

# Publishing Excellent Conference Reports: Editors and Reporters Share Advice

## Barbara Gastel

Many periodicals in science and science communication include reports on conferences or conference sessions. Some have staff specializing in such coverage, and others hire freelancers to cover conferences or sessions. But many, including *Science Editor*, rely on reports by volunteers, such as members of the association sponsoring the publication.

To help our annual-meeting reporters and others, *Science Editor* gathered advice from five writer-editors with experience and expertise in conference coverage:

- Jessica Ancker, chair, program committee, 2002 CSE annual meeting; medical editor and former newspaper reporter.
- Katherine Arnold, news editor, *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*.
- Mitch Jacoby, senior editor (Chicago News Bureau), *Chemical & Engineering News*.
- Ann Conti Morcos, of MorcosMedia, annual-meeting editor, *Science Editor*.
- Brian Vastag, associate editor, Medical News & Perspectives, *The Journal of the American Medical Association*.

The suggestions below come largely from those five. May this article—which presents advice on commissioning conference reports, guiding reporters, and editing the resulting reports—prove useful to many science editors.

## Recruiting Reporters

Publications that rely on volunteers face the challenge of finding people who can attend conferences and serve as reporters. Traditionally, members of the staff or Editorial Board of *Science Editor* and its predecessor, *CBE Views*, called annual-meeting registrants by telephone to ask them to cover sessions. For the 2001 annual BARBARA GASTEL, a faculty member at Texas A&M University, is the editor of *Science Editor*.

meeting, however, Morcos took a different approach: “I sent an e-mail to each individual registered for the conference with a list of the sessions that needed a reporter”, she recalls. “Response to my e-mail was quick and almost always positive. I think because e-mail is less intrusive and allows people to think a bit before answering, people were more willing to be reporters. Using this medium, I got 100% coverage for the conference last year.” Morcos has continued to recruit reporters this way.

Other tacks also can yield volunteer reporters. Those used by *Science Editor* for conferences other than the CSE annual meeting include obtaining suggestions of reporters from conference organizers, having Editorial Board members identify potential reporters, and calling on science-communication graduate students who wish to exercise their skills and see their work in print. Because volunteers sometimes become unavailable, backup plans are advisable.

## Giving Instructions

Carefully prepared instructions can help to ensure that a report is suitable. Especially for editors new to assigning conference reports, the following points may be worth keeping in mind.

*Clearly define the scope of the coverage.* Make clear whether the report is to cover a single session, selected sessions, the conference as a whole, or, more broadly, the conference topic. If it is to cover a single session, say whether it should summarize all the main points (somewhat like minutes of a meeting) or focus on highlights. If selected sessions are to be covered, consider indicating those on which the reporter should concentrate. “At larger conferences, hundreds or thousands of posters and abstracts are on display”, Vastag notes. “A short list of potential topics makes it easier to concentrate on reporting instead of sifting.”

*Remember to specify the basics.* When is the report due? How long should it be? In what format should it be submitted? Should speakers review the report for accuracy before submission?

*Consider providing sample reports.* Good examples can be worth many words of directions, especially if reporters have not prepared similar pieces for the publication. Therefore, consider supplementing instructions with good examples of analogous reports. For efficiency, consider keeping some such copies on hand.

## Advising Reporters: Tips to Convey

For conference reports as for other commissioned pieces, coaching authors beforehand can save editors time and effort in the long term. The following are some tips to consider conveying to volunteers or others who will cover conferences or sessions.

### Preparing to Cover a Conference or Session

The amount of preparation advisable for covering a given conference or session varies widely, but some preparation is always in order. Experienced editors and reporters offer the following guidance:

*Obtain basic identifying information.* “Prepare ahead of time”, Arnold says. “Gather the names, titles, and affiliations of all speakers before the conference so you only have to verify that information, not gather it.”

*If the topic to be covered is unfamiliar, learn about it before the conference.* Various experts emphasize this point. Jacoby states, “Figure on spending almost as much time before the meeting as at the meeting.”

Arnold advises reporters to “become familiar with terminology and the major controversies that will be covered in the session”. She says, “If the speaker is addressing a specialized audience, he or she may take for granted knowledge of certain issues. Therefore, research the topic ahead

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of time. Depending on the audience of your report, you may need to provide this context for your readers."

Vastag notes that "most conferences publish abstracts ahead of the meeting; many use searchable Web databases. These ease premeeting preparation considerably by giving reporters an opportunity to identify potentially newsworthy stories early."

