



# MSA Meetings:

## How to prepare and what to expect



Poster session at MSA 2016 in Berkeley, California.

This guide was created by the 2017–2018 Student Section Executive Board:

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## BEFORE THE MEETING

Whether this is your first meeting or if you are a regular attendee, being prepared for the next MSA meeting can greatly enhance your conference time and overall experience. We've put together this guide of tips so you to maximize your conference experience and hopefully have fun!

### *Prepare and practice an elevator speech*

First impressions, and they only take a *few seconds* to be formed upon first meeting someone. An elevator speech helps you tell your story in a brief way and achieve a good first impression. Having an elevator speech ready will be incredibly useful for the myriad networking opportunities you will have during MSA meetings!

#### ***What is an elevator speech?***

An elevator speech is basically a 15-30 second speech that describes who you are, what you do, and your future goals. The idea (and where the name comes from) is that you can deliver your pitch to someone in the amount of time it would take an elevator to get you both where you're going.

#### ***When can an elevator speech be used?***

They are useful in all kinds of situations, e.g., career fairs, networking events, conferences and MSA meetings! Basically anytime someone asks you "what is your research on?". Recognize that your elevator speech can change for different situations, but if you're going to the MSA meeting then you will have a good idea who your audience is and how to target your speech!

#### ***How to prepare an elevator speech***

Here is one possible outline of how you could format your elevator speech:

Hello! My name is (your name here), I am a (undergraduate/graduate student in field) working with (your advisor) at (affiliation/institution). I work with (describe your research project in concise way. What do you do? Why does it matter?). My skills include (list some of your skills). I plan to (state your future professional goals/your next steps).

Sounds like a very easy task, but preparation is **KEY** when getting an elevator speech ready. Here are some suggestions on how to get started:

#### **1) Write it down**

Get on paper what you would like someone you are just meeting to know about you. For example: your current project, your skills in the lab, field work experience, communication skills, etc.; anything that makes you stand out in the mycological/research field. Write it all down!

#### **2) Polish it**

Go over what you wrote and take out what is not actually that important, look for any redundancies. An elevator pitch should take 30 seconds or less! Keep that in mind when reviewing what you wrote. Sure, your research is interesting and there are lots of things you'll want to talk about... but work hard on determining what you really want the other person to know. Make sure you explain your research in a general way, try to avoid using technical words that might be too specific to your research project. (Remember we're all in love with fungi at

MSA, but we all come from diverse backgrounds)

### 3) Speak it out loud

Practice saying your speech and time it! Take the time to be critical about your work and make adjustments.

### 4) Practice, practice, practice!

Once your elevator pitch is ready, write it down on a sticky note and put it up somewhere you can see it every day... maybe on your bathroom mirror and practice it every morning in front of it! It is also a good idea to practice it with some of your friends and lab members and get feedback from them.

### 5) Adapt it

Constantly practicing it does not mean you'll have to memorize it and recite it the same way every time. What practice will do for you is actually the opposite, you will be able to tweak it from time to time and personalize it depending on who you are talking to and what the goal is for that specific conversation.

Don't forget to smile (remember that first impressions only take a few seconds!) and show enthusiasm about what you do. At MSA we all love fungi and research so make sure you convey through your pitch that passion you have for fungi and research!

### Additional resources

Here are some additional resources you can check for more help on preparing your elevator pitch for our next MSA meeting:

<https://www.nature.com/naturejobs/science/articles/10.1038/nj7435-137a>

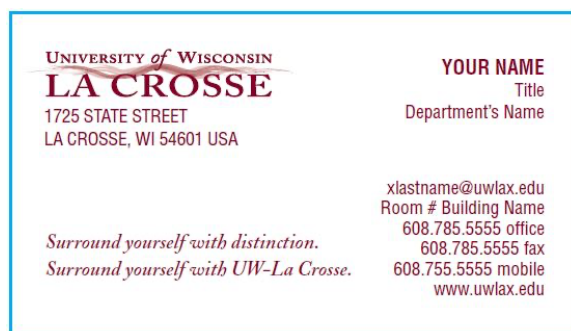
<http://thepostdocway.com/content/elevator-pitches-scientists-what-when-where-and-how>

Want to make sure they remember you? Follow your elevator pitch by offering your business card!

