order to fly in greater ease. Don't patronize that system.

Your travel budget: travel can be expensive, especially if you're not prepared for the extra costs ahead of time. Make a budget (or at least keep one in your head) and be prepared:

- airfare (plus taxes, and be ready for luggage and other fees at the airport)
- international fees - *check ahead* - many countries charge western travellers at the airport to enter or leave the country
- taxi or (far better) train to the airport (it's better to take the train because trains rarely get stuck in traffic, and they're typically a quarter of the cost)
- food - you will want coffee and snacks while you're travelling (and maybe a DVD, if you're me). *Plan ahead.* I would have *starved* on my recent trip to Oslo had I not looked it up and discovered that it's one of the most [expensive cities](#) in the world (Oslo - who knew?).
- tips - customs vary in different countries, but basically, if you interact with a human for anything more than a minute or two, you should be prepared (and happy!) to pay a tip
- internet access - if you travel a lot, have a current account on t-mobile or boingo (I use boingo.com); hotel internet is either free or ridiculously expensive - *plan ahead* how you will access internet on site (don't depend on [conference wifi](#); I repeat, don't depend on [conference wifi](#), *especially* if you have to do things like finish your presentation or do online banking).
- booze - if you plan to drink, make a budget and stick to it - booze in bars (especially conference hotel bars) can be really expensive (in Oslo, my \$50 beer budget was consumed in four beers in one night - and that was at places that can only be called *dives*).
- souvenirs - you will want branded t-shirts, plaques or ornaments, local food ([check](#) what you're allowed to bring home)



Travel Gear

The other major expense of conference travel is travel gear. Fortunately, you can manage most of the costs by planning ahead. It's often a good idea to make a list (or to at least have a list in mind) as you prepare for conference travel.

Conference Kit. I have a 'conference kit' that is my essential conference gear, and which mostly stays in its own place at home between conferences (actually, I store it in the suitcase, so I don't even have to pack it!). The conference kit contains most of the personal items I might need on the road:

- electric toothbrush, small travel toothpaste tubes, soap, comb or brush, wash cloth, travel-sized shampoo and conditioner (I use [Pert](#) so I only have one bottle), disposable razors, sunscreen - you might not need all of these, but it's really nice to have your *own* toiletries, so you know how your hair and skin will react
- daytime cold medicine, NeoCitran (great for sleeping on the plane!), Imodium or rehydration salts, Ibuprofen or Tylenol, Strepsils and Fisherman's Friends, Polysporin (very important to treat cuts in tropical regions), Gaviscon and Roloids
- your own prescription medicine - *bring the original bottles* or copies of the prescription

Travel Documents. You will need your passport (and possibly a Visa - [check before](#) you travel (I once had to scamper to get an Australian visa while in transit in Toronto!)), flight tickets, and hotel bookings. Bring your driver's license (but not your car keys!), credit cards and bank cards (you can use ATMs almost everywhere in the world; don't bother with travellers' cheques, and don't travel with a wad of cash).

I have an old blue passport case (I got it as a speaker's gift about ten years ago) I use to hold my travel documents (there's a zippered case for the passport and a string I can use to make sure it's attached to my body). Then, *make a copy* of every document and store it in a separate case. If you lose your passport (like [I did once](#)) having a spare copy will save you from huge problems (as it did for me).

When you are traveling, don't put everything on one place (when my camera bag was stolen in Spain I lost nothing but the cameras - but I heard people in the police station talking about how they had lost *everything* when their bag was stolen). I put travel documents in the passport case, money and cards in a wallet (*front* pocket only) and another secret location, electronics in another bag, etc. I once lost *all* my music gear from an airline seat pouch when someone swiped it while I was in the washroom - now I keep a backup iPod nano and earbuds in a separate location.

Note: these warning apply equally if you're travelling half way around the world or if you're travelling to a nearby city. Loss can happen anywhere, and it's when we get comfortable that we're the most vulnerable.

Vaccines. Check the [CDC page](#) for recommended vaccines. If you can, you should get a [Twinrix](#) vaccine against Hepatitis A and B if you're going to be doing any large amount of travel at all. If you are travelling in the country or to tropical regions, be sure to bring and use bug spray (like [Deep Woods Off](#)).

Electronics. I travel with a [MacBook Pro](#), an [iPad](#), and an [iPod](#) (with a backup [Nano](#)). These have of course their power cords (each neatly coiled) and connecting wires (I have two baggies containing essential cords - chargers for iPods and Pads, earbuds, USB connectors, adapters for digital projectors). If you're travelling overseas, check the [power supply requirements](#), and purchase an adapter. I also bring an extension cord or power bar.

My cameras are in a separate bag (of course!), and I bring my [nice camera](#), a small [compact back-up](#), and chargers and USB connectors for each. I have a [nice microphone](#) so I can record audio (both cameras record HD video). I also use a [Sony Walkman](#) to record conversations, street sounds, background noises, and whatever. It's also a local radio receiver and backup iPod!

