



1 Hi, my name is _____

Yes, it can be that simple! You don't need a witty statement or seemingly astute observation to start a conversation. It can be as easy as extending your hand for a handshake and stating your name.

2 How are you enjoying this [conference, event, poster session, etc.]?

You can begin the conversation by remarking on what you see around you and what is taking place right now in time and space.

3 What a long queue.

At receptions and mixers, there are often what I refer to as "Action Nodes". These are features of the event which can serve as the fuel for a conversation. An example of the action node is the queue to pick up your registration materials, or the queue for food or drink. Or perhaps there is an interesting display in the corner of the room. At one fundraising event I attended in celebration of a new observatory, there was an ice sculpture of a telescope mirror that had been positioned near the center of the room. I sashayed over there and commented to the physicist standing nearby "what a beautiful sculpture", and that was all it took. He responded "yes, indeed" and I then said my name and we started chatting about astronomy, the telescope and his work.

4 What area do you focus on?

Asking someone straightaway about their research and profession gets them talking about their favorite subject – themselves! Don't hesitate to inquire about what people are working on, and to ask questions that demonstrate your interest in the subject and learning more. And don't worry if you are a non-expert in his or her field, or that you are early in your career – you are never expected to know everything about a particular subfield, but merely by asking about it you are showcasing your positive, can-do, knowledge-hungry attitude. And a positive attitude goes a long way in building a conversation and fortifying a relationship.

5 Are there certain talks you are especially excited to attend?

I love asking people what is motivating them to attend an event, but rather than say "hey buddy, why are you here?" It gives me a chance to practice asking people questions about themselves and I gain valuable insight into possible clandestine opportunities taking place at the conference or event, such as a special presentation or poster that I had not noticed on the scientific program or agenda before.

