

Ecology 101

Note: Dr. Harold Ornes is the editor of **Ecology 101**. Anyone wishing to contribute articles or reviews to this section should contact him at the Office of the Dean, College of Science, Southern Utah University, 351 W. Center, Cedar City, UT 84720; (435) 586-7921; Fax: (435) 865-8550; E-mail: ornes@suu.edu.

I attended a student award ceremony recently and after receiving an award, the awardee and spouse and child got up and left the ceremony. Then, a brief but annoying electronic malfunction in the speaker's microphone caused the audience to hear the proceedings from a concurrent event elsewhere in the building. More of the audience got up and left. And so it goes. My suspicion is that such behaviors are not unique to Utah.

The following article focuses on tips and advice for all of us, but perhaps especially our newest fellow ecologists—colleagues about some appropriate and inappropriate professional meeting behaviors. Thank you, Ryan O'Donnell, Department of Biology and the Ecology Center, Utah State University, Logan, UT.

Meeting Manners: Unspoken Rules of Polite Meeting Attendance and Presentation

In all parts of social life, professional and otherwise, certain unspoken rules dictate appropriate behavior, and these rules can vary greatly among cultures and circumstances. These unspoken rules, customs, or manners, may seem obvious to those well accustomed to a given situation. However, for the uninitiated, these customs can be unexpected and even intimidating.

Such customs are also in effect at scientific meetings, although they are rarely discussed. Scientific societies generally welcome first-time meeting-goers with open arms, but with extreme violations of these unspoken rules, that welcome can seem short-lived.

I have compiled a brief list of some of these manners, which if kept in mind can make conferences more enjoyable for both attendees and presenters. I hope that this will be a helpful introduction for people attending their first scientific conference. It also may be valuable as an update for those of us who have been attending conferences for decades, but who haven't thought much about recent changes in meeting manners brought on by technological innovations such as PowerPoint and mobile phones.

Presenting

The most basic rule of polite presentation-giving is to give a good, effective presentation. Do not waste your audience's time with a poorly prepared and weakly presented talk. There are many excellent references available that provide guidance on how to give effective presentations (e.g., Bragg 1966, Cook 1968, Janzen 1980, Pickett et al. 1991, Köchy 2004, Smith et al. 2007). The following suggestions go beyond guidelines for effective presenting and refer more specifically to how to respect your audience and your meeting organizers in the preparation and delivery of your presentation, but there is much overlap between these and previously published guidelines for effectiveness.

1) Bring your talk to your session moderator as soon as possible, but at least 10–20 minutes before your session starts. USB flash drives are great, but also have a CD ready just in case. Older computers running Windows 98 and earlier will not have the drivers installed to access your device, and flash drives are notoriously unstable compared to more permanent media like CDs.

2) Figure out how to use the laser pointer and remote control ahead of time, preferably well before your session. Midsession lessons from the moderator interrupt the flow of the meeting, cut into your presentation time, and bore your audience.

3) Give your presentation. This suggestion may seem obvious, but at each meeting a few people cancel talks because they decide at the last minute that they don't have time, or that the talk is not a high enough priority. This is a major inconvenience to meeting organizers, audiovisual techs, and would-have-been audience members. Of course, sometimes emergencies happen and you simply must cancel. That's fine, but you should tell your session moderator as soon as possible. You will impress the meeting organizers if you offer to find a replacement speaker to fill your spot.

4) Don't stand in front of your slides. Everyone else wants to see them, too. In particular, keep in mind the people in the ends of the first rows. And talk to your audience, not your slides.

5) Keep in mind the scope of your audience. It is better to give too much background than too little. It is frustrating for your audience if you launch into your methods without enough explanation of why you're doing what you're doing. Also, watch out for jargon or undefined acronyms.

6) Use common names whenever you can, that is, if they're available for your organism and standardized enough that you're not just making them up. Common names are more approachable for a general audience. An exception might be for a discussion of a variety of species where scientific names (e.g., genera) would help the audience to understand phylogeny better than using common names.

