



NICAR first-timer's guide

Updated March 2025

Before the conference

Think about what you want to learn, and keep it reasonable. Learn at least one new technical skill that you've never tried before, or pick three things you want to learn — whether it be skills, software, languages, a certain tool or type of analysis — and commit to them. The important thing here is to know your limits. Don't try to learn too many things this weekend or expect yourself to move mountains with the new skill right away. Trying to learn how to write an entire program in Python or statistical analysis in R in one conference weekend is too much to expect for anyone, but you can get started with a master class. Pick a project or story that will require the skills you learn this weekend so you can keep practicing consistently with them when you get home.

Master classes are three-hour sessions that require payment and registration ahead of time. They often fill up quickly and sell out before the conference, so if you want to go that route, [do it sooner rather than later](#).

Plan ahead and get a seat, especially for hands-on classes. Once you know what you want to learn, take time to look at [the schedule](#) and download a copy (available in four different formats) before the conference. Find the sessions that have those skills and tools you identified as your priorities to learn. Get to your must-have classes early — like half an hour early, if you want to make sure you're going to get a seat.

If a class is overflowing and you can't get in, look for [tipsheets and audio posted on the IRE website](#) later. For some sessions, the tipsheet might work fine for you — and if you need to take a hands-on session or want to go to a session where you think you'll have lots of questions, that should take priority. Sharon Machlis also gathers NICAR materials and posts them [on her website](#), where she's got materials from NICAR20 and forward.

Sign up to be a mentor or mentee. The mentorship program is one of the best parts of the conference. I learned a lot by just sitting near experienced reporters in the Post-Dispatch newsroom. We lost a lot of that learning-by-osmosis even before the pandemic because of layoffs. The mentorship breakfast brings some of that back.

As of February 21, IRE has a waitlist for NICAR mentees, but is still taking volunteers to be mentors. Email Cody Winchester, cody@ire.org, if you're able to be a mentor.

Give yourself time to explore the hotel when you get in. Download the conference app, [Guidebook](#), which has a hotel map, and budget time to get lost especially on the first and second morning. Ask the hotel folks and IRE staff for help when you do get lost. Do not wander around until you are sad and defeated because your top session has zero seats left. And, don't fret: You will master the layout of the hotel right before you leave on Saturday or Sunday.

During the conference

Look for social events after the panels and in the evenings and carve out time to explore Minneapolis with new conference friends. This is where some of my best conference time is always spent. You can cultivate a community here for yourself. Occasionally, people have had to drag me out of my hotel room for social things — that one's for you, NICAR20 4am beignet crew — and it's always worth it. Another example: We almost always find a place to do karaoke, and occasionally a second night of karaoke pops up somewhere in the hotel.

Matt Waite put it best in his post-NICAR recovery guide, which is linked below — NICAR has become “my tribe. A really nerdy, wonderful tribe.” And think of it this way: You might never be in Minneapolis again, or at least not for a while, so enjoy it and explore it with colleagues and new friends while you're here.

A final note, here. You don't have to drink alcohol to have fun at NICAR. There's usually a big crowd around the hotel bar each night, but you can hang out there and not drink — that's what I'll be doing this year; it'll be my first sober NICAR — and there are often “Sober CAR” events organized, too. Keep an eye on the News Nerders Slack (link to join is below) and ask around at the conference to find out where those are happening.

Pay more attention at fewer sessions. The first year I went, I fully stacked my schedule and planned something for every single hour of every single day. By early Saturday afternoon, I had to leave a class halfway through to go take a nap. Don't overload your daily schedule. Build in some time to take breaks, even if it's not a nap, even if it's just chilling in the hotel bar and catching up on email or work.

On that note, if a session isn't for you, you are allowed to get up and leave. It's your conference, and you paid for it — or, erm, your bosses, or someone did. You want it to be useful to *you* and to what you need to learn. Just do it quietly, and if you make eye contact with the instructor on the way out, give them a polite nod. We will understand. Trust me, we've been there, too.

Approach people and talk to them if you want to talk to them. Ask them to lunch or dinner. Join random groups for lunch or dinner if you need people to eat with. Even if someone is a “big name” to you or someone you really look up to, just do it. When I haven't done this, I've regretted it. It took me a few years to work up the courage to talk to one of my heroes for the first time, and then largely because of NICAR, I ended up working for her. The point is this: Every time I have done it, I have never regretted it.