You might ask, why don't I travel with one computer, one MP3 player, and one camera, and skip the rest. It's all about having the right tool for the job. A computer's a lot easier to use than an iPad, but the iPad is great for crowded conference audience seats (I don't know why conference organizers don't provide tables, but they often don't). The compact camera is great for the bar or busy areas where you wouldn't want a big camera, but if you want really nice photos (as I do) you want the really nice camera. And having more than one device is great for long airplane trips, because between them you have hours and hours of entertainment!

Note: power in the Americas is 110 volts, and elsewhere is 220 volts. Most of your gear will work with both (check the tiny print on the charger, power cord, or adapter - if you see 110-220 v you're OK). *Some things won't!* I've blown up a number of power bars!

Clothing - bring extra socks and underwear, and economize on pants and shirts. It's always wise to bring a sweater. When travelling to a cold country I wear the coat in transit (some guides say you should pack them, but coats are really bulky) and use it as a pillow (up against the bulkhead of my window seat). If you're giving a talk, have clothes designated especially for your talk - wear nice clothes when you present, even if it's informal. You're on stage. Be professional.

The Rest - I travel with a [Cpap](#) because I have sleep apnea, so I have to make sure there's always electricity where I'm sleeping (yes, sometimes [organizers forget](#) you need power, so make sure ahead of time). I also travel with my own prescription meds. I bring a travel alarm clock. And I bring my own coffee machine, coffee, filters and whitener, because you can't get good coffee anywhere!

Luggage. Don't use suitcases, and be prepared to walk with your luggage *without* a baggage cart. I use upright luggage, [like this](#). I have one larger bag I check-in, and another smaller bag as carry-on. Then I have my computer shoulder bag. I use a [bungee cord](#) to loops the smaller luggage to the back of the large luggage, so I can pull the two of them with one hand (matched sets will also have straps that join the two together). I either carry my computer bag over my shoulder or use another bungee cord to attach it to the tall luggage. The idea is that I can be pulling everything with one hand, and have the other hand free (for a coffee, for a phone, for my travel documents, etc.).

Preparing for the Conference

A conference comes and goes in an instant. Even a long conference might only be four days long - most are only one or two days. You won't have time to find your feet, even if you're arriving early.

Research the conference. Who will be there? What will they be talking about? As much as possible, scan the program, look for people (especially keynotes) talking about things that are interesting to you, and look them up on Google. Do this before the conference! Sometimes it's nice to be [surprised](#) by someone you weren't expecting, but the experience is so much more rewarding if you know where they're coming from.

You also want to be looking at the program to see which sessions you want to attend. You don't have to decide right away (but if you do, create your own schedule and put it on your iPad or computer - it will be really hard to find this information at the conference itself, because they almost never post big signs with the conference program on it (they just assume everyone has their program).

Find the chatter. These days every conference has a backchannel (where or not the organizers want one). The backchannel is typically indicated with a [hashtag](#). If you don't know the hashtag, search for the conference on Twitter. Or use a Google site:Twitter search, [like this](#). Or just include 'hashtag' in your search, [like this](#). If you still can't find one, ask people you know. If nobody knows, create a hashtag of your own, and put up a blog post with the name of the conference, the year, the URL, and your proposed hashtag (don't forget to Tweet using the hashtag too).

The hashtag chatter will not only highlight talks to attend and issues that are current, it will be a guide to the unofficial activities associated with the conference. If people are meeting at a pub, or getting together in an open hotel room, it will show up in the chatter (use reasonable safety precautions when travelling to new places in strange cities). It will point you to resources and background materials. Being linked to the chatter ahead of time will prepare you to get the

greatest advantage of the backchannel during the conference.

Prepare your talk. It goes without saying, I suppose, but it can be the last thing you're thinking about when travelling overseas. You want to do as much as you can ahead of time, but remember, your presentation is a creation of the moment. Plan on making changes, adding local content, and more.

Mostly what I do ahead of time is to *assemble resources*. This is especially important if the hotel has a bad internet connection. I'll have copies of papers I want to quote in my digital library, copies of all my previous slide presentations, sometimes even downloaded versions of web pages (I just use the browser - it downloads the site and copies of all the images on the site). Sometimes I download video clips (using [DownloadHelper](#)). One day I want to use videos for my slides instead of static images, but I need to get better at that.

It's also good to *create an outline*. If you have a good abstract, this has already been done for you. Now you can fill it out. The principles [I've described before](#) work really well for presentations. Sometimes I create an entire outline first; other times I have the outline in my mind and just author the detailed version slide by slide. *The less experienced you are the more you'll need to prepare* (on the bright side, once you've done this a few hundred times, you can create an interesting engaging original presentation in a few minutes right before the talk).

