

# Checklist for navigating Stat-ML conferences/workshops

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Big conferences like ICML/NeurIPS or even smaller workshops can be intimidating for younger attendees. Here are some personal suggestions (via accumulated wisdom) for my own students.

- **Purpose.** Identify the purpose of attending the meeting. Usually a combination of disseminating your research ideas, meeting new people who work in your area, catching up with old friends, learning about some new ideas (detailed ideas within your research area, high level ideas in nearby topics).
- **Structure your learning.** You cannot show up at a large conference and expect to learn lots of things about every area (you will learn nothing about most). Be selective about what you want to learn more about:
  1. **Study the schedule.** Before the conference, study the schedule and note (mobile/paper) what you want to attend (tutorials, plenaries, posters, short/long talks, “Minority X in Field Y” meetings, etc). Especially in a large poster session, mark the posters you want to go to first before exploring others.
  2. **Avoid burnout.** In big conferences, you can get burnt out by attending too many things. Be realistic about your attention span. Mix social events with technical ones (use different parts of the brain).
- **Meeting people.** If you’re well-established, you will recognize people from earlier encounters, but when you’re inexperienced, you might not recognize people and maybe others will not know you.
  1. **Start early.** If you would really like to meet certain researchers from your area, contact them beforehand, tell them about how you know/love their work, and request to set up a time to meet and discuss your ideas and to learn more details about their ideas. (mentioning university+advisor might help)
  2. **Develop memory.** For authors you respect and read/cite often, make it a habit to go to their website, look at their photo, know their full name and university, and other papers they have written. Names are hard, but authors are human beings, so putting a face to the name and adding a story with context will help you remember them and possibly recognize them at chance encounters (at a small workshop, or a poster session of a big conference, or when they are introduced to you in a conversation).
  3. **Ask questions post-talk.** If an author has just given a relevant talk, approach them, introduce yourself very briefly, and ask them questions about their work to begin a conversation. Authors love to talk about their own work, so you don’t have to do much to make them start talking to you. Some people may not want to know anything about you until it’s clear you care about them (or their work).
  4. **Ask questions at posters.** One way to meet relevant people is to spend time with them at their poster really trying to understand their contributions by asking good questions (and potentially comparing it to your own work, which they may not be aware of, or of other works that come to your mind).
  5. **Enthusiasm about your own work.** Enthusiastically talk about your own research whenever a chance arises, tell them why it’s interesting and important and nontrivial, and why they should check it out.
  6. **Following up.** At some point after meeting someone relevant, continue the conversation over email. Point them to your own related work, or ask them more nuanced questions about aspects of their proofs/assumptions, or just tell them that their work was cool and it was nice to meet them.
- **Take notes.** You will likely learn things that you may want to read up more about. If you do not note them down (relevant papers, talks, authors, ideas, etc), you will forget them quickly and not be able to recall them. So take notes in a notebook or your mobile, take photos if needed, etc. However, be realistic about what you will really have to read more about and try to rank things in order of relevance to your research interests.
- **Meta-notes.** Don’t just note down interesting technical ideas. Also take notes of what made a talk or poster particularly effective (design? visuals? interaction? humor? eye contact? confidence?).

Most importantly, enjoy it. Don’t compare yourself to others or fear judgment. You have an chance to see the latest work by the best researchers, meet and learn from them, and expand your horizons. Let your curiosity and enthusiasm run free, and as long as you don’t focus too much on yourself, it can be an inspiring experience!