

Graduate student's guide to organizing symposia and working groups

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Background: Organizing symposia and working groups is one of the most valuable activities you can engage in as a graduate student. Between us, we have organized more than a dozen (8 of which we organized as graduate students). Below, we outline some benefits of organizing symposia and working groups, basic advice for how to go about organizing and leading these activities, and a few tips for overcoming common challenges you may face along the way.

You might be thinking that as a graduate student, you don't have the authority to organize a symposium or working group. But let us be the first to tell you that your ideas are just as valid as anyone else's (including any big name scientist). If you're feeling nervous, find a co-organizer to gain confidence in numbers. And remember that you are mainly just facilitating the process, not standing up in front of everyone talking at them the whole time. You've gathered people together to share ideas, so of course you don't have all the answers already.

You might also be thinking that you don't have any ideas to organize a symposium or working group around. But, if you are in graduate school, then you likely have tons of ideas! If nothing else comes to mind, consider organizing a session around your dissertation topic. Be assured that the scientific community is large; so no matter what your idea, there will always be several others who share your interests.

Benefits:

- **Be a leader of your field.** You are choosing the topic that your colleagues will be thinking about for at least a couple hours, if not much longer.
- **Expand your own understanding of a topic.** It can be very easy to get stuck in a science rut. Symposia gather together scientists from diverse backgrounds around a common theme, thus helping you gain a new perspective on your own work. Similarly, bringing together a diverse group for a working group can lend strength to any synthesis activities you engage in.
- **Form new connections and collaborations.** It is never a bad idea to meet new people in your field, and organizing a symposium or working group is a great way to make those connections. In addition, people will now associate your name with this topic, and a little name recognition never hurt anyone.
- **Enhance your CV.** Showing leadership in the field looks good to colleagues and future employers.
- **Develop further products.** Generally working groups result in some great publications, such as conceptual, review, and/or data synthesis papers. But symposia can be the start of a written product as well. Kim was once approached by a publisher to turn her Organized Oral Session at ESA into a book. And many symposia have the explicit goal of developing some sort of synthesis product, opinion paper, or report at the end. The sky is the limit here!

How to organize a symposium (e.g., ESA Organized Oral Session or symposium):

- **Start early.** Meetings can have submission deadlines for symposium proposals a year before the meeting will occur. Don't wait on a call for proposals; go to the meeting website and see what information you can find.
- **Identify your goals.** Do you want to learn about how your question is approached in different systems? Develop a new method? Find collaborators for future synthesis activities? By identifying your goals, you'll be able to tailor your topic and speaker invitations to help you succeed. Try to keep the topic relatively contained, as most symposia only last a couple hours. Consider looking at organized symposia at previous years' meetings to get an idea of how broad you might want to go.
- **Pick a topic.** It can be question-, system-, or methods-based. Be broad enough to draw a large audience but specific enough to allow for a focused and cohesive discussion.
- **Invite speakers.** Create a list of speakers (plus some backups) that you would like to invite to participate in your session. Begin your search for speakers by thinking about the scope of the meeting you will be attending. If it is a local or regional conference, you should probably choose to invite locals. If it is a large national or international conference, invite people from all over the world. Generally, brainstorm speakers to invite based on relevant papers from your field and other individuals whose work you are familiar with. While it's tempting to invite all your friends as speakers, remember this is a chance to make new contacts. Consider asking your advisor or others in your department for suggestions.

We recommend having speakers from a range of career stages (fellow graduate students, early career, and established). You should consider putting yourself on the speaker list—speakers generally sit through their whole session, so giving a presentation yourself can ensure the people you think are most qualified on the topic see your talk too.

Send out invitation emails with the following basic components: (1) who you are; (2) what meeting you're inviting them to speak at; (3) the topic and goals of the session; (4) specifically what you want them to speak on or why they fit in your session; and (5) a deadline by which you need their response. Be sure to give people plenty of time to respond before the proposal submission deadline. And don't be discouraged if many people decline your invitation, just move on to the next name on your list.

- **Write and submit your proposal.** Be sure to follow the guidelines set out in the call for proposals, including having the correct number of confirmed speakers.
- **Follow up with invited speakers.** Whether or not your proposal has been accepted, be sure to let the people you invited know. If your proposal was not accepted, you can thank them for their interest and let them know if you plan to pursue the ideas in any other way. If your proposal was accepted, tell them what the next steps are.
- **Publicize.** Don't go overboard, but let people know about your session. Tell your friends; make an announcement; send an email to a targeted group of people who you know will be interested. But don't spam lots of list serves.
- **Run the session.** Arrive early to ensure the room is properly set up, greet speakers as they come in, and let speakers know how the symposium will run. Be prepared to ask questions after each presentation, just in case there are few questions from the audience.
- **After the session.** Often symposium organizers invite their speakers to get together after the session, either over a meal or drinks. This is a great way to keep the conversation going. Also be sure to send out thank you emails to all of your participants!

How to organize a working group at a meeting (e.g., at the LTER All Scientists Meeting):

- **Identify your goals.** Again, try to keep the scope of your working group relatively contained. You only have a couple hours to discuss your topic with those who attend your working group at a meeting, so if you go too broad you might end up without a final product.
- **Pick a topic.**
- **Write and submit your proposal.**
- **Publicize.**
- **Run the working group.** Arrive early to ensure the room is properly set up, greet attendees as they come in, and send around a sign-in sheet to get contact information for follow-up communications. Working groups can be brainstorming sessions, a series of informational talks, data syntheses, or something else entirely, all of which may be run slightly differently. In any case, be prepared to start out with a short presentation to give some background on the topic, meeting goals, and an outline of how the session will be run. Brainstorming generally works best when attendees split into small groups, reporting back to each other later in the session. This can lead to a greater flow of ideas, rather than a conversation dominated by a few vocal people. Data syntheses work best when the data are ‘cleaned’ before the session. End the session with a wrap up of accomplishments and next steps. If future collaboration has been planned, be sure to identify who among the attendees are interested.
- **After the session.** Email all attendees to thank them and recap the meeting. If you want to continue the conversation, consider applying for funding for stand-alone working groups (see below). You are often required to submit a report on your working group to the meeting, so be sure to identify and meet all deadlines and requirements for this report.