## Business cards

Business cards are handy to have at conferences. They may seem a bit old-school, but they are still used commonly to quickly share contact information. They may be especially useful at international conferences, since people may be reluctant to use data on their phones to connect at the time.

You can often get business cards made through your department or institution to a standard template, which is a good way to get professional-looking cards with the approved institutional logo. It is inexpensive to get many hundreds of business cards made and it is worthwhile checking if your supervisor will cover that cost!



A standard business card template offered by the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

It's best to get business cards done through your institution but if this is not an option then there are many options for external places to get cards made.



Here are a couple of options:

- Vistaprint.com
- [Staples](#) prints 200 for \$10 and provides a template of how to make your own

**Information you should definitely include on a business card:**

- Name
- Email address
- Affiliation
- Mailing address

**Optional extras:**

- Phone number
- Fax number
- Personal website address
- Twitter handle
- ResearchGate, LinkedIn, etc.
- Photo of yourself

**Tips for handing out business cards at conferences:**

- Use them to follow up with potential collaborators or job opportunities
- Keep a few in with your name tag for easy access
- If the back is blank and you have time, you can write down a note of interest to the person before you give them a card, e.g., a great paper you've been discussing, a website, a couple of keywords of your interests or expertise

## *Professional Social Media*

If you want to give yourself an online presence before a conference, here's a brief introduction to a couple options. First, go to the website and sign up for the chosen professional social media, i.e. Twitter, ResearchGate, LinkedIn, etc. Using your

research email (school, government, etc.) may be helpful to connect you automatically to others in your institution.

### **ResearchGate [www.researchgate.net](http://www.researchgate.net)**

This is a place to share your research articles (or projects/posters/data if they haven't been published yet), follow researchers doing work you're interested in, look for jobs, and ask research questions. The more you fill out your information – institution, occupation, research interests, experience, etc – the better the “Recommendations” for people and articles you may be interested in will be. One interesting aspect is that a lab can have its own ResearchGate page that connects all lab members and can feature research projects and links to the lab website. You can manually upload information on your publications, but sometimes it will find them and ask if you want them added. This is a medium-paced social media website designed for researchers and does not require much attention after initiation.

### **Twitter [www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)**

For science professionals, this is a place to follow others and share research articles that you may not have necessarily published yourself, popular press articles and other news, photos, videos, and (short) opinions/ ideas/ anecdotes to scientists of all backgrounds. Many researchers use scoop it (<https://www.scoop.it/>) to easily share links to research articles on twitter. You can use hashtags to tag your tweets with a certain topic, but any text in a tweet can also be searched. This is a rapid-pace social media website/app which is updated constantly and is designed for anyone. It is very interactive.



## LinkedIn [www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)

This is a place to connect with people or businesses in your field and network easily, and look for jobs. Like ResearchGate, you first fill in your resume information such as research experience, education, skills, accomplishments, and interests. You can also add links to the labs with which you are or have been associated, outreach pages, or other interests to personalize your page. This is a medium-paced website/app which is designed for professional networking in research or other fields. You can choose your level of interaction but you should try to keep it updated.

During a conference is a great time to make a list of people you would like to find and follow on any of these websites. And remember, they may be making a list too. So think about creating your profile before the conference and highlighting what you're interested in and what makes you unique. Especially for students, it's OK to not have any publications or lots of research experience. Instead, you can showcase your work in creative ways, such as photos, links, and descriptions of research that you would like to do. Consider highlighting interesting outreach opportunities and your lab's website (or your own personal website!) on your profile as well.

