Presenting at an academic conference is normative practice for academicians and researchers across virtually all academic fields and disciplines. While most professors become seasoned presenters over time, conference presentation can be intimidating for the inexperienced, especially graduate students engaging this important professional development step for the first time. A range of anxiety-inducing thoughts typically arise, such as “What should my presentation entail?”, “How will my research be received?”, and “Will there be critics, and if so, how will I handle them?” While presentations can be a challenge at first, engaging them strategically and with a positive mindset will minimizes associated stress and increase the likelihood of success.

First, map the playing field. Most conferences are sponsored by regional or national professional associations and organizations. Most professional associations, especially at the national level, feature student panels (typically 3 to 5 papers grouped loosely around a theme or topic). These events are excellent venues from which to dive into the “conference pool” that, in addition to providing presentation experience, offer networking opportunities with future colleagues, and the choice to reconfigure your research relative to feedback from others.

The presentation nightmare of a well-known scholar critically correcting and embarrassing a student presentation is a very, very rare occurrence, especially in student-only panels. Similarly, regional associations typically enjoy a student-friendly reputation and welcome student involvement.

Regarding the presentation, preparation is the key to success and a smooth experience. Having a well-developed PowerPoint will ensure that you stay within the allotted timeframe (usually no more than 15 minutes) and eliminate the problems of forgetting important information or “freezing up.” A good tip is to practice the presentation before the conference through a “trial run” to other graduate students who can both time your delivery and offer feedback. Just remember to follow your PowerPoint and engage the audience with confidence and your presentation will be over before you realize it!