Create Your Presentation Page - I should do this ahead of time a lot more than I do. But what you *should* do is to create a web page for your presentation. This page will constitute the permanent record of your presentation, but for now it's a planning document. Your presentation page can be a blog post, a wiki page, or any other internet presence. I really recommend that it be a *page* rather than something transient like a blog post or social network status update. This will be an *archive*; treat it seriously. (In my view *everyone* should create their own presentation page - the fact that most people still don't is a matter of some astonishment to me).

When your proposal is first accepted, post your abstract and links to any background material you may be looking at. *Especially* if your talk is going to be controversial, make sure your summaries and readings are available for people to see. So - for example - when someone says you "didn't understand" their paper, you can point to [your summary](#) and ask, which part was wrong (in my case, probably nothing - but I get the "didn't understand" sour grapes a lot).

Here's [a good example](#) of what I mean. Note that even before I even arrived in Utrecht I had the background work done, and more importantly, *posted* online for comments and feedback. It's useful in multiple ways - like when [someone says](#) "oh he just got mad and did it in the last minute" you can point to this work and make it clear that you had in fact planned this all along (and can hardly be accused of springing a *surprise attack* on someone). Here's the completed [presentation page](#) of the talk finished after the event (yeah, I know it's not beautiful - but it's a great archive of the talk).

Publicize your presentation - use the conference hashtag and post a link to your presentation page on Twitter. Give people a way to give you comments (don't be disappointed if you don't get any - people talk a lot about how interactive the web is, but there's a lot less actual feedback on

things than you might think). Be prepared to add to your presentation right up to the day of the event.

Practice your talk. Seasoned hands have probably forgotten that people need to do this, but people who are new to the whole concept of giving talks at conferences should strive to practice their talk in front of a live audience. *Don't read your talk*, even in practice. Make sure you have notes, so you don't lose your place or forget what you wanted to say. But even when you practice your talk, just glance at your notes to find your place, and then speak without reading your notes.

Why? Three reasons. First, you want to hone the art of *interacting* with your audience, and you can't interact with them if you're staring at your notes. When you speak, you want to be *looking at them*, not your presentation. Second, practising this way will help you *remember* your presentation. It forces you to *think* about what you're saying, and not to merely recite it. And third, you'll get feedback and probably a lot of support. People will tell you it's a good talk, or how to make it better.

I still do this, especially when I'm trying out an entirely new line of argument. My Speaking in LOLcats presentation was [first delivered](#) to a small conference in Richmond Hill, and then to [an online course](#). Of course, this would have been a *lot* better done the other way around. Online talks are *great* ways to hone your conference presentations - just do a [Google hangout](#) and have people join you. Or here, I [presented first](#) to an online class (same class, different year) and [then next](#) to an international conference.

Writing Your Paper. Some conferences will require that you provide a written paper for the presentation. This means that you may be committed to having a presentation (and paper!) completely planned before you have all the information you need. That can't be helped, and you should strive to accommodate them.

Do it this way: prepare the presentation and slides first. Practice your talk a few times, if you need. Ideally you want to actually *give* your talk first, but if you can't, rely on the practice. Delay as long as you can, pulling your resources together, assembling your articles, links and diagrams. Then, use the presentation outline as your essay outline. How you proceed at this point is up to you, but I sit down and do it in one draft. Maybe not necessarily start to finish (as I type *this* paper, for example, the organization is chronological, but I'm adding sections as I think of them).

This works really well. My paper [E-Learning 2.0](#), for example, was created this way. Here's the link (it was published in eLearn Magazine, was their most popular paper ever, but then they broke the link and now none of the references to it work - *that* is why you keep your own records!). I first presented the talk to a [CIDER online](#) workshop. I adjusted a bit and presented it [in Edmonton](#) (to many of the same people!). Then I wrote the paper.

This is really common. The purpose of conferences once upon a time was to provide a forum where people could try out their partially-formed ideas before committing them to print. Over time, with the publication of conference proceedings, the conference presentation has become ossified. But I try as much as possible to use presentations to [try out new ideas](#). That's why it's so important that I actually talk *with* the audience, rather than just at them. Even if there's no

question-and-answer, I can get a good sense of how it was received from their expressions, and later, from the conversations and backchannel.

The Night Before

Charge your electronics. Make sure you have a full charge on your computer, iPod, iPad, camera batteries, and anything else you are bringing.

Print boarding passes. If you can (check your airline site), print your boarding pass. While you're at it, make sure you print backup copies of all your documents (if you don't have a photocopier, take a digital photo of the document and print that).

Use Google Maps. You may have done this at an earlier stage, but do it now, the night before you leave, so it will be fresh in your memory. Locate the conference venue, your hotel, and the airport. If you're taking a train from the airport, locate the train station. Print out a copy (and backup) of the street map and store it with your travel documents. Use street view and walk through your route on Google before you arrive. (Seriously - I actually do this and it makes a *big* difference when you arrive, and you know what your hotel *looks like*, because you saw it on Google maps).

