Conference Information on the Internet

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In this age of live video, Web sites and e-mail, why might you need to go to a scientific conference in person? Many people still feel it is useful to meet other researchers in person, whether it is to share ideas face to face, keep abreast of the “cutting edge”, get ideas for research, broaden their perspective or identify potential collaborators. Meetings are also a great excuse to get out of the lab. Although Internet virtual conferences (1) can be a technically appealing and even useful means of communicating scientific information, Internet-based information services can also make real-life conferences more effective.

Finding a Conference

Assuming you have a finite number of conferences you can attend every year, you will probably want to make your choices judiciously. Lists of conferences in a variety of specialized topics are given in the BioBit: Web Sites Listing Scientific Conferences.

Planning Your Conference Itinerary

Some conferences have so many things going on that it may be a big job to plan what workshops, presentations or activities you will attend. Having this information on a Web site makes it possible for the organizers to publicize last-minute changes. Some conference Web sites provide software assistance in planning your itinerary; the site for the annual meeting of the American College of Physicians (http://www.acponline.org) has a particularly elegant scheduling feature that uses client-side “magic cookies” to let you select activities for each time slot and keep track of your selections in your own personalized conference itinerary.

Paying for Travel

Many institutions and departments have funds available to support travel to meetings, and these may be the best sources of funding for most people. Graduate students are usually encouraged to apply. Several other sources of travel funds are described in the BioBit: Travel Grants; most notably, many professional societies also have programs to help attendees cover travel costs.

Planning Your Trip

From finding discount airfares to locating airport maps, the Internet provides easy access to a lot of information to help you plan your trip (http://www.thetrip.com/). Many of these sites are fascinating demonstrations of Internet technology in their own right. For example, MapQuest (http://www.mapquest.com) lets you zoom in on a map of the world to a single neighborhood.

Presentation Hints

A recent Internet On-Ramp article gave hints for making slide presentations (2). Many Web sites for conferences contain useful advice as well. For example, FASEB’s Guidelines for Effective Slides (http://www.faseb.org/meetings/eb/slides.htm) advises: “If you can hold your slide at arm’s length against a bright background and read it, then it should be readable to the audience.” While this author has taken to carrying binoculars to meetings in order to see slides from the back of the room, most audience members are not so farsighted.

news.group.news

News.group.news goes to cyberspace and back to gather Net news for you. We emphasize practical, methods-related issues that are discussed in many newsgroups and also feature issues of general interest to biological scientists. But be warned! On this page of BioTechniques, we don’t review it — we just report it!

If you are planning to carry out PCR using a proofreading polymerase such as Pwo or Pfu, netters recommend that you use the same reagent concentrations and conditions as for Taq but double your extension time, allowing at least 2 min/1000 bases.

Inquiring about preparing homemade matrix for silica-based DNA purification, a netter was informed that, while commercially available silica and diatomaceous earth are chemically identical (SiO₂), the physical properties of the two materials differ significantly. Silica is naturally occurring silica that has been finely ground into relatively smooth particles 1–10 µm in diameter. Diatomaceous earth—the siliceous remains of diatoms—consists of larger particles (which are less susceptible to the problem of fines) that have more complex shapes and therefore larger surface areas for binding.

If you are using dUTP and UDG (uracil DNA glycosylase) in your PCR to prevent carryover contamination, netters remind you to completely inactivate UDG (95°C, 10 min) before starting the PCR. Using primers with annealing temperatures greater than 60°C and increasing the number of cycles by 5 will increase reaction efficiency.

Looking for a PCR-compatible loading dye? Netters recommend a solution of 0.01% Cresol red and either 1.5% sucrose or 5% glycerol.

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The FASEB site also offers tips for effective poster presentation: "Use large type...The temptation to overload the poster should be resisted." Don’t make me take my binoculars to poster sessions, too.

As computer projection technology becomes more commonplace, it is becoming easier to give presentations directly from a computer. The Web sites for some conferences have instructions on how to arrange to have computer facilities for presentations or poster sessions. In general, no special software is necessary to use a projection system; most projectors show whatever is on the screen. Thus, if you can bring up a PowerPoint presentation, an animated Web page or even a word-processing document on your computer screen, you can project it to an audience. This projection capability is already used routinely in many places and will undoubtedly become more commonly used in scientific conferences. Taking advantage of such facilities not only lets you give more whiz-bang presentations, but it also saves the time and money needed to have slides made.

