

## Tips and Advice for Attending a Conference

Attending your first conference can be at the same time very exciting, but also very discouraging. Often, we are too easily intimidated by the knowledge more experienced mathematicians manipulate with so much ease, forgetting that they were all students once too. The main purpose of this guide is to help you get the most out of a conference and even to make the experience enjoyable! After attending more than a dozen of conferences, meetings and colloquiums, these are the purely personal suggestions that I can offer you.

### Before the Conference:

Often, we leave in a hurry, thinking that there will be time to prepare everything once we have arrived. From experience, we are always in a rush at the beginning of the conference. We meet old colleagues, have problems with reservations, etc... This is why I strongly encourage you to follow these simple steps before leaving:

- ❑ **Read the schedule** and the talk descriptions. The schedule is usually on-line and often many talks are given simultaneously. Take the time to select the talks that interest you the most and decide who the researchers are that you would like meet.
- ❑ If the conference is about a specific topic, take the time to **read up on that topic**. Often, even the introductory talks are of a high level. The better you know the material, the less painful it will be. If you have time, you can even read papers related to the talks.
- ❑ If applicable, be sure that everything is cleared with your **sponsor**. Make photocopies of your reservations and choose a method to keep all you receipts together (envelope, binder, etc). Check if any restrictions apply. For instance, some sponsors only reimburse flight tickets from specific airline companies.
- ❑ **Prepare** your talk. If you are giving a talk, take the time to practice and prepare in advance. You will have more time to enjoy the activities and you will avoid needless stress. Practice in front of friends and be sure you respect the time constraints. It is much easier to print out your overheads before leaving than to be in a panic, between two talks, trying to figure out the printer or to find your overheads are blank. Bring an electronic copy of your documents with you, just in case!

### During the Conference:

Once you have arrived at the conference, it can be very intimidating to find yourself in the big league. The author of the paper you have been trying to understand for months is sitting in front of you during a dinner, then someone asks your opinion about the new government

policies...hum, watch out! For all the ``etiquette'' rules and the art of rhetoric, I will let you use your common sense. The following recommendations should be taken as generally as possible and are not absolute rules, use your judgement.

- ❑ **Do not panic!** If you have only understood the first ten minutes of a talk, that already is a lot. The speakers are experts in a field that may not be your own, it is natural to understand only a little. The idea is to try to get as much as possible from it and to follow as much as you can. And, who knows, it may inspire you for your future work. If you are completely lost, respect the speaker. Avoid sleeping, or looking completely bored, be discreet.
- ❑ **Make new connections.** This is the place to create a professional network, to talk with prospective supervisors and future collaborators. Suggest to your colleagues going out for lunch. This is the perfect time to learn about their research areas and to get a feeling for possible joint work. Talk about what you are doing, the mathematics that inspires you, and sell yourself! But keep in mind, it is always better to admit honestly that you do not know the answer than try to make something up to not appear ignorant.
- ❑ **Do not attend all the talks.** Even you are only attending these talks, it can be very exhausting. Keep up your energy and your focus for the talks that really matter to you. However, be careful not to offend anybody. Some colleague, supervisor, etc, might be expecting your presence at their talk, be alert.
- ❑ **Do not take advantage** of your sponsor. Use your common sense. If your meals are paid for, you do not have to go to the most expensive restaurants. However, if a dinner is organised at a fancy restaurant where you think you can work on your networking, then this is worth the expense. At the same time, you do not have to order two bottles of Veuve Clicquot.
- ❑ **Ask questions.** But, once again, use your common sense. I do not think it is relevant to ask what a normal distribution is during a high level talk. Some questions can wait to be asked after the talk, one on one and, who knows, this could lead to new collaborations.
- ❑ **Participate** in social activities. You will have a great time and, moreover, you will have the opportunity to talk to all these people you otherwise would not have the time to meet. If there are no activities organised, propose one!
- ❑ **Take notes.** You do not have to rewrite everything. Just try to keep up with the general idea and the questions that come to you. Take references and who knows, they could be very useful later.

- ❑ Take time to **visit**, to decompress. The host city surely has its charms that will make your stay even more enjoyable and you will come back home with even nicer souvenirs.
- ❑ **Identify** yourself. You may be incredible at memorising faces but that may not be the case with other participants. Do not take that chance, introduce yourself when you meet someone. If a name-tag is provided, wear it!

### **At the End of the Conference :**

Before your departure, if you have time, take few minutes to :

- ❑ **Quickly reread** your notes. That will help you to keep a better general perspective on the conference you have just attended.
- ❑ Take time to **thank** the staff and the organisers! Often, it is that little something extra that makes all the difference, their real salary!

Once back home, be sure to fill out the reimbursement forms as fast as possible. Some sponsors can be very strict with deadlines and you will lower your chances of losing your receipts. I hope these advice were helpful and I wish you a worry free and enjoyable conference.