Make an arrival plan. The idea is that you'll be making plans before you get there. You arrive at the airport and get on the train - what stop are you getting off at? Make sure you know. Will you be able to walk to the hotel or will you need a cab? Finding taxis or trains at the airport is usually very easy, but when you arrive at a train station in the middle of the city it can be confusing. Plus, there are thieves, so if you're standing there looking lost they will zero in on you. Have a plan so that when you arrive, you know what you're doing.

Sometimes, especially when you're an invited speaker, your hosts will say "don't worry, leave it to us, someone will pick you up at the airport." *Don't count on this.* I remember arriving in Bogota for the first time - the flight was four hours late, I arrived at 10:30 at night, and my ride had bailed. What would I have done if I had not *already* looked up where to find taxis at the airport (there's an official stand, but it's a bit out of the way) and known the location of my hotel?

Back up your files. I always travel with a [32 gig USB drive](#) on my keychain. I put a copy of my presentation on it, as well as a nice reading library, all my previous presentations, and a bunch of other stuff I'll write about in another post one day. The night before you leave, make sure you've updated your USB drive with backups of all your data.

Pack your bag. Fold your clothes, make sure everything fits, and *don't forget to weight your luggage.* Use a [luggage scale](#). There are [always restrictions](#). Be sure to check your connector flights - in the middle of a long trip recently [a tiny airline](#) handling one leg of my trip tried to shake me down for excess baggage fees - but I had done my homework.



Travel

Getting to the airport. If you're travelling from home, you may have a good idea of what to expect. Since you're travelling at noon or later, the airport won't be a zoo. Plan to arrive an hour and a half early (that gives you an extra half hour for traffic, car accidents, disputes with the driver, delayed trains, whatever). *Don't economize on your arrival time.* Time spent at the airport is *just as productive* as time spent at home, so it's really silly to delay departure to the last minute in order to have more time at home.

I travel with checked luggage. I know that when you read travel guides they will say you should try to avoid checking your baggage, but I'm not really sure this is a wise idea, especially if you're on a trip of any length. Yes, your baggage might be delayed or even lost (though my luggage has *never* been permanently lost). And you have to wait at the carousel to get your baggage. But who cares! You've arrived - what's the rush?

But if you don't check your luggage you're travelling with heavy and often bulky cabin baggage. You have to lug it around the airport. You have to fight with other passengers for overhead compartment space. And the stuff you need in transit - like computers and flight documents - gets mixed up with stuff you don't need to be messing with on an airplane, like underwear. You're always rationing your liquids. Being careful to make sure you have no toe-clippers. You don't have enough room for your electronics (which you absolutely *must* carry on - don't risk losing them) and you can't do things like bring your own coffee machine. All this to save a few minutes at the carousel?

Have a carry-on sized carry-on. [Like this](#). They are designed to fit into the overhead bins (if you are travelling on a small plane like a [CRJ](#) or [Embraer](#) you will have to cabin-check your carry-on - don't panic, it will be there as you leave the aircraft, but keep this in mind and keep the stuff you *really need* in your computer bag). Don't overstuff your bag because it won't fit into the

space if you do. This may seem overly picky but you can save yourself a lot of heartache at the check-in line or in the airplane by using the proper baggage.

As I said, arrive early. If you're going to be standing in line a long time, be sure you have something to read or listen to (an iPad is fabulous in a check-in line). If you can, print your boarding passes [the night before](#), or otherwise, use the airport [kiosk check-in](#). There are [many options](#) - you only need to learn them once, and then they'll save you hours every trip thereafter.

Be nice to the airline staff. Let me repeat: *be nice to the airline staff*.

As you approach security, put all your pocket stuff into your coat pockets (you should almost always wear a coat when you travel, because you never know where you'll end up, airplanes can be cold, and it's good to have extra pockets). You can also toss stuff into your carry-on bag, but it's a lot harder to fish out after. Don't travel with liquids in carry-ons unless you absolutely have to. You will need to remove your computer and iPad, so when you put them in your bag, put them in last so you can easily remove them. Carry your boarding pass in your hands (if they do an extra check, they will ask you for it, so it's good to have it with you and buried inside the x-ray machine). In the United States you'll have to remove your shoes (happily that insanity has not spread beyond the American border) so prepare by untying them.

Go through security right away and go straight to your gate. I *always do this* in strange airports. It's important to make sure you know where your gate is as soon as possible, because you never know what's between you and your gate (in Bogota, it was an extra security check, in Oslo, there was a passport check just outside the gate).

Arrival

Remove all your clothes and put them in the dresser; when you finish with your clothing, fold it neatly and put it in your suitcase (that way, you can pack to leave in just a few minutes). Put your stuff in the bathroom where you need it. In my case, I set up the Cpap and coffee machine right away, so I can spot any problems before they happen. Check your electronics, connect to the internet (if you're using in-room internet, which I really recommend if it's not too expensive), and use Skype to call home and tell them you've arrived [safely](#).

