

Hey Jane!

Making Cold Introductions

Welcome to Column 39 of *Hey Jane!* This is a project of the SWS Career Development Committee. Questions are generated by the committee and SWS members.

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Hey Jane! I've heard that much of academia is about connections, but I'm not sure how to go about making them. I recently attended a conference and saw a handful of researchers whose work has influenced my own, but I was too nervous to introduce myself. What should I have done? Should I e-mail them? What should I say? I'm nervous and don't want to make a fool of myself!

Yours is a great question and a concern I've heard both students and young professionals express on many occasions. While introducing yourself to a role model can be nerve-wracking, it can absolutely be worth it! In general, there are two ways you might go about making a "cold" introduction: introduce yourself in person or send an e-mail.

If you find yourself in the same room as someone you admire, making awkward eye contact can be just that: awkward. But walking up and introducing yourself is certainly an option. The person is likely to be engaged in conversation. Don't interrupt mid-sentence. Rather, wait for a lull in the conversation and confidently introduce yourself. (You may not feel confident, but it's okay to fake it. And you'll be less and less nervous the more you practice.) When introducing myself, I usually give my name, professional association, and mention any connections we might have. For example, was your mentor on a conference panel with this person? Have they published together? Alternatively, you might mention a recent article or book of theirs you've read and express your regard for their work. *In short, you want to signal you know who they are and the work they do.* I can't emphasize this enough. I recently heard a professor complain that he'd been besieged by a graduate student at a conference. But once they started chatting, it soon became apparent that the student knew nothing about his work. In an ideal world, this wouldn't matter and the two could continue chatting on equal footing. Unfortunately, however, it doesn't work like this. If you annoy someone, it can be hard to rectify. Given this, if you need to pull out your smart phone and google the person to double-check your facts before you approach, feel free.

A cold in-person introduction might look like something like this: "Hi Professor Rockstar. I just wanted to introduce myself. My name is Sally Sociologist. I'm a graduate student at the University of Social Sciences and I work with Wilhelmina McFeminist. Wilhelmina recently introduced me to your work on Utopian socialism in our *Gender & Society* seminar and I'm working on my thesis using your theoretical framework but applying it to the study of sexuality."

This introduction is short, but leaves a lot of breadcrumbs for the person to pick up and carry on with the conversation.

A second strategy you might employ is to send a cold email—that is, an e-mail that comes “out of the blue.” When sending a cold email, you’ll need to have a reason to send it beyond “I think you’re amazing!” You can, of course, compliment the researcher on his or her work. Everyone likes their ego stroked. But there needs to be another reason for the email as well. For example, you might want to tell the person how their research has impacted you. If someone’s work on why women leave STEM fields has helped you persist in your graduate statistics course, this seems like a good reason to write. Or, you can ask a question. Ask for clarification about something they’ve published; ask if they’re working on anything you could read related to a previous piece you enjoyed; or ask about their university if you are interested in applying. You are essentially asking for a favor—to answer your question—and when people do small favors for someone, they are more likely to like them as a result, a phenomenon known as the Ben Franklin effect. Small is key here. Don’t ask for anything extremely time-consuming (e.g., to provide feedback on a paper of yours) or inappropriate (e.g., their data). And, it goes without saying the e-mail should be well-constructed (e.g., proper grammar, appropriate greeting, e-mail signature).

Regardless of the approach, when building your network, follow up is crucial. If you have a conversation with someone you admire, send them an email to say you enjoyed meeting them. If they offered you advice, follow up with a thank you. If you mentioned an article or book they hadn’t heard of, send the reference.

Cold introductions can be scary and rejection is difficult, but the worst that can happen is that the person doesn’t engage in conversation or answer your e-mail. If this happens, remember that there are a lot of plausible explanations that have nothing to do with you. The person could be running late, distracted with a personal issue, or the email may have gotten lost in the sea of e-mail we all receive. Don’t let this stop you from putting yourself out there again. You never know what relationship might develop out of a simple email or handshake!