"For covering specific sessions", Vastag says, "I try to do as much background research as time allows. This includes looking for information on the researchers and their general interests, scientific context, and earlier studies on the same topic. Many times, abstracts presented at meetings display a snapshot of current research, so it's important to know where any particular piece fits into the broader research timeline."

*Consider asking speakers beforehand for materials.* Jacoby sometimes obtains copies of slides, other visual aids, or written materials from speakers before a conference. He notes that reporters can receive PowerPoint files by e-mail, print them out, and take notes on them during presentations. Also, he sometimes asks speakers to start thinking beforehand about suitable graphics to accompany reports on their sessions.

*Perhaps consult some of those planning the conference.* Organizers of symposia at conferences can be a valuable resource, Jacoby observes. For example, they can identify noteworthy sessions and supply background information about the subjects to be addressed and their importance.

*Plan your time—and space.* Jacoby notes that large conferences often have sessions in more than one building. Check whether you will have enough time to walk from one session to the next one you hope to cover. (If Jacoby must miss a talk because of a schedule conflict, sometimes he arranges for the speaker to meet him in the hotel lobby and go through the talk.) Determine routes beforehand, so you can move from session to session without delay.

*Consider consulting others who have covered the conference.* If you are new to conference reporting, or if you are covering a given conference for the first time, consider contacting colleagues with more experience. The colleagues may be able to

## Starting Well: Some Effective Beginnings\* of Annual-Meeting Reports in *Science Editor*

\*"If English is the language of science, are authors not fluent in English at a disadvantage? What can journals do to support them? The panelists, all journal editors and members of the World Association of Medical Editors . . . , addressed these issues." (Wogan C. Mar-Apr 2001;24(2):47)

"In constructing a Web site, how you organize and present your data can be key to making your site accessible by both naive and skilled users. That was the point stressed by presenters. . . ." (Nash J. Sep-Oct 2001:24(5):155)

"The sneak preview of the seventh edition of *Scientific Style and Format* lived up to its promise to present new recommendations on citing electronic resources, recent changes in the nomenclatural codes for organisms, and new guidelines for presenting genetic information." (Baird B. Sep-Oct 2001:24(5):157)

share useful tips.

### Gathering Information

The following tips from experts can help reporters of all experience levels gain the most from a conference session.

*Arrive early, and make good use of the time before the session.* Morcos advises: "Get to the session early and introduce yourself to all the speakers. Get contact information from all speakers." Vastag says: "I try to arrive early to sessions that I know I'm covering, to make contact with the presenters. This approach has sparked good, casual conversations about the topic among the presenters and bystander researchers."

*Before or after the presentations, confirm identifying information.* "Get the correct name and title of each speaker", Ancker says. "Always double-check by asking the speaker directly." Information in conference programs sometimes is outdated or

"If you're up to your neck in alligators, it's hard to remember that your task was to drain the swamp!" So noted Johanna Reinhart . . . as she launched a lively discussion of problem-solving tips for the small publication office." (Carr M. Nov-Dec 2001;24(6):190)

"Roy M Pitkin began this session by emphasizing that a journal is only as good as its reviewers. How do we find and instruct reviewers, educate and evaluate them, and deal with them productively?" (Edington M. Nov-Dec 2001:24(6):193)

"When it comes to models for preprint servers . . . , it is clear that 'one size does not fit all.'" (Meiksin J. Jan-Feb 2002;25(1):7)

\*All examples are from *Science Editor*.

otherwise inaccurate. Be sure the information you use is current and correct.

*Even if you tape-record the session, take good notes.* Tape-recording can aid in completeness and accuracy, but notes should also be taken. "Your notes will be helpful if the tape-recorder fails or the tape turns out to be inaudible (as it often does!)", Ancker explains, "and they'll help you fast-forward through the audiotape to locate quotes." Ancker reminds reporters to make note of "both *what* was said and *who* said it". Of course, as Morcos notes, copies of any handouts from speakers should be obtained.

*Notice what audience members, as well as speakers, say.* Discussion can be an important part of a session. Consider noting points from it for possible use in your report. "Pay attention to questions from the audience", Arnold says. "Your readers may have the same questions as the audi-

ence; listen to the questions, make notes on the responses, and include that information in your report as appropriate.”

*Consider talking with the speakers at the end of the session.* After the session, Ancker says, “ask [the speakers] to clarify anything that you’re unsure about. That might include subtle shades of meaning or full citations for references used in the talk.” Vastag sometimes approaches researchers for interviews at the ends of their sessions. “If they’re semi-famous in their field, they may be mobbed”, he observes. “By waiting out the crowd, you might overhear something noteworthy, or at least get a feel for why the researcher gathers so much attention.”

