

My first conference...

Last week I spent several days at the United Kingdom Literacy Association ([UKLA](#)) conference at the University of Exeter. This was my first ever conference and I thought that it might be useful to share some thoughts on presenting and attending. Spoiler alert: it was *wonderful*.

As someone relatively new to academia, the idea of a conference was daunting. I asked several colleagues for advice. The variance in the tips I received shows that people enjoy conferences differently. I will share all of these but feel free to pick and mix...

First, do your research. Read email communications and the conference programme carefully. From these I deduced that Exeter University was at the top of a hill. I also found out that there was a gala dinner. 'Gala dinner anxiety' resulted in an enormous suitcase. Suitcase + hill = putting the local taxi company in my phone!

When you are reading the conference programme, make a note of the sessions that you really want to see. Bear in mind that this bit is like a festival – you can't see everyone! If you can't fit in all the presenters that you are hoping to see, try and seek them out when you're there. If you're able, why not drop them an email and arrange to have a coffee together during the conference?

On the topic of coffee, UKLA arranged the timetable well. We were encouraged to explore the campus and told where we could find a quiet spot. So much intense interaction can be exhausting (I was still talking shop on the train home), and I appreciated the option of time out.

Some practical tips...

Add your contact details to the end of your presentation. If you're on Twitter, add your Twitter handle too. Take pictures of the slides that you like in other presentations and if you have pictures of the presenter too, ask them if they are happy for you to share them. Some people like to ask for selfies.

If you have fancy fonts in your presentation, make sure that you embed them in the file (tutorial [here](#)) on your USB stick so that your work looks as you intended on the big screen. You can take advantage of a coffee break to go to your room early and get set up. Don't forget to take a drink.

Having a timer for your presentation helps, that way you stay on track and protect the time for your questions. The Chair will signal if you are running out of time, keep your eyes on them. Phrase any questions to others in a supportive and curious way.

If you are presenting, it is a good idea to make sure that you've anticipated what people might ask you about in the questions section, especially if these touch on potential limitations or awkward aspects of your research. I think of these as 'roundabout questions.' Before my first driving test I remember saying, *I'll be fine if there are no roundabouts*. Reader, there were roundabouts. If there is something that you perceive as a limitation, present it as an area for further development. No one is there to pull you down.

I already mentioned my enormous suitcase. This was unnecessary. Wear what you feel confident and comfortable in.

Ye, there will be intimidating names present. At one point I was talking to at least five different people from my reference list. Again, they were lovely.

Perhaps the most important piece of advice about attending your first conference is this: you deserve to be there.

Recently, Reshma Saujani spoke about imposter syndrome by linking it to '[bicycle face](#)'. 'Bicycle face' refers to a condition that nineteenth century doctors associated with women who wanted to ride a bicycle. [Bicycling women](#) had bulging eyes, clenched jaws, and suffered with weariness. Solution: don't ride a bike, don't step outside the box that is assigned to you. Saujani suggests that, like 'bicycle face,' 'imposter syndrome' makes people feel that *they* are the problem as opposed to the system. So, push past that discomfort. Get on your bicycle and head to a conference!

Conference newbies, it is completely understandable to feel nervous about stepping into a new space because it is unfamiliar. It is *not* because you do not belong. *Everyone* at UKLA wanted to talk about literacy, about reading, about writing. They were my people. In going to a conference, you are going to be among allies. You will be welcomed and valued because you are bringing new funds of knowledge to the community. You have metaphorically (and literally in Exeter!) travelled up a hill to get there. Enjoy the view from the top. You deserve it.

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Aisling Walters works as a teacher educator and researcher at Nottingham Trent University. She is an early career researcher and has just completed her MA in Education. The focus of Aisling's research is the writer identity of trainee English teachers and the formative experiences that shape these.