OpenNews is serving as table hosts and paying for dine around, community-style dinners on Wednesday night. This is great for anyone brand new to the news nerd community. [Sign up here](#).

Additionally, during the lunch break on Thursday, Friday and Saturday at the conference, there will be a designated spot — in front of the hotel gift shop on the 5th floor — where attendees can meet and an IRE staffer will put them in groups of four and connect them with a volunteer. If you'd like to volunteer, just show up for one of the lunch breaks at the designated spot. IRE doesn't pay for the lunches, to be clear; the goal of this is to help you find people to eat with and make the conference feel a little smaller.

Take care of yourself. This one is easier said than done, I find. First, dress comfortably. NICAR is pretty casual, and if we have a uniform, it's "jeans and a hoodie." At least bring a hoodie or sweater with you because the conference rooms in hotels can be chilly. Eat, drink water and sleep well. Get some exercise at least once during the conference: cardio, yoga, take a walk (hit the Skyway!), whatever your thing is. Keep granola bars, high-protein snacks and a water bottle on you at all times to keep hunger and dehydration at bay. Recharge your batteries — computer and brain — when you need to. Take naps when you need to. Make sure you are in full learning-mode when you do go to sessions.

Pro tip: You can avoid the coffee lines in the morning by buying snacks and canned or bottled coffees at a local grocery store on Wednesday night. I always take a trip to the grocery store Wednesday afternoon or evening when I get in to stock up on snacks, and if you don't have time to do that because your flight gets in too late (as is the case for me this year) stock up on what you can at the airport in Minneapolis and then make a stop at a grocery store as soon as you can. If you've got a microwave in your room, a box of breakfast sandwiches can save you a lot of time and hassle in the morning. You can often take a two or five minute walk from the hotel to find a coffee shop and skip the line that way, too.

Bring a power strip. This one's an oldie but goodie. It's a great way to make friends at NICAR because we're all always looking for outlets. You are the hero if you show up with an extra six. Oh, and don't forget your chargers. And your dongles. I almost bombed my own session one year because I forgot a dongle, and IRE President Brian Rosenthal, the realest of them all, came and saved the day.

Go to lightning talks. That's all, that's the advice. 😊

After the conference

Fill out the surveys IRE sends after each day and after the conference ends. They listen and these are important. If you loved NICAR, help us make it even better.

If you can, take a buffer day or two when you get back. You are going to be tired. Carve out time to rest when you get home. Maybe get your groceries delivered that week or make sure your partner is game to cover most of the chores. You know what you need best to refill your cup. Make those plans now.

Your first project is going to suck. Do it anyway. This is advice from one of what I like to call one of the NICAR OGs, Matt Waite. Matt wrote a [5-step NICAR recovery plan](#) that has four

other great post-conference tips. But this one is my favorite because he's right, and it makes me laugh a little bit, now. My first project(s) sucked a little bit but I'm still proud of them and they made me the data journalist I am today (wipes tear dramatically). It's like Nike says: Just do it. And make sure to ask for help when you need it, too.

If you're brand new to data, start smaller. Start with data that you're confident you can work with. You don't have to start with a huge project, and it's better for skill development not to. Daily practice, which brings incremental progress and keeps your "data brain" turned on, is important and it is the best way to retain these skills. If there is a bigger project you want to tackle, talk to your mentor about how to break it into steps and do it right. DRY.

Don't be surprised, and don't get discouraged, if the skill or reporting recipe doesn't translate exactly when you get home. One good reason to hit the social events — make friends you can text or Slack with questions after you get home. If something isn't working when you get home, put it down and try again tomorrow. If it's still not working, call a friend. The most important thing with this, though, is to not get discouraged. Don't give up. Your story may not look exactly like the one you saw in your session, but that's a good thing: You get to figure out what the story is on your beat and break it.

Join the News Nerdery Slack community. [Here's the link to sign up.](#) Within the Slack community are channels for specific tools, languages and there's even a "nerdettes" channel only for women and femme-identifying folks. There's also specifically a "helpme" channel, so if you have a question when you get home and you don't know who to ask, that's the perfect place for it.

If you need anything at any time during the conference, don't hesitate to ask IRE or hotel staff for help. Let's get nerdy and have fun!

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