(I know some people use phones. I can barely make my phone work where I live, but I have no idea how to make it work when I travel. If someone has a good guide to this, that would be nice.)

On jet-lag day, get the lay of the land, catch up on email or correspondence - if your hotel internet is awful or nonexistent, find the nearest cybercafe. Find coffee shops (unless you've brought your own coffee machine) and stores and things that might be useful. Have a *nice* day and relax - travel is *really* stressful, even when everything goes well. Putter with your presentation - see what people are writing about the conference (they will also be arriving, some of them, and you can meet up if you want).

The Conference

It has been a lot of work (less work with experience) but you're finally here. You're well rested, you've already had a look at the program and have a good idea what you want to see. You've been chatting with people online and have some contacts to meet for lunch or just a gab session, if you wish. You know when the official conference sessions are, and also when some unofficial [meet-ups](#) will take place.

The key rule now, after you've done all that planning, is to *go with the flow*. Let your interests and instincts guide you. Don't feel you have to do anything, feel free to change your schedule, and plan in the moment. Because you've done all that background work, you are now perfectly positioned to *surf* through the conference like a master.

The receptions. Personally I hate conference receptions because I'm just not a wine and cheese kind of person, but if you're an invited speaker you really should go to them. Being an invited guest at a conference isn't about the keynote - that's the least part of it, often. You're there because people want to *meet* you, and the receptions are the first and easiest way to do this.

If you're not the keynote, you should feel free to skip the receptions, and I often do. But you may want to look at it this way: *free food!* Remember, conference travel is expensive. You'll probably eat more than your meal allowance (assuming you have one). Your conference fees have paid for this food, and you ought to fill up. The receptions are a good way to do this.

Most receptions are stand-up and free-flow. I'm not very good at them, but here's what I've learned, that works reasonably well. Look for a smallish group of people (three or four or so). Approach them - they will be talking - smile and nod. Then listen and get a sense of the conversation. If it's boring or personal, move on. If it's interesting, stay, and use body language to communicate your interest (for example, not at points you agree with). If they are welcoming, they will look at you as they speak, to include you in the conversation, and may open their stance so the group circle now includes you. Wait for a natural pause in the conversation before you interject a remark. When you comment, keep it on topic. It's ideal if it's a question that helps them carry the conversation further.

If you're speaking with a group of people at a conference and someone is hanging around at the edge of your circle, look at them, open your stance, and give them an opening - because it's probably me, and if what I've just stated doesn't work, I've got nothing!

I suppose I don't need to tell you not to get hammered at the opening reception. Just remember this: the hangover will last the rest of the conference! But again - go with the flow. I remember some all-nighters with Terry Anderson and Rory McGreal that were really important to me when I was just beginning to attend conferences.

I know a lot of people approach receptions like sharks and go into them with an express intent to gather contacts, make a good impression, pass out business cards, and all the rest of it. I don't recommend this approach; it's too stressful, and it's too artificial. I would say that your main

objective would be to have some great conversations. You're meeting some really interesting people. Listen with interest, ask relevant questions, and enjoy the art of a great story. And don't just focus on the work. Talk about the venue, the local attractions, or anything else that interests you.

Finally - as I write this the concept of the '[social artist](#)' comes to mind. I first heard it from Nancy White; she credits Etienne Wenger. When you're taking part in conversations, don't think about what you want to get from the other people, don't think about what sort of impression you're making (you know, unless there's blood dripping from your nose or something). Think, instead, about how you can *help* the conversation. Lead by creating a [space for dialogue](#) - ask open-ended questions, venture an opinion that could be considered, say something nice about a talk you've heard.

The keynotes. A big part of the conference fee went to pay for the keynotes, so you may as well attend their talks. Often, they'll be the best speakers (but sometimes there are some real dud - beware keynotes given by politicians or corporate sponsors). Also, the keynote speakers are one experience most people at the conference will have in common (they'll split off for the conference sessions). They set the tone for the conference, and many other speakers (including you!) will refer back to the keynotes during their own talks.

Whatever you do, *don't sit there passively* when the keynote is speaking. I know there was once upon a time when you showed the best honour to the keynote by paying strict attention and doing nothing else. As a frequent keynote, I can only say: please don't do this. Because I know what's happening - you start out with the best of intentions, but your mind wanders, you start thinking about other things, and then the talk is over and you can't remember a bit of it.

I *strongly* recommend taking notes. If you're a novice, take note as an outline - you will then be able to see the structure of the keynote's talk (and you'll see how it actually does fit [the patterns](#) I've talked about). You can learn a *lot* by how they have put together their remarks, even if you're not so interested in the subject matter. Also note the way they speak, the way they're communicating with the audience - *learn* from them, because you'll be on that podium soon enough.

Taking notes also helps you interact with the subject material. There's a very good chance that what the speaker says will be relevant to your own talk (especially if you've both tried to fit within the theme of the conference). You will want the notes for later, when you are making last minute additions to your slides. And if you're asked to give a report on the conference (something I think is a good idea, but which I don't personally do nearly often enough) the notes will be a lifesaver.

