



# Meeting Preparation: Then and Now

So you have a job lined up and you're not an expert at the subject. How to prepare?

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**Overall understanding was my main focus** as an eager, wide-eyed beginner. I would always start by just reading the documents in my passive languages, to get a feel for the topic, the vocabulary and how it would “come at me”. Pros and cons of allowing people to shoot crows, ravens, magpies, jays, and other corvids? (This was a real meeting.) I read the report and merely underlined or highlighted the terms I thought might be difficult. Only once I had read all the documents in at least one passive language – the one I expected to give me most trouble – did I move on: what *is* the difference between a raven and a crow, anyway, and how do we draw the distinction in my other languages? How much will it matter in the context of the meeting? Can I piggyback on my boothmate's greater experience? And was it a raven or a crow that helped Dumbo learn to fly?

This approach worked for years, but my second-ever medical conference put an end to it. Sports medicine. I couldn't get my bearings by just reading the abstracts and underlining words: too many terms were unfamiliar, and eighth-grade anatomy just didn't provide enough background knowledge to understand or convey the relevant points my speakers wanted to make. I had to be rescued (thanks, John!) and I then realized that if I was going to accept medical conferences on a regular basis I had to go beyond reading *Scientific American* biology articles for pleasure.

In addition to studying anatomy on spec and learning about anatomical and medical false friends from more experienced colleagues, I began to slog through documents, trawling for keywords and difficulties. Mumbled sight translation turned out to be the best way to identify troublesome phrases and terms that might seem perfectly innocuous at first glance.

That's what I've been doing for years now. Skimming and ordinary reading do happen, but I tend to do it with the background documents I come across while researching terminology, rather than the meeting documents themselves. Presentations, especially in medical conferences, tend to focus on the leading edge, but assume a huge body of background knowledge about daily work in the relevant specialty or subspecialty. This background is a given for most conference participants, but finding the right documents for an impromptu crash course is tough for an interpreter, since we never have the time to read a whole textbook for a single conference, let alone master the subject. Introductory papers and online classroom notes (even if not perfectly accurate) are treasure troves that provide the breadth that I need, whereas I tend to rely on the meeting documents for the necessary depth.

This contrast with the past came into focus after a recent conversation with a teammate. I realized that I now tend to use this approach for all sorts of meetings, whether or not they seem “technical” up front. There's a good reason: if I run into trouble because of a phrase I know I probably would've caught by slogging through – particularly if it's a key term or phrase – I know I'll blame myself because I'm built that way. But still, it's exhausting.

I now feel nostalgic for my old, more relaxed, somewhat cockier preparation style. I had a chance to use it recently (literary lecture, no documents in advance) and it felt great.

So what approach do you readers take? Does a regular habit of highly technical interpretation color your preparation of less-technical subjects? Does your regular reading cover a significant percentage of your needs in terms of general background and understanding? Have you noticed a change over time?

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