

First-Timer Guide by Allison M. Charette

Never been to an ALTA conference before? Don't be scared! This is not your typical, gigantic, stuffy conference. Literary translators are an overwhelmingly nice group of people, and the atmosphere at our annual conference reflects that. Just be yourself, be comfortable, and don't worry.

To put you even more at ease, here are a few pointers and things to expect. (Disclaimer: This is all based on my own experiences over the last few years. Your mileage may vary.)

Preparation

- There's no professional dress code for an ALTA conference, and very rarely will you see people wandering around in suits and ties. Everyone looks polished and put together, but you can leave your cufflinks and black stilettos at home. (Unless that's what you're comfortable in, then by all means: show off those cufflinks!)
- Related: Comfy shoes are a must. You'll be on your feet a lot more than you expect, and you never know how far you'll be walking for lunch. Better safe than sorry. Plus, your shoes don't have to impress anyone.
- Remember to bring business cards to the conference. If you don't already have them, you can get 50-100 printed fairly cheaply at [Vistaprint](#) or [MOO](#). Just do it now so you don't have to pay rush shipping! (Related: Don't bring resumes. No one's going to want them. If you talk to someone who's interested in your experience, you can email them a resume later.)
- If you have the money and/or the funding, booking a room at the conference hotel is highly recommended. It's wonderful to have a 60-second trip to the conference activities, as well as a place to store your things and take quick naps in, if necessary. There are also usually plenty of people looking to share a room—check out the ALTA listserv and the [Facebook group](#).
- If you like being super-organized, the full schedule is usually available a couple of months before the conference—download it and start plotting out your days at the conference.

At the Conference

- It's really important to get sleep and take breaks to rest during the day. If you feel yourself fading, take a quick nap.
- There are many ways to learn things, and the panels are just one part of that. Try to balance the "official learning opportunities" with just talking to people over coffee or at the receptions.
- The beverage and lunch breaks are the best ways to get to know people. Feel free to attach yourself to a random group for lunch, or go up and introduce yourself to anyone and everyone you'd like. 99.9% of people at an ALTA conference are extremely friendly, including the people who you think are "big names".
- That being said, be mindful and respectful of people's time. This counts double for editors—they're going to have a lot of people trying pitch projects to them, so consider just introducing yourself and making friendly conversation. Asking intelligent questions about their press is always a good way to go.

Panels/Roundtables/Workshops

- This is not organized like a typical academic conference. Panels, roundtables, and workshops are all completely organized by the people who want to present. Individual paper submissions aren't accepted for the ALTA conference; the organizers won't put a bunch of strangers together based on similar topics.
- Panelists are encouraged to give presentations and foster discussions, rather than reading a pre-determined paper. This means that all the workshops and roundtables, as well as the grand majority of panels, are designed more as a conversation between presenters and audience. Feel free to contribute and be as engaged as you'd like.
- It's also totally acceptable to explore a number of panels during each time slot. As long as you sit near the back and are quiet and respectful with your entrances and exits, you can sneak in and out of a few different panels each hour.
- Three things to definitely attend: the Fellows and Mentorships Readings, Declamacion, and the keynote address.
- Finally, the Bilingual Readings are highly recommended. It's great to attend one or two (or parts of a few different ones). You can choose based on what languages you work with or someone you've always wanted to meet, or you can just pick at random.

And the fabled ALTA friendliness starts now! If you have more questions, or just need a little reassurance, feel free to email Rachael (rachaeldaum@literarytranslators.org).