Unless someone explicitly tells you that you shouldn't, feel free to take pictures of the speaker and some relevant slides (not every slide, you don't need all of them). You can use them on your own slides when you refer to the speaker's points (don't worry about the copyright, this falls squarely within fair use).

Finally, track the backchannel. I recommend something like [Tweetdeck](#) for this, so you can

follow more than one thread and so you don't have to worry about reloading pages and all of that. Participate - judiciously - in the conversation. I don't think Twitter is a good place for a summary of the talk, but rather should be used to highlight good quotes, express support or opposition to arguments, and to fact-check the speaker.

The whole point here is to *engage* with the speaker and the subject material. Don't just sit there passively and watch the presentation as though it were television - you will be *bored silly* and you will *learn nothing*. The content during a presentation is coming at you at 300 [baud](#), and you have a 64,000 baud mind. Use that space to learn by being active, by creating, by interacting.

If your notes are half-decent, I recommend positing them online, on your blog. Too few people do this. I like to link from my presentation to the summary, but so few people really do a summary. The best presentation summaries read like a blog post or short essay - [like this](#). Don't try to capture everything; focus on main points - it's a *summary*. With any luck, the presenter will provide a recording, slides and a transcript.

A note on recording: I don't mind if you record my talks (actually, I encourage it, so I have a backup) but some people think they are protecting some big secret. So if you intend to record the entire talk, it's always a good idea to ask the presenter (at some of the larger conferences the organizers also will have to approve, because they've arranged some special deal with some company to create conference recordings - I imagine conferences like [TED](#) and [Idea City](#) are like this).

The streams. Everything I've said about engaging with the keynotes also applies to the stream speakers. Maybe even more so, because these speakers will be a lot less skilled and will have less to say. This makes it more difficult to pay attention and follow the thread of the presentation. Try to be charitable - many of the speakers will not even have read this post - they'll be jet-lagged, their presentations will be awkward, and they won't be sure of the point they're trying to make.

Because of that, feel free to be mercenary with the streams. Don't treat the program as an agenda, treat it as a buffet. Pick and choose the talks you *want* to see and feel free to move about. One of the great things about a conference is that you don't have to stay in the room - but to take advantage of this, you have to feel free to *leave*. I know it's harsh, but you didn't spend thousands of dollars to watch some guy read his slides describing how he used a website for his class of 14 people.

The hardest thing when dealing with the streams is moving from place to place. Make sure you know where all the breakout rooms are so you can dash from one to the other without searching all over for it. Sometimes you'll want to switch rooms in mid-session - conferences often schedule two or three speakers to a slot, so you may want to view the first speaker in one room and the last speaker in another room (and yes - of *course* it's allowed. It's not a prison).

And if none of the stream speakers is interesting to you, take a break. Catch up on email, pull together your notes for a session summary, grab a snack - whatever. Sometimes the best conference experiences are had by people hanging around in the halls during the sessions (treat

these conversations just like the ones at receptions and you'll be fine you'll be fine - in general, if people are seated at a table, they want to be by themselves, but if they're standing by the bar or at a standup, they welcome interaction).

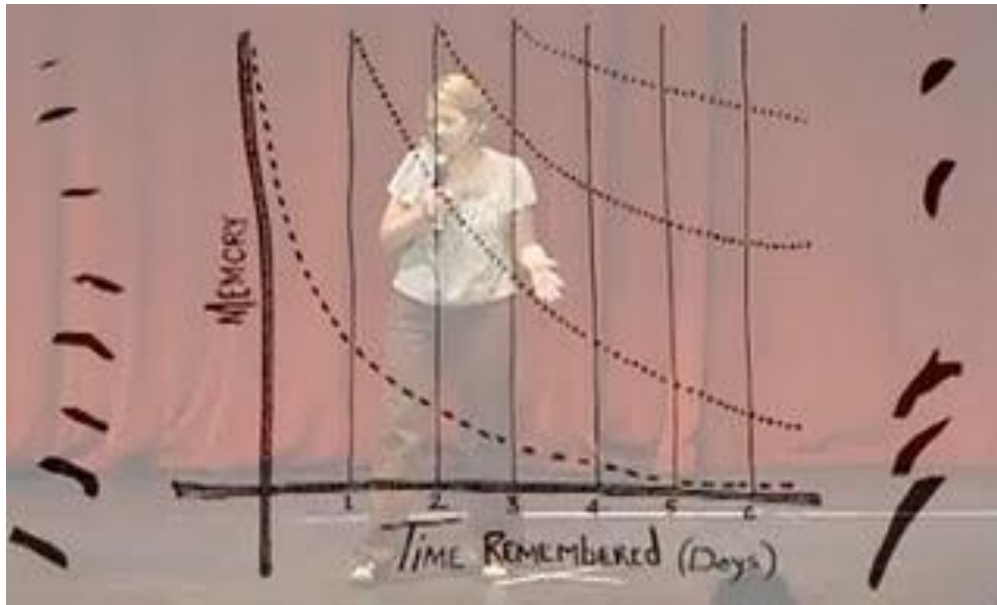
The big difference between the streams and the keynotes is that it's a lot easier to interact and have conversations during the streams. Because you're taking notes and engaged, you will be in a good position to ask questions. But ask *genuine* questions - try to draw out the person on a certain point or concept. If you think there's a criticism that should be made, make it - but in an empowering way. Because *you're both* engaged in the same pursuit of inquiry and truth. It's not a competition; you don't have to knock out some opponent.

