

Conferencing Alone – A Survivor’s Manual

By Erin K. Milne

So, you’re going to a conference . . .

Conferences can be a great opportunity to learn a lot and meet people in our industry. They are also one of the best things you can do for your career, where you can learn about industry trends, gain some new skills, and make all kinds of new connections with other library professionals.

However, attending a conference alone can be a frightening undertaking, especially if - like me - you’re an introvert. Here are my tips to relax and not just survive the experience but make it a great one!

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Pre-conference

Be prepared!

What’s in store for you? If it is a large conference, you’re going to be attending dozens of sessions led by professionals in your industry, meet a ton of new people, and take home lots of great swag (it’s freebies GALORE – see below!).

Make sure you wring the most from your conference by first taking the time to sit down and formulate a plan.



Free swag at APLIC!

Review the Program

As soon as the program is released make sure you check it out. Read the titles of the papers that will be presented, and check out the abstracts to get a better understanding of what they’ll be about.

Some presentations – like the keynote addresses – are conference-wide, but the smaller sessions often run concurrently, so you have to keep an eye out and make sure you don’t miss anything of interest, by specifically tailoring your own plan.

Do Your Homework

Find out who else is going. The people you’ll attend sessions with are as important as the sessions themselves. There’s no better time to network with your peers and connect with library suppliers than at a conference.

Conferences usually have a social media presence – a Facebook event page and/or a Twitter hashtag set up. The most recent conference I attended – the Asia-Pacific Library and Information Conference (APLIC) – promoted an app in advance of the event. Once downloaded, AttendeeHub (the app) could be used to get in touch with fellow attendees, as well as track any social media activity tagged with the event’s hashtag “#APLIC18”.

Use these types of early networking methods to contact people you want to reconnect with or get to know better; reach out to them a few weeks before the conference and set up a time to catch up, maybe over coffee or a meal.

Pack the Right Gear

Conferences can be multi-day affairs where you will be booking long hours each day. Remove as much stress as possible from your experience by making sure you’ve taken care of the little niggly things before you board the plane:

- **Business cards!** Make sure you have some on hand and a stash in your luggage. You never know how many people you're going to meet, and a business card is an effective way of standing out in people's minds.
- **Don't let your tech die!** Keep your phone and laptop chargers with you. You're going to spend a huge part of your day on your devices – don't get caught with dead batteries.
- **Show off!** Been doing something you're proud of in your library? Take photos and create a portfolio to share with your fellow attendees.

Once you're there

You're here! Now what? The next few days will be a whirlwind of activity, but don't be overwhelmed. You're armed with your plan – there are only a few other bits to keep in mind to help you make the most of your conference time.

Do Some Recon!

Register as early as possible so you can minimise your time standing in lines and maximise your time learning and meeting people. Check out the exhibition venue, and get to know the layout – this will help you to navigate your way around in the session breaks.

Use Social Media to Participate in the Larger Conversation



I whipped up these cards through an online design service – very handy!



Erin K Milne @ #APLIC18
@LibraryBuggalug

Tea Tree Gully Library are
#librarygoals.
Are the notes to this
available post-presentation
@Davidwebrooks @Merrick_77?

#APLIC18
#YouCantdothatinaLibrary
@aliaconference @ALIANational

9:49 am · 02 Aug. 18

View Tweet activity

6 Likes



David Brooks @Davidwebr... · 02 Aug. ✓
Replying to @LibraryBuggalug
@Merrick_77 and 2 others
Happy to provide the talk!

✓ Tweet or post about the conference while you're there. Tag people you've met, or hope to meet, and make complimentary, positive comments about their session, session topic, panels and the conference itself. Always make sure you're using the conference #hashtag.

Monitor the hashtag throughout the conference

Tweet or post about the conference while you're there.

to see what people are talking about. Striking up a conversation online is a great way to reach out to someone you're interested in meeting but haven't come across in person yet.

Catch Up

Most conferences are extra welcoming to newbies and host first-timer catch-ups. At APLIC a group called the #CATSofAPLIC hosted a new grad and first-timer 'Tweet-Up', tweeting out question prompts for people to engage with. This interaction is a great method of meeting other participants who – just like you – might be a little uncertain and looking to form some new relationships.



Erin K Milne @ #APLIC18 ... · 31 Jul. ✓

A2. I love the working holiday of travelling and networking with other #librarians. As a rural librarian it's so important to form those connections. #CATSofAPLIC #APLIC18 @aliaconference

1 reply 8 likes

Small Talk

Not good at small talk? Don't worry, you're not alone there. Try these conversation starters to kick things off:

- "Where are you from?"
- "How long have you been there?"

- "What sessions/speakers are you looking forward to?"
- "What have been your favourite sessions/speakers so far?"
- "I'm trying to improve [fill in the blank] – what are you doing; any tips?"

Don't Be Afraid . . .

In a session that isn't quite what you thought it was going to be? Don't feel bad about skipping out and going to a different one. A conference is all about using your time wisely and getting the most out of all that's there.

This also goes for tapping out for a beat. Conferencing involves long hours of interacting with overly-keen peers. This isn't just shaky ground for introverts, it's also fertile ground for your inferiority complex to blossom. Counter this by taking time out, and going for a walk or some other activity outside the venue for a bit, to give yourself time to breathe and reset. You ARE a great library professional, but in an environment saturated with library passion, it can be easy to lose sight and forget this!

Stay Organised

Conferences are information avalanches. Between sessions, workshops, one-on-one conversations, and catch-ups, you'll come away with more notes, names, and numbers than you can possibly remember. Keep yourself on track by jotting the salient points down, to jog your memory and remind you of why you have that business card or why you took that note.

Conferences are information avalanches.

Post-conference

Phew! You're home. Time to decompress . . . But not too much, because your work's not yet finished! The days and weeks after a conference are when you'll be able to put everything you've learned to use, and turn your short meet-and-greets into wonderful collaborative partnerships.

Apply It!

You gained a lot of new information and inspiration from the conference; now to collate and disseminate it all! To best reflect on all your learnings, Michael Stephens (@mstephens) suggested APLIC attendees break their reflections down into three sessions that amazed us, two concepts we will focus on, and one idea that we want to apply immediately.

How can you share your new-found knowledge?

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Perhaps you could opt to speak at a staff meeting, or send out materials on the sessions you thought were particularly valuable. Consider ways you can apply your new ideas in your workplace; who will this involve and who will you have to plug the ideas to? Parent helpers? Your Principal?

Follow Up

Connecting with people you met during the conference is best done in the days immediately following your return. Send follow-up emails and LinkedIn requests while the conference is still fresh in everyone's minds. Include a brief message, reminding the person who you are and thanking them for the time they spent speaking with you.

Finally, Rest Up!

Congratulations, you survived! Conference exhaustion (or conference-itus, as I cheekily refer to it) is a very real thing. After expending all that energy, make sure you take time for self-care. No one else can rest and reflect on your behalf, so ensure you do take a break and give yourself some credit for making it through what hopefully was an enjoyable and successful conference!



Source: Michael Stephens: The Heart of Librarianship, Finding Balance in Challenging Times.



Friends I made along the way at APLIC.

Erin Milne is the Librarian at Grey Street Primary School Library, in regional Victoria. She received a Charles Sturt Bachelor's degree in Library and Information Systems last year, but also holds various tertiary qualifications in Library and Information Studies. Her current focus is on the power behind using student voice to create innovative 21st Century flexible learning environments. Erin is passionate about engaging young people, and supporting and developing diverse communities.