## Writing It Up and Following Up

What about writing the report and ensuring that the content is accurate? Here are some pointers that may be useful to convey.

*Write the report soon after the conference or session.* Morcos advises: “Write the report as soon as possible after the session so it will be fresh in your mind and the speakers’ minds.” Similarly, Vastag says, “If I’m writing a straightforward report on one or a few sessions, I try to draft the article as soon as possible. Details are often missing, but they can be filled in later with additional research or interviews.”

*Provide sufficient focus.* Try to relate most or all of the report to one main focus. The focus will often be the theme of the conference or session, the most noteworthy topic of discussion, or the strongest conclusion to be drawn from the presentations. It may also be another aspect of interest. For example, Jacoby recalls writing a report that concentrated on the various nationalities represented at a meeting.

Ancker tells the following anecdote:

“When I was a reporter at a daily newspaper, my editor used to pounce on me as soon as I walked in and ask, ‘What happened today?’ I’d stammer out an answer, and he’d scribble something on his pad and head for the next reporter.

“One evening, after I’d gotten rid of him with a short sentence, I sat down at my computer and typed the same sentence as the lead of my story.

“That experience made me realize that my mind was usually clogged with details, irrelevant observations, or grandiose plans. His simple question every night cut all that away and forced me to find the simplest, most important event that had happened that night. Once I had identified the lead, I could write a clearly focused story.”

Ask yourself what was most important or memorable about the conference or session. Then focus your report accordingly.

*Begin with a strong lead.* Start your report with a sentence or paragraph that clearly and engagingly indicates the focus of the report. Do not begin by merely stating the fact that the conference or session took place. As Arnold recalls a journalism professor emphasizing, “the news is not that a speaker spoke, it’s what the speaker said.” (For examples of effective beginnings of some annual-meeting reports in *Science Editor*, see the sidebar “Starting Well”.)

*Organize the report in keeping with its focus.* A report need not present points in the same order as the speakers stated them. Rather, points should appear in an order consistent with the focus of the report. For example, Arnold observes, “a speaker may spend a large portion of his or her talk covering . . . background before discussing main issues. When writing, focus on these main issues and incorporate background as necessary. This will make your report more concise.”

*Include sufficient attribution.* Explicitly indicate the source of each idea presented. Do not assume that readers will differentiate correctly between points made by various speakers, background information, and your own views. “Attribute everything—including your own ideas”, Ancker says. “No important idea should be an ‘orphan’—give each one a ‘parent’ by clarifying who said it. When a speaker quotes or paraphrases somebody else, track down the original source whenever possible so that you can give proper credit—and double-check the accuracy of the quote!

“It may be appropriate to include your own viewpoint, but if you do, make it obvious to the reader that it is yours, and not that of any of the [speakers].”

*Report evenhandedly.* Provide a balanced account of the discussion. “Describe dis-

## It Pays to Look at the Pictures

### Brian Vastag

On my way to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention vaccine meeting in Atlanta, I settled into my seat and began reviewing background material. As the plane filled up, a hale blond man with a familiar face sat next to me.

“Are you John Gearhart?” I asked. His eyes widened, and he leaned closer.

“Yes, yes, I am”, he said, apparently delighted at being spotted in public. I had never met him, but as the first scientist to culture human embryonic germ cells, Gearhart had received substantial media coverage, including several articles with photos.

As the captain announced a delay, I chatted with Gearhart about his destination—a tissue-engineering conference—and eventually mentioned I was a reporter for *The Journal of the American Medical Association*. The urge to dive for my notebook and recorder rose into my fingers, making them twitch. I resisted and kept chatting about his research, hoping for ever longer mechanical, weather-related, and congestion delays.

Eventually we departed and Gearhart turned to his paperback, a medical thriller. I grabbed my notebook and brain-dumped the conversation.

As we deplaned in Atlanta, Gearhart invited me to see his laboratory sometime. I took him up on the offer a few weeks later and turned it into a handsome feature.

I don’t expect to get this lucky again—but I was able to take advantage of the situation because I recognized Gearhart. So before the meeting, try to find out what your scientists look like. If not, you may just be sitting next to a brilliant somebody while waiting away time in the hotel bar, wishing for someone to talk to.

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agreements fairly”, Ancker says. “Not every panelist in a . . . session will agree. Don’t overdramatize . . . differences of opinion, but don’t ignore them, either. Do your best to convey each person’s position fairly and accurately. Even if you leave the session with a strong opinion about who’s right, don’t play favorites when writing the article.”

*Revise sufficiently.* Often, preparing an excellent conference report entails drafting the report and then refining it extensively. Ancker recommends the following approach:

“Try turning off your ‘internal editor’ when you write your first draft. Don’t worry about phrasing, word count, or elegant language. Just focus on your ideas.