7) Using color in your slides is great, but don't be obnoxious. Especially keep in mind the needs of the colorblind audience. Use color, but make sure your slides are easily interpreted in grayscale as well. You can check this by printing them out on a black and white printer. Also, keep in mind that most projectors have lower contrast than your computer monitor does, especially in a room with windows or a few lights on. Try to examine your slides projected in a lighted room to make sure they are still able to be interpreted with low contrast. Watch out for photos of animals that can no longer be discerned from the foliage, and for text that fades into backgrounds. Also, some colors shift in projection—another reason to make sure your slides are understandable in grayscale. For example, don't just use red lines and blue lines; use solid red lines and dashed blue lines.

8) Practice your pace, and finish on time. There is perhaps nothing more arrogant in science than to assume that your audience has nothing better to do than watch you speak, and that the subsequent speakers' topics are less important than yours. When you go over your allotted time, this is what you imply (Cairns 1989).

9) In some meetings, it is customary for the session moderator, not the speaker, to ask the audience for questions and to call on members of the audience. The purpose of this custom is to minimize the speaker's ability to "plant" questions in the audience or to avoid questions from competing research groups. Pay attention to the custom at your meeting, or ask the moderator who should request questions before your session starts.

10) Repeat or paraphrase the questions you get at the end. It is usually hard for at least one person in any room to hear the question being asked.

11) Stay for your entire session. Meeting sessions are the closest thing to a team sport that science offers outside of direct collaborations. You should work to make your entire session the best one of the conference, and that includes supporting your "teammates" by staying for their talks, even if they were not present for yours.

Attending

Not everyone who attends a meeting will present, and, unfortunately, not everyone who presents at a meeting will actually attend. But there are guidelines for polite meeting attendance that go beyond presenting, and that apply to all attendees.

1) Wear your nametag. It shows that you paid, but more importantly, it makes it easier for all your new friends and future collaborators to remember your name, and to avoid being embarrassed by having to ask you again.

2) Turn off your mobile phone. It is best to just leave it off the whole day if you can, but you should at least be absolutely sure it will not ring or give any other alerts, including vibration, during a meeting. Vibration mode is also audible and distracting, especially to the members of the audience with more youthful hearing.

3) It is fine, even encouraged, to change rooms during concurrent sessions. But enter and leave the sessions as quietly as possible. If you know you are going to be leaving early, try to sit near the end of the row. Conversely, if you know you are going to stay for the whole session, sit as far in from the aisles as possible to make it easier for others to come and go.

Some of these points straddle the line between meeting manners and effective communication, but they all come down to common sense. Try to be the speaker you want to watch and the audience member you want to watch you. It will make the conference experience more productive, and most importantly, more enjoyable for everyone involved.

Acknowledgments

Discussions with Aimee P. McIntyre and Kathryn Ronnenberg contributed to the development of this manuscript.

Literature cited

- Bragg, L. 1966. The art of talking about science. *Science* 154:1613–1616.
- Cairns, J. J. 1989. Speaking at length. *BioScience* 39:632–633.
- Cook, E. B. 1968. Oral presentation of a scientific paper. Pages 150–166 *in* F. P. Woodford, editor. *Scientific writing for graduate students: a manual of the teaching of scientific writing*. Rockefeller University Press, New York, New York, USA.
- Janzen, D. H. 1980. Plea from a symposium goer. *ESA Bulletin* 61:170–171.
- Köchy, M. 2004. Things that can go wrong with PowerPoint presentations. *ESA Bulletin* 85:81–82.
- Pickett, S. T. A., B. E. Hall, and M. L. Pace. 1991. Strategy and checklist for effective scientific talks. *ESA Bulletin* 72:8–12.
- Smith, J., J. Myers, and I. Myers-Smith. 2007. Tips for effective communication in ecology. *ESA Bulletin* 88:206–215.

Ryan P. O'Donnell
Department of Biology and the Ecology Center
5305 Old Main Hill
Utah State University
Logan, UT 84322-5305
E-mail: Ryan@biology.usu.edu