don't have to skip through slides if you run out of time, which can be frustrating for your audience. “They feel like they’re missing out on something,” says Twells.

“It looks better if the speaker finishes, and you don’t realise they’ve got a few extra slides.” Try to keep the number of slides and the accompanying content to a minimum. “Only have the key messages on your slides, and then develop them further orally,” says EMBO's Glynn. If you don’t need to present any data and are giving a more general presentation, consider omitting slides altogether. If you get it right, the style can captivate your audience. However, you’ll need to balance that against the lack of visual reinforcement of your message and the increased potential for misunderstanding.

Consider carefully the level at which you pitch your content, even at more specialised events. “You can never assume that everyone in the audience has the same experience as you,” says Glynn. When presenting data, avoid using red and green together in graphs as this can cause problems for colour-blind people. And if you’ll be including any unpublished data, it’s best to indicate this clearly.

Visit the lecture room in advance and meet the audio-visual (AV) staff so that you can check whether your presentation will be compatible with the system being used. Technical problems can “throw even experienced speakers off”, says Glynn. It’s also a good idea to meet the person chairing your session beforehand. Get lots of practice if you’re not very experienced at presenting. “It is just a quantity game,” says McCary. “The more times you do it, the more confident you will feel.”

Keeping track of time

Time management becomes more important at larger conferences featuring concurrent sessions. Choose what you will attend beforehand, and check whether you need to register for workshops in advance. If you’re interested in two simultaneous presentations, check to see if one is repeated, or if it has an associated poster presentation that you could attend instead. Find out whether the presentations are being filmed for the conference website, or ask a colleague if they could cover one for you. If you’re attending on your own, try to find a fellow delegate who might be willing to split the programme. “Sometimes organisers pair up students when arranging accommodation,” says EMBL’s Davison. “By default you get a ‘buddy’ straight away, and you can build your programme as a pair.”

Remember to check the final programme when you arrive at the conference for any last-minute changes. If you find yourself in a parallel session that isn’t what you expected, “feel free to leave”, says McCary. “At big meetings people are moving about all the time.”

A time-management tip that can help the whole conference run more smoothly is to submit your abstract to the organisers in good time. “Try to avoid submitting it on the day of the deadline,” says Davison.

Back to basics

If you need to book accommodation for an event, check the conference website for recommended hotels. The organisers may have secured a discount, and those hotels will likely be closer to the venue and other delegates will be staying there. If recommended hotels are more expensive than others in the area, weigh this up against the potential benefits. If money is an issue, you could look into youth hostels or consider pairing up with a colleague to share the cost of a hotel suite.

Visas are another area to consider. “Arrange that as early as possible,” says Twells. Make sure you’re clear about which visa you need and watch out for any areas of potential confusion — for example, delegates from outside Europe who need a ‘Schengen’ visa to travel to one of the 25 European countries that make up the Schengen Area should be aware that the visa does not allow entry to the United Kingdom and Ireland.

During the conference, make sure you adhere to policies on disseminating content from presentations. If you post something related to unpublished data on Twitter, for example, you could be inadvertently jeopardising a patent application or journal submission.

If you need more information at any point, be sure to check the event website and any emails you have received. Many conferences will also have dedicated staff on hand to answer specific questions. “We’re here to help,” says Twells.

A fresh perspective

Whether you’re a conference newcomer or a seasoned pro, attending events can give you a new outlook on your work and career. “You never know who you’ll get talking to,” says EMBO’s Davison. “Visiting a conference is like pressing the reset button — sometimes you meet someone who makes you think differently about where you’re heading.”

Nature editorial staff have no responsibility for content.