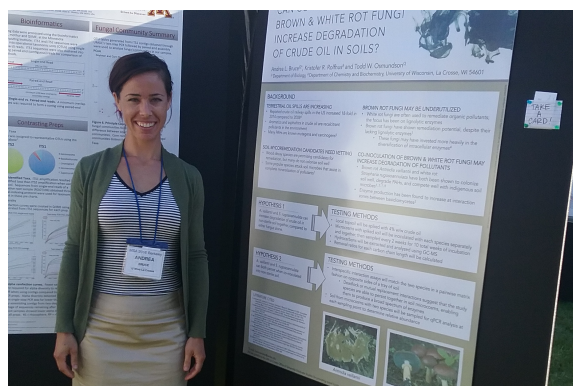
There are still so many other ways to share your science and connect with other researchers online today, we couldn't possibly list them all! Here is a short list of websites to check out if you're still looking for more ways to discover and interact with science online:

<https://www.inaturalist.org/>  
<http://mushroomobserver.org/>  
<https://www.scoop.it/>

<https://www.tumblr.com/>  
<https://www.instagram.com>

## *Preparing a poster presentation*

Because posters often present early work or preliminary data (sometimes collected up to the last minute before a meeting), designing a poster can be a fairly chaotic task – if this happens to you, you are not alone! Still, there are some basic design elements you won't want to forego. Poster sessions can be loud and crowded with bad lighting (see “What to Expect During the Poster Session”), so your poster needs to be especially visually appealing with an interesting title to draw people in! For inspiration, we really like the blog (<http://betterposters.blogspot.ca>), which showcases all kinds of non-traditional academic posters and showcases their weaknesses and strengths. Below are some tips we came up with for creating a great MSA poster.



Andi Bruce presenting her poster at MSA 2016.

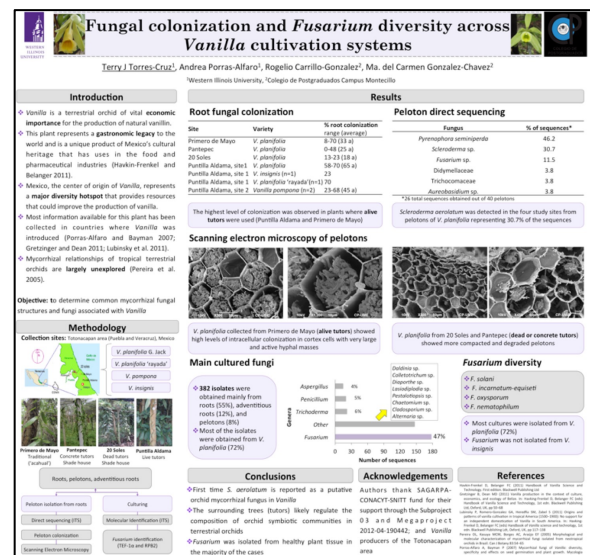
## Design

- Many scientists use PowerPoint to create their posters. You can also use any professional software you have access to, e.g. Adobe Illustrator or Photoshop.

- Choosing an attractive color scheme goes a long way. Effective use of 1 or 2 colors can be striking but beware of going overboard! You can find inspiration for color schemes in all kinds of everyday items, like magazines, upholstery, advertisements, etc. Try to keep in mind that some colors do not go together (e.g. red writing on a blue background). You can also look into color blind scales (e.g. check out [www.somersault1824.com/tips-for-designing-scientific-figures-for-color-blind-readers](http://www.somersault1824.com/tips-for-designing-scientific-figures-for-color-blind-readers))
- Most seasoned poster-presenters will have a template they like to re-use that they may let you use. Feel free to request this from your mentors, but don't be afraid to break free of convention! There are no rules when it comes to creative ways to present information well.
- When using headings that follow typical manuscript formatting, your conclusions get tucked away at the bottom. Consider placing your conclusions front and center to draw people in with your interesting results rather than hiding them. Also consider using non-traditional headings and use these to convey the important information so that people can get the main ideas without having to read the whole thing!
- Graphics and figures should dominate! Most people will glance through the figures before reading much more than the title. Use high quality figures and make sure your axes are labelled. Don't use cluttered figures, it's better to extract the important data and make a simpler figure than to show too much information that may confuse your audience.
- Make sure your figures can stand alone. You can title them with the point you want people to understand about them in lieu of a caption. Expect that people will look at

them without context and possibly without you there to explain it to them, so make them as clear as possible.