### BioBit: Web Sites Listing Scientific Conferences

**Professional societies**
- American Association for the Advancement of Science: [http://www.aas.org/meetings/meetings.htm](http://www.aas.org/meetings/meetings.htm)
- Other organizations
  - Keystone Symposia on Molecular and Cellular Biology: [http://www.colorado.net/symposia/](http://www.colorado.net/symposia/)
  - Gordon Research Conferences Home Page: [http://www.grc.uri.edu/](http://www.grc.uri.edu/)
  - Cold Spring Harbor Laboratories meetings and courses: [http://nucleus.cshl.org/meetings/](http://nucleus.cshl.org/meetings/)
  - Collections of links to conference Web sites
    - Archives of the bionet.announce newsgroup: [http://www.bio.net/hypermail/BIONEWS/](http://www.bio.net/hypermail/BIONEWS/)
    - (from the Human Genome Information System [HGMIS] at Oak Ridge National Laboratory)
    - HUM-MOLGEN - Meetings in Bioscience and Medicine: [http://www.informatik.uni-rostock.de/HUM-MOLGEN/anno/meetings.html](http://www.informatik.uni-rostock.de/HUM-MOLGEN/anno/meetings.html)
    - Medical Conferences and Meetings:
      - [http://www.psgroup.com/MEDCONF.HTM](http://www.psgroup.com/MEDCONF.HTM)
      - [http://www.aacm.org/events/mjmtgcal.htm](http://www.aacm.org/events/mjmtgcal.htm)
      - The WWW Virtual Library Journals, Conferences and Current Awareness Services (Biosciences): [http://www.golgi.harvard.edu/biopages/journals.html](http://www.golgi.harvard.edu/biopages/journals.html)
      - (largely industry-oriented meetings)
      - (technology conferences, mostly computer-related)

### Save the Trees

In addition to publishing their programs electronically, some conferences let you register (e.g., 1999 AAAS Annual Meeting “Early Bird” registration form, [http://secure aaas org/meetings/earlybrd.htm](http://secure aaas org/meetings/earlybrd.htm) and/or submit abstracts on line (e.g., the American Society for Microbiology page at [http://www.asmusa.org/mtgsrc/abstsubm.htm](http://www.asmusa.org/mtgsrc/abstsubm.htm)).

### Funding to Sponsor a Conference

Information on NIH policy regarding sponsoring conferences is given at [http://www.nih.gov/grants/guide/notices-files/NOTICE-N9-02.html](http://www.nih.gov/grants/guide/notices-files/NOTICE-N9-02.html). Several Institutes also have their own pages regarding these grants; e.g., the National Cancer Institute’s page on R13 grants ([http://www.nci.nih.gov/extra/deaweb/doc/r13.htm](http://www.nci.nih.gov/extra/deaweb/doc/r13.htm)).

In the future, greater “bandwidth”, faster connections and more elegant conferencing software will undoubtedly help the Internet to subsume more and more communication functions that have traditionally required travel. Meanwhile, the Net can help us use traditional means of communication more effectively.

### REFERENCES


### BioBit: Travel Grants

Many professional societies provide travel grants, particularly to meetings sponsored by the society.

**FASEB**: [http://www.faseb.org/meetings/asbmb/asbmb98/travelaward.html](http://www.faseb.org/meetings/asbmb/asbmb98/travelaward.html)

The American Society for Microbiology ([http://www.asmusa.org](http://www.asmusa.org)) includes grants for junior and senior high school biology teachers, undergraduate faculty, graduate students and postdocs.

**Minority Travel Award Programs** are available through various institutes of NIH. For example, NIAMS, NIDDK: [http://www.nih.gov/niams/grants/pa/PA88-09.txt](http://www.nih.gov/niams/grants/pa/PA88-09.txt)

**SBNet foreign travel grants** ([http://alpha2.bmc.uu.se/~gerard/srf/foreign_travel.html](http://alpha2.bmc.uu.se/~gerard/srf/foreign_travel.html)). While only for Structural Biology PhD students in Sweden, the site is interesting for how it uses the Internet: proposals are made by e-mail only, and the grantees must write a report on the trip in HTML for posting to the Web site.

**Travel from the Former Soviet Union**

Several organizations have programs specifically to fund travel by scientists from the Commonwealth of Newly Independent States to attend international meetings.


**US Civilian Research and Development Foundation Travel Grant Program** ([http://www.crdf.inter.net/programs/travelinfo.html](http://www.crdf.inter.net/programs/travelinfo.html)): limited to first-time visitors to the United States from the non-Russian countries of the former Soviet Union.