The booths. Many conference (but by no means all) have vendor booths. I *always* make the time to go to as many of the booths as I can (a challenge at some of the bigger conferences). Why? Well for one thing, you'll never have to buy pens or coffee mugs again. There's also sometimes free clothes, pointers, and other trinkets. If you give them your business card (or let them scan your conference badge) you'll be added to their mailing list - but also eligible for some good door prizes.

Most importantly, though, the booths are offering products and services relevant to your area of interest. It's advertising, sure, but advertising tailored to you (or to as close an approximation of you as they can manage). You'll be able to watch demos, try out products, ask questions (and even get answers!) about costs, service and support. Booths attune you to the trends in your field and suggest where the future is heading. When you're back at your institution and someone says "we're considering getting a [SmartBoard](#)" you can say "oh yes, I tried one at the conference, and..." (that actually happened for me).

I also feel free to engage with booth staff. Yes, they are often actors or people hired to represent the brand, but they are also tasked with collecting feedback. So if I disapprove of [a company's](#) business practices, I say so at their booth. If I have a specific feature I need, I ask for it. If I have a criticism of the product, I offer it. I'm always nice about it - but I'm a customer, they're a vendor, and I am using this experience to help them serve me (and society) better.

Don't collect paper brochures from booth staff; they're too heavy to fly home, and you'll never read them again anyways. Collect web site addresses.



Your Talk

Almost before you know it, the day of your talk will arrive.

Make sure ahead of time you know exactly when your talk will take place, and in what room. You wouldn't think this comes up, but I've had more last-minute scrambles than I care to count, and so now I always take the effort to get my bearings and make sure I'll be on time.

The night before (or, if you're me, at five a.m. on talk day) you're finishing your slides.

My talk often doesn't take form until this point. Yes, I have an abstract, yes, I have a plan, but I rarely know precisely what I want to *say* until I've arrived at the venue, gotten a feel for the place and the people, and (ideally) been able to see some of the keynotes and other talks (that's why being the *opening* keynote is a special challenge).

Your slides: your slides are *not* your speaking notes (unless you're able to work with minimal speaking notes). Your slides are a *visual aid* for your audience. And unless you're a *very* compelling speaker, your audience will rely on them to keep track of where they are in the talk.

It's really important to take the time and effort to prepare effective slides. I recommend a visit to [Presentation Zen](#) (or Garr Reynolds's summaries [elsewhere](#)). And notwithstanding that there are [dozens](#) and [dozens](#) of sites giving advice on slides, here are my inviolable rules:

- no more than eight lines of text per slide. Usually less. Text on images and charts count as lines of text, so don't throw up a 20-line graph. People simply can't read slides like that.

- use enough text - some people love the [Lessig style](#), but unless you're prepared to create and

time 200 slides for a half hour, don't do it. Actually, don't do it in any case. For two reasons: people who speak English as a second language will depend on the slides to follow the talk, and people reading the slides later on will want a clear message, not mysterious one-word blips.

- one major image per slide. Use the [rule of thirds](#) to size and position the image.
- dark text, light background. Otherwise, your room must be very dark in order for your slides to be visible. There's been plenty of [research](#) on colour selection; take heed of it.
- use a consistent design theme throughout; you can be creative with the design, but don't overwhelm the message with it.

Your delivery: Again, there are [many sites](#) that can help you learn how to give a good talk. [This](#) is a good comprehensive guide. We've addressed the content and outline above, so here I'll focus on the delivery. And really, there are only two major rules:

- speak clearly. This means speaking loudly enough for people to hear you, saying your words clearly and not mumbling.
- speak to the audience. Don't face the screen, don't read your notes, *look at the audience* and *speak to them*. If you can't speak to an audience like that, practice until you can.

This isn't just a conference skill, this is a *life skill*. It doesn't matter how good a scientist or researcher you are if you can't look people square in the eyes and explain your point of view.

One more tip: *love your audience*. I know that this may sound weird, but it really does work. When you love your audience, when your focus is on how well you can give your gift to them, everything else melts away. Just remember: they are there to hear *you* (if you're a keynote, they actually *invited* you and *paid your way* - how could you not love them? How could you have any doubt that they *really* want to hear what you have to say?)