- Ideally you would use your own images, but if you need to use some from the web, make sure you have the rights to do so. Ask the creator for permission, or go with images that are licensed as Creative Commons. Government images are usually considered public domain and therefore free of copyright.



Poster by Terry Torres-Cruz.

## Formatting

- The poster size can change from year to year, so be sure to read the poster instructions on the meeting website before you begin! And double-check before you print!
- The title does not have to be long and descriptive like a manuscript titles does. On the contrary—short and catchy or one that asks an interesting question better piques people’s interest.
- Abstracts are not necessary; your poster is in effect a summary of your research as it is.
- People skip over big blocks of text. Creating columns is a great way to use

shorter lines, which are easier to read. Bullet points are your friends!

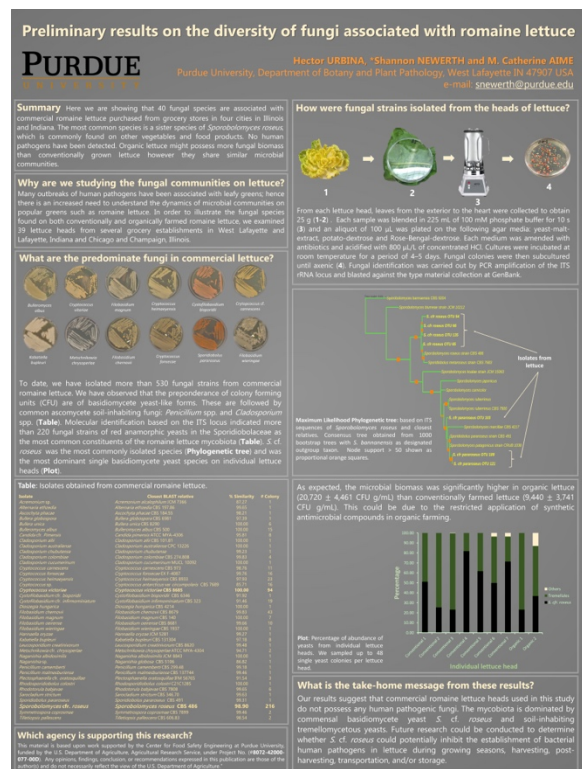
- Leaving plenty of blank space is important for a poster to look inviting. Remember you don't need to include every last bit of data or supporting work; you're there to fill in the gaps. Let your poster focus on the main points.
- It's not necessary to use headings that follow typical manuscript sections (i.e. Introduction, Methods, Results, etc.). For example, results-based headings state the main point of each section. Just make sure it is clear what order the viewer is intended to look at each section in, which can be accomplished by visual cues like lines or arrows, or even numbers.
- Avoid small font at all costs! Some suggest ballpark font sizes of 85 pt. for titles, 36-44 pt. for headers, and 24-34 for the body. A useful test before finalizing your poster is to print it on a sheet of office paper and hold it at an arm's length away. If you can't read all the text or interpret all the figures at that length, go bigger!
- Varying fonts can look great, but using more than 2 or 3 can look haphazard. Some people prefer sans serif fonts for the body because it makes it easier to read, while others prefer serif fonts because it helps guide the eye through the word.
- Make sure you put your contact details somewhere obvious and make it stand out! At minimum, provide an email address.

## Presentation tips

- Prepare a 5-minute talk summarizing the poster – identify the big problem, explain its importance, and describe what you did to answer it. This is how you can introduce your poster to people that

