Conferencing as writing: Balancing our time between attending a conference and writing.

Our research lives require many things of our time: we must conduct good science, publish that science, make our names known so people will cite that science, get grant funding to do more science, and so on. What inevitably develops is a sense that we only have time to do one of these things well. For example, we may focus on applying for grants rather than getting that next paper out. Or, we may think about the time we spend at a conference as time lost for writing. I will focus on this last issue and how we can think about conferences a bit differently in order to be more efficient with our time.

To preface, I study concepts and categorization. This research tradition tells us that labels and categories are important; how we categorize things in the world determines how we think about them. For example, if I was experiencing fatigue and concentration problems and categorize these symptoms as indicative of a medical condition, I may go to my primary care doctor or take a medication to feel better. However, if I think of those same symptoms as originating from a mental health condition, that different categorization will change whom I go to for help and what seems like a useful treatment. In short, the way we mentally label something is going to change how we think about it.

So why do we care about categorization when we start thinking about time management? First, let us think about this divide of writing VERSUS conferences. When we categorize these two activities differently then we have set up an obvious time divide where we have to put our efforts into one or the other. However, if we can categorize attending a conference as PART OF the writing process, then we lose that tension of feeling like we must be doing one over the other. In other words, we are aiming to make conferencing part of our writing category. Here are some ways we can think about this.

1) *Conferences as inspiration for writing*. I would guess that most researchers have data that are sitting in research purgatory: the data set is complete but nothing has happened to push that data towards being written up. These types of data sets are excellent ones to submit to a conference. Pulling data out of purgatory and thinking about them as marketable data is that first step toward framing a paper around that data set. In this way, from even the first step of submitting for a conference we are beginning to think about the writing process for that data.

2) *Conference presentations as a first draft of your paper*. Conference presentations can be a great outlet to get feedback on the framing for a set of data before submitting it to a journal. Summarizing a series of experiments into a 15-minute talk or a single poster forces you to think about the streamlined message that best conveys your data. Importantly, how your presentation goes over to an audience gives you valuable feedback on how that framing actually works to present your data.

3) *Conference hobnobbing as part of the review process*. A large part of conferences is meeting other researchers in your field and getting them to know you and your work. We do this through our talks and posters, but we also do this through the happy hours, quick lunches, longer dinners, and all the informal meetings of a conference. This can be an invaluable time to get feedback on your latest writing project. Talking to someone who has seen you present data can result in ideas for new experiments, suggestions for outlets for your work, or even simple suggestions of literatures to include that are relevant to your work. While these conversations may just be scientific chatter over a meal, they are also the same suggestions we would hope a good reviewer would give on one of our manuscripts. In this way, we can think about

the social aspects of a conference as part of an informal review process for our work. (Also, there is always the hope that someone you talked to about your work will be a reviewer on it in the future, and letting the mere familiarity effect work for you is never a bad idea.)

These are just a few ways we can re-categorize what we do as part of a conference as part of our writing. This is not just a trick of labels; if we are really using conferences as a way to jumpstart and improve our writing then there are not the same time management tradeoffs to be made. However, if you submit data that is already in press or data that you know you never want to publish, this is not conferencing as writing. If we do not take the time to listen to our colleagues about our work and synthesize their comments into our drafts, then we are not saving ourselves writing time by attending a conference. We can only efficiently balance our time between conferences and writing if we make these categorizations real and make them work for us.