“Then, after you’ve got a draft, turn your mental editor back on again—and be ruthless. Smooth the transitions, replace vague descriptions with concrete detail, weed out useless words, and double-check all your facts.

“Make a special effort to shorten the article. Each time you look at it, find a way to make it just a little more concise.”

Use whatever approach works best for you, however. Jacoby, for example, says he proceeds directly to writing the final copy, without preparing an outline or draft. Whatever the approach, what’s important is the final version—not the number or nature of drafts preceding it.

*Check the report for accuracy.* Before submitting the report, check the information. Make sure, for example, that names and affiliations are correct and that facts are consistent with those in your notes and handouts. Consult authoritative sources if information seems questionable. If it is appropriate, show the speakers the report or the parts of it about their presentations. For *Science Editor*, and *CBE Views* before it, reporters have long been required to have speakers review their reports for accuracy. Likewise, Jacoby routinely shows his stories or relevant parts thereof to the scientists whose work is being reported. Remember, though, that reports are shown to the speakers only so that they can check the information. How the story is crafted remains the bailiwick of the reporter and the editor.

### Taking Photos of Speakers

Jacoby often takes photographs for poten-

tial use with his reports. “I truly enjoy photography”, he says. And many editors appreciate reporters who can submit publication-quality photos.

Before a conference or session, Jacoby alerts speakers. (“Beware, I take lots of photos.”) To help establish credibility, he mentions photos of his that have appeared in print.

Jacoby offers the following tips for taking photos of conference speakers:

- Unless instructed otherwise, limit yourself to head-and-shoulders shots (“mugs”).
- Have the subject largely fill the frame.
- Ask subjects to stand outside, where the light tends to be better than indoors. Try, however, to avoid taking photos at lunchtime: Sunlight from directly overhead causes problems such as “raccoon eyes”.
- “Look before you snap the picture.” Notice what is in the background. Ask the subject to move if, for example, a branch looks as if it is growing out of his or her head.

### Editing Conference Reports

If reporters are skillful and well briefed, reports on conferences and sessions may need relatively little editing. Nevertheless, editing such reports requires skill and care. The following are some pointers from editors and those whose reports they edit.

*Especially if you edit conference reports regularly, establish a routine.* Morcos describes hers: “First check to see if the length of the report conforms to the guidelines. If it is well over the maximum length, send it back to the reporter to reduce. Sometimes reporters are too close to their work and cannot see what needs to be deleted. In this case, cut down the article yourself, either by tightening the language or by cutting out sections, and send it to the reporter to review to make sure that it still accurately reflects the speakers’ message. If the report is too short (this rarely happens), ask whether the reporter can expand any of the content. Check the title and speakers’ names to make sure they are spelled correctly and consistently. Make sure that speaker affiliations are correct. Query the reporter

about any statements that are confusing or unclear. Do routine copyediting.”

*Check that basic facts are included.* Occasionally, reports that are otherwise well prepared lack key information, such as conference dates or locations. (Embarrassingly, one such omission was not noticed until a report for *Science Editor* was in proof.) Make sure right away that such facts are present.

*Make sure the origin of the information is stated.* Arnold advises: “If you are editing a straight conference report, make sure that the report clearly states that the topics were addressed at a specific meeting or conference. If you are editing a larger feature story on issues addressed at a conference, . . . it should be clear which comments were made at the meeting and which comments were obtained in follow-up interviews.”

*Take the part of the reader.* Those reporting on conferences or sessions sometimes become so familiar with the content that they have trouble discerning what readers do not know. By viewing a report through fresh eyes, editors can help to ensure that it is complete, clearly worded, and easy to follow. “Pay attention to your own questions”, Arnold advises. “If you as the editor are wondering whether a particular issue was addressed, ask the writer about it. The writer may have simply omitted an issue because he or she thought it was not necessary for the article.”

*Check for excessive generalizations.* Beware of broadly stated conclusions, Arnold says. “For example, a statement such as ‘there was a general consensus that the peer review system is flawed’ may reflect a majority opinion, but even within that majority, there likely were several varying opinions of its flaws. Be more specific and don’t overgeneralize.”

*Avoid arbitrary copyediting.* “The editor should be invisible”, Jacoby states. Make changes that seem likely to aid readability or that are needed to suit the publication’s format. But insofar as feasible, keep the editing subtle. Avoid reworking passages simply because you would have written them differently. Respect the integrity of good copy, and thereby retain the good will of the reporters you took the care to recruit and instruct.