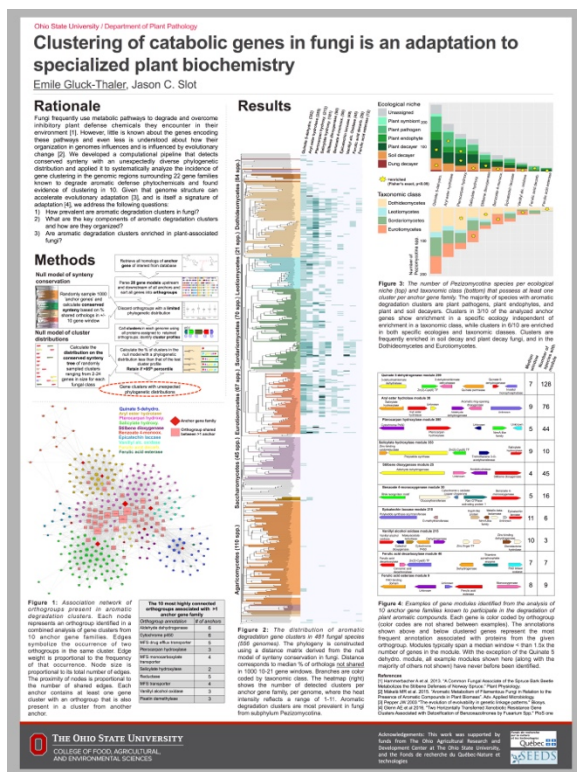
approach it, and they can ask questions from there. Practice this, along with your elevator speech.

- During the poster session, make eye contact and say hello to invite people to come chat with you.
- Avoid blocking the poster. Stand next to it and face the viewers.
- Talk loud enough that your audience can clearly hear you, but keep in mind there are other presenters trying to talk at the same time.





- You can print out mini versions of your poster for people to take with them that have your contact info, or business cards for people to be in touch with you after the meeting.
- Dress professionally (“business casual”, see “What to wear” section).
- Don’t ignore people who walk up while you’re chatting with someone else. You don’t have to drop the person you’re already talking to, but it’s nice to acknowledge the new person with eye contact, a nod, or a smile. Turning your body to face them, as well as the person you’re talking to, invites them to listen in and join the conversation.



Presented by Emile Gluck-Thaler, Graduate Student Research Poster Award winner 2016.

## Other general tips

- Get a poster tube to protect your poster while traveling to the meeting. If you are

traveling with other poster presenters from your lab, you can share the poster tube.

- Cloth posters travel well and don't require a poster tube, which are awkward on a plane. They're more expensive, but easier to move places.
- Consider lamination options to minimize glare – you usually have a glossy or matte finish.
- Most schools have large-format printers you can use for posters; ask your advisor about this. If not, make sure you leave plenty of time to call around to find a local print shop that can do this for you.
- **Consider the following judging criteria,** used to score student poster presentations. Undergraduate and graduate students are eligible to win an award (including a monetary prize!), presented at the award banquet to the best poster presentations!
  - Style and organization (Is the poster or are the slides graphically pleasing with a logical order and clear figures?)
  - Quality of science (Is an interesting question put forward and addressed in a rigorous manner with appropriate methods?)
  - Presentation (Is the project explained clearly, with effective framing of objectives, conclusions, and answers to questions?)
  - Advancing science (Is this contribution important for advancing mycological knowledge, innovative in design and experimentation, and adequately contextualized with a nod to historic work?)

## DURING THE MEETING

MSA meetings will provide you with lots of opportunities to interact with other mycologists. You may be preparing a presentation for the meeting, here we provide information on how to prepare a poster and what to expect during talks and poster sessions. We also describe what to expect during forays and diverse social gatherings.

### *What to wear*

Conferences are a place where you are presenting yourself as a professional and should therefore look the part. Generally, conferences are a place for business casual attire. That means nothing should be too casual, too revealing, or generally scruffy looking. Most of the time, the more established you are in your career, the more relaxed you get with the dress code, so don't be surprised if you see people in t-shirts. MSA meetings also tend to be less formal than some other professional societies, so there's no need to break out your finest blazers for those conferences. As dramatic as it sounds, you are representing your university and lab at a professional event and therefore need to dress to fit that idea.



The MSA student section (2016-2017) modelling business casual attire at MSA 2017.

Another thing to remember when packing for a conference is that conference centers tend to be VERY air conditioned during the summer. We recommend bringing a sweater/cardigan/jacket for when you're sitting in talks so you don't spend all your time shivering instead of listening! At most meetings, you'll be leaving the conference center for lunch/dinner, so layers are generally a good idea (especially for our meetings, which are held during the summer). Comfortable shoes are a good idea. There's a lot of walking to/from meals, between sessions, and at social gatherings. Being uncomfortable in your clothing won't help you get the most out of a conference.