How to organize a stand-alone working group:

- **Identify your goals.** Here your goals can be much broader in scope, as you will have several days over which to achieve them. If you want to write a synthesis paper on a topic, you could likely make a lot of headway toward this goal in a stand-alone working group meeting. But if you tried to schedule that into your two hour symposium or meeting-based working group, you probably wouldn’t get very far. Again, if you are unsure how broad to go, pitch your idea to your advisor or others in your department and see if they think you are aiming for the right level.
- **Pick a topic.**
- **Invite participants.**
- **Write and submit your proposal.**
- **Pick your location.** Travel is taxing, and many scientists do too much of it already. So pick a place that will make traveling as easy and quick as possible for as many participants as possible. Here are some things to consider: (1) choose a central city with a big airport—this helps cut down on cost and makes travel faster; (2) choose a meeting location near the airport—while you may suggest an approximate ETA, with 15 people you may still have 5-10 airport trips; and (3) find facilities that will help you meet your goals—although we all might prefer to spend 4 days at a ski lodge in Aspen, you need a place that facilitates work, including good collaborative space with tables, multiple rooms for breakout groups, whiteboards, projectors, fantastic internet (to facilitate research and

potential online conference calls), and proximity to good food options.

- **Organize travel, lodging, and meals for participants.** If this working group is funded, the grant agency will likely have clear procedures for all spending, including who to purchase airline tickets from, what things you are and are not allowed to spend money on, how to reserve hotel rooms and pay for them, and more. Sometimes the grant agency will pay for all of this directly. Other times, you and your participants will pay for everything out-of-pocket and get reimbursed. Make sure you fully understand what is required for reimbursements. In addition to making sure you understand the procedure, it is your job to ensure all participants understand how it will work. Be clear and organized.
- **Send out working group information to all participants.** This should happen about a week before the working group is to occur. You will want to create a detailed timeline, including start times, meal times, coffee breaks. In addition, include enough information so people know how the day will be structured in terms of time for brainstorming, writing, discussion, or analysis. All this could (and likely will) change on the fly, but people like to know what they are getting into. You might also suggest some reading or thought exercises for people in preparation for the meeting. However, keep them short. These people have already agreed to give you a couple days of their time; you cannot expect them to also spend a ton of time preparing.
- **Run the working group.** Stand-alone working groups are typically multi-day affairs. They can generally be run the same way as meeting-based working groups, but with much more time to expand on your ideas. However, there are some key differences.

Go around the room and have everyone introduce themselves. In addition to giving a short introduction talk, consider having a few participants present on the area of expertise for which they've been invited. Keep these short, and tell people the structure ahead of time (*e.g.*, 5 minutes and 5 slides). Don't start off the meeting with too much presentation time; people are excited to share ideas, and it's best to get right down to discussion.

Depending on the size of the group, you may want to spend most of the day in breakout groups, with each group tackling a different goal. It's important to check in on each group throughout the day, as some groups will have a tendency to stray from the desired course. Your goal is to keep all groups on track to divide and conquer!

Be sure to schedule in lots of breaks and some time for fun. It can be easy to get burned out if you're stuck in a room for days on end. While the goal of a working group is usually a scientific product, another very important benefit is the relationships you form with the other members. Therefore, try to keep people interacting until 9 pm, but definitely don't make people work until 9 pm!

- **After the meeting.** Excitingly, the in-person working group is usually just the beginning. Often a single working group can lead to a year(s) of collaboration. Immediately after the working group be sure to email everyone who attended to thank them and recap the meeting. Remind people if they have been assigned tasks and deadlines for those tasks. If you're required to submit a report, write this up quickly so you don't forget important details. In addition, be sure to follow up with reimbursements.

It's important to not wait too long to check in with people who have been assigned tasks. Momentum was generated at the working group, so don't let it dissipate. Have your first virtual meeting a month or two after the working group. And finally, your first working group will likely generate many new ideas—so apply for more funding and do it all again!

Common fears, challenges, and solutions:

- **“I wouldn’t even know where to begin writing a proposal.”**
It’s definitely a different type of writing, and there is a knack to it. Chances are you know someone who has submitted something you can use as a guide to help jumpstart the process. Ask your mentor or a fellow graduate student for an example of one they have submitted.
- **A symposium speaker cancels at the last minute, leaving a gap in your program.**
Having a gap can lead to a drastic attrition of your audience—not good! Instead of letting people walk out, use the time to engage the audience in a topic germane discussion. Make sure you come up with relevant questions to jumpstart the discussion. These can be addressed to one presenter, all the speakers at once, or even a survey of the audience.
- **Dreaded silence in your working group meeting.**
This can be one of the hardest things about being an organizer. But remember that people just need time to think. The silence is more noticeable to you than anyone else. Just be patient and someone will likely think of something to say.
- **Your carefully crafted plan for the working group is not working.**
Going down the wrong track can often be a valuable exercise, so don’t think of it as wasted effort. But also don’t be afraid to change course, especially in a stand-alone working group where you may have days ahead of you. If you are unsure of the best way forward, open up the floor to discussion and ask participants how the next day should be organized—just make sure to limit the discussion or too much time may slip by!