I tried to find a good link for this but couldn't find one, which tells me that I need to write about this in more detail one day.

Why? Why have I lingered so much on your own talk at the conference? Because this is going to be one of the main ways you get the most out of the conference.

- a good talk will prompt questions and discussion, which will lead to much-needed suggestions and improvements to your ideas
- people will want to talk to you after your talk; they may offer to exchange resources, collaborate, or in some way help you do your work (and even better: give *you* an opportunity to help them do *their* work)
- your talk is like a calling card; a person who gives good, well-researched and well-presented talks will be considered for recruiting and job opportunities

You can't fake your way through a good talk. That's why they're so important. People will see *the real you* when you are giving a talk. And they will engage (or not) based on that. So give a great

talk, and become the person everyone wants to talk to!

Archiving and Recording

I strongly recommend maintaining an archive of all your talks. On my [presentation page](#), you can see the archives of some 288 talks I've given over the years (people keep asking me, so I must be doing *something* right).

- *Your slides*: upload a copy of your slides to [Slideshare](#) (or an equivalent slide hosting service). Save .ppt versions and .pdf versions on your website (assuming you have a website). And of course, be sure you save a copy in your own filesystem.

- *Audio*: it's really easy to record audio and there's no excuse for not doing it. On any computer, you can download and install [Audacity](#); this is a free and open source program that will record hundreds of hours without a problem (seriously! I've accidentally left Audacity running over the weekend and returned to find it happily recording away).

Use a good quality microphone; as mentioned above, I use a nice Audio Technica microphone. You should use some sort of [directional condenser mic](#) for the best results. Make sure the microphone is pointed toward you when you speak (it *is* after all a *directional* mic).

Save your audio as MP3. You'll need to install [LAME](#) with Audacity to do this. Here are [instructions](#). For audio, set the bit rate to 64 or even 32 (the default is 128) so you don't end up with huge audio files. You can store the site on your website or (better) use a free storage site like [Dropbox](#).

- *Video*: it's a step up, and harder to do, but if you can, record a video of the talk. Probably the best way to do this is to use a [Flip Video camera](#) or (because they're out of production) a [Kodak](#) video camera (your regular camera will only record for 20 minutes or half an hour). I upload all my video to [Blip.tv](#) (because YouTube has size and length restrictions).

Save your archives, create a presentation page (like the ones I've been showing throughout this post), and when it's ready, Tweet it to the world and write a blog post about it.

Why? You will receive a *much larger* audience for your archive than you will for your presentation - some of my presentations have been viewed by thousands of people online. The archive also gives prospective conference organizers some idea of what to expect if they bring you in as a speaker. Your archive is also your calling card for prospective employers.

And best of all, if you do this, *others* will do it too. And that helps you get the most out of any conference you attend. Imagine what it would be like to be able to replay that really influential talk you heard? Normally, the talk comes and goes, and unless you've taken really good notes, it begins to fade. But if there's a recording, you can refresh your recollection whenever you want.



After the Conference

After the conference, you have two major resources that you want to cultivate:

- ideas - you've seen a bunch of talks, met with and talked to people, and with any luck, have been filled with ideas. It's a really good idea to ensure you're recorded them somewhere, so you can recall them in the future if you need. You could post blog summaries online; it's also a good idea to collect and save website addresses.

You will have been exposed to dozens of resources - websites, projects, applications, products. Take the time to review them at your leisure - they would make a great topic for a blog post later on, again keeping a record so you'll remember what you found. You may well find yourself installing a new application and using it for a while (or for a lifetime!).

- people - unless you're going to the same conference every year, you will have met a wealth of people. Now is the time to make sure you stay in touch with them. Depending on how you communicate with people, add them to your email address book, your Twitter follow list, your Facebook friends, or (my preference) your RSS reader.

You don't need to form a deep and permanent bond with all the people you meet at conferences. You *can't* - and even if you could, you will be introduced to their friends, and their friends, and so on. But it's OK to stay network friends with most people. You'll chat from time to time, exchange messages on social networks, and be there for them when they need the answer to a question or a suggestion for a good resource.

It is best (even if a bit idealistic) to think of the people you meet at conferences as *people you can help*. I'm not so good at that as I should be (though I try). But I've seen it modelled really well - people like Dave Cormier and Helene Fournier are people who seem to approach every interaction with the question, "what can I do for *you*?" Those are the best kind of people.

And - if you've followed the advice in this post - think about the impression you've left with other people. You knew where everything was ahead of time, because you took the time to check. People asked *you* for directions. You were interested in what they had to say and created a space for some really interesting conversations. Your presentation was on topic, interesting, clear and well presented. And you really interacted with your audience. And when you were at other presentations, you were interested and engaged, taking notes and (ideally) asking questions. Who *wouldn't* want to do more work with you?

Online version: <http://halfanhour.blogspot.com/2011/11/how-to-get-most-out-of-conference.html>