### *What to expect during the foray*



Mycologists bring their favorite collection baskets to the foray.

Mushroom forays at conferences are a mixture of hiking and a treasure hunt, surrounded by enthusiasts, amateurs and experts in abundance. Don't be hesitant if you've never been, these hikes are often slow and can be accessible to most people. Forays are often on a wide trail meandering through a forest; along the trail the terrain can be hilly and even steep at times. If

you're inclined, prepare to venture off trail, because though trails are nice to humans, the fungi don't always care for them.

Here's a general outline of what you can expect. First, a bus will pick up foray participants at a designated spot, usually outside the conference center. Then you'll drive to the trail that has been chosen for the foray, ideally a trail that the organizer has recently found evidence of fungi. After offloading the bus, the leaders will announce trail and timing information, often including cardinal directions and which fungi to look out for. And then off to the races! Just kidding, people slowly break into smaller groups and head for the trail. Some die-hard fungal fans will try to ensure their basket gets full of fungal delights before anyone else's. And some years the hike will be so abundant with golden chanterelles that mycologists leave them picked, by the side of the trail. The hike is usually a loop or easy to follow signs to lead you to the meeting point, which may not be where you were dropped off.

After the hike, you can expect tables on tables to be filled by taxonomic (or morphological) groups, and have forayers exclaiming at rare fungal finds. After and while the fungi have been organized and fawned over, lunch will be available (or you'll bring it, if not included) and people spread out to eat, picnic style. Then the buses reload and take you back to town, to bask in the glory of a complete foray, perhaps taking home some new myco-friends.

**Tips:** Always stay with a buddy and return to the meeting point by the designated time. Bring water, but lunch is often provided (if indicated at sign up).



Identification table after a foray.

#### **What to bring:**

- Basket or bag for collecting
- Comfortable clothes
- Walking/Hiking shoes
- Protection from sun and insects
- Water/lunch/snacks (food sometimes provided)
- A sense of adventure!

### *What to expect during social gatherings*

These events are all a chance for you to network with your peers. These events are good opportunities to get involved in the society, meet people in your field, and build a network. At the MSA SS board meeting, speak up! This is a really great way to get involved in the MSA organization as a whole. **Students and postdocs are usually not aware that they are welcome at the board meeting. Please join us!** We want to share with you have we have accomplished over the past year and want to hear your ideas!





Student Section Board meeting, 2014.

At mixers and banquets, talk to people! Use your elevator speech! These events are an informal time to meet people and talk to them, without having one person presenting to another. This is a good chance to ask further questions about talks you saw previously, someone's work if you're interested, or just science in general. Mixers are going to be loud, chaotic events with a lot of people, but most everyone is open to talking to anyone, so don't feel shy about introducing yourself to people. Utilize your drink tickets wisely at these events!



Banquet at MSA 2017 in Athens, Georgia.

## *What to expect during the poster session*

Poster sessions are similar at all types of academic conferences; they provide opportunities for researchers to chat with attendees about their work in a casual, social setting. They typically take place in a

large room with rows of numbered boards where presenters hang their poster in an assigned spot (usually grouped by subject matter or category). In some occasions MSA has also held them outdoors when the weather allows.

The purpose of a poster is to summarize research findings succinctly and attractively to help publicize it, to generate discussion, and to showcase the presenter as a contributing member of the scientific society.



An outdoor poster session at MSA 2016 in Berkeley, CA.

During the poster session, the presenting author stands by his or her poster while attendees walk around, enjoy refreshments, browse the displays, and interact with the authors. Posters are often used to present early research or preliminary results prior to publication, which provides a great opportunity to receive feedback from other mycologists. As such, the etiquette is to avoid taking photos of posters unless you have the author's permission. The meeting often establishes an icon that authors can put on their posters to inform viewers it contains sensitive/unpublished information not to be disseminated. Posters can also provide junior scientists with an opportunity to get their feet wet presenting research, who might not yet be ready to give a talk.

Check with your advisor before deciding whether to submit your abstract for an oral or poster presentation!

As an attendee, the poster session allows you to interact more personally with researchers. If you're shy to approach people you don't know at the socials, posters are the perfect ice-breaker! Chatting with poster presenters gives you the chance to ask questions and gain some insight into how the project developed in the lab. Whether you're visiting the posters or presenting one, the session offers an excellent networking opportunity. While it's important to dress and act professionally (there's usually beer... don't go nuts), it's a fairly casual event where you can let your personality shine as you get to know other mycologists in the society. Be prepared to give out your contact information as you form new connections! (remember to carry your business cards with you). There will be judges among those visiting your poster who will score your presentation in the categories of style and organization, quality of science, presentation, and advancing science. Undergraduate and graduate students are eligible to win an award, presented at the award banquet, for their poster presentation!

The poster session usually lasts about 1.5 hours, so if you're presenting, be sure to bring water. Sometimes organizers may schedule odd-numbered posters in a row to present before or after the even-numbered posters in order to avoid congestion. You'll get information when you arrive at the meeting regarding where your poster has been assigned to be hung, as well as when it needs to be hung and taken down. It's wise to hang your poster early if the meeting allows, because attendees generally have

access to browse the posters both before and after the session.

## *What to expect during talks*

### **How to choose talks strategically**

Review the schedule of sessions, and look at the titles of each seminar during the session. Choose sessions that will be useful to your research, but also attend some that just sound plain interesting! It can be a good idea to stay for all the talks in one session because if you move between rooms during the middle of a session you'll often miss part of the talk, or have a difficult time finding a seat.



Oral presentation by Danny Haelewaters at MSA 2016.

### **How to effectively get information out of talks**

Take notes just as you would during a lecture. Writing down the introductory/background information allows you to better remember applications of interest when going through conference notes after returning home. Write down questions in case you weren't able to ask during the post-talk question session, you can ask the speaker in person at a meal or social hour, or send an email post-conference.

It is common to live-tweet talks at conferences. These can serve as digital notes but be respectful of the presenter's wishes. Some speakers do not want unpublished data shared on social media.

## *How to network*

Conferences are awesome opportunities to make meaningful connections with other student and researchers that can become future collaborations, or even potential new advisors, if you are looking for future opportunities in the field.



Students taking an opportunity to chat with professional mycologists at MSA 2017.

### **Put your elevator speech to use!**

Use that speech you worked so hard on before the meeting to introduce yourself to other mycologists at the meeting.

### **Hand out your business cards**

If you don't have pockets, you can keep a few cards in your nametag lanyard.

### **Arrange meetings in advance**

If there is someone specific you would like to meet during the meeting, try to set up meetings prior to the conference with those individuals you'd like to talk to. You can also talk to your advisor in advance about introducing you to people of interest.

### **Research the attendees**

If you are interested in talking to an individual it is a good idea to get familiar with their work in advance and maybe have specific questions in mind that you would like to ask. This will show your interest and knowledge of their work.

### **Take advantage of social gatherings**

There will be plenty of opportunities at MSA meetings to talk to old friends and meet new colleagues. It can be good to network into the night instead of going back to your hotel room right after the sessions are done. Try to get away from chatting with your labmates the whole time.

### **Talk to presenters**

The poster session is a great way to network and hear about the work of others. Keep a list of questions of presentations you have attended that you would like to ask certain presenters.

### **Be receptive**

You will be more successful at networking if you are open to listen to others and avoid pushing your own agenda. Maintain eye contact with the person you are talking to.

### **Follow up with people you met**

Within a few days after the meeting, send an email ("It was nice to chat with you about x, y, and z," "thanks for your input on my research questions," etc.). It's also an opportunity to ask any additional questions. In addition to emailing, you can connect with people or labs through social media (Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, etc). If you are active on social media, you can also tweet or post during the meeting; and even make positive comments about talks and symposia during the conference.