

# Approaching bilateral meetings with external researchers

e.g. 1:1 with seminar speakers

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## Bilateral meetings - what are they?

- Typical format: slots of 20-30mins
- Organized such that
  - Guest researchers (e.g. seminar speakers) can learn about the research happening at the institution
  - Researchers from the hosting institution, juniors in particular (!), have a chance to talk about their research with external scholars and get feedback

## Why you should do it

- Research is about conveying your ideas to the outside world. This is your job. That requires practice and exposure to people of many different backgrounds.
- Guest researchers are often well-established researchers with broad horizons and great knowledge of our profession. Knowing what kind of questions they would ask, what suggestions they might have is invaluable. This allows you to anticipate the comments you will later receive from referees.
- (Senior) researchers don't do their jobs for the money (there would be better alternatives). They enjoy talking about research and being exposed to new ideas. They are happy to help - make use of it.

## Downsides?

There are hardly any. If a feedback is negative, that may be helpful to know. If a person is awkward, you say "thank you for your time, I have to leave" and go. If you feel you didn't make a good impression, they will forget and you will be better prepared the next time. These things are rare anyway.

Bilateral meetings are the literal 10-dollar bill lying on the street. So now as you want to start getting into these meetings - how to go about it?

## Before the meeting:

- Make sure you get into the mailing lists that are relevant to you - typically, each seminar has its own. Find out who is organizing a seminar and get in touch with these people. Slots for bilateral are often announced via such mailing lists. Sign up.
- Check CVs of seminar guests. If they have expertise within your area, that's great. If not, that's still no problem - we are all interested in stuff that happens beyond our narrow fields. Especially for your job market paper, you should seek feedback from all kinds of researchers.
- Think about the project you could talk about. Be prepared to give a 1-2 mins elevator talk of the paper.
- What questions and challenges do you currently face in this project? Write them down and bring the list to the meeting. Know your purpose. Purposes might include:
  - Practice talking about your research to others
  - Get feedback on specific questions
  - Get advice on whether you should continue a project
  - Get advice on what kind of journal might be interested in your project
  - Get insights into how the guest overcame certain challenges in his own work, especially if there are related projects
- Bring a pen and paper to take notes. Guests will appreciate you are seriously interested in their opinions.

## During the meeting:

- Start with small talk only if it comes naturally - it is not a necessity. If the guest gave a seminar talk beforehand, you may follow up on that.
- Introduce yourself: Name, status, interests - knowing you're a 2nd year Phd student rather than an AP sets expectations. Reminder for Germans: It is expected to call each other by first names, no matter how senior the guest is.
- The typical conversation will start with the guest asking: So what do you do in your research? If s/he does not say so, it is still a good idea to briefly introduce the project you would like to talk about. What is the research question? Why is it relevant? What do you do? Don't talk for more than 3 minutes, leave room for the guest to digest the information and ask questions.
- Typically, a conversation will emerge from here, or you take the chance to ask the questions that are most pressing to you. You can lead the way in the conversation. After all, it is your time.
- Questions I like to ask include:
  - I am looking for data on X
  - Here are two ways to frame the paper. Which one would you prefer? Any other alternatives?
  - Are the results/story plausible? What objections would you raise (and how to tackle them)?
  - This is the most important assumption I have to make. I already do these checks. Are they credible? What other checks could I do?

- How could the paper be extended?
- What kind of journal might be interested in this paper?
- If the guest has worked on related research, also mention that at the beginning
- Taking notes may help you to bridge silence and allow you to consider your next question/conversation topic.
- Keep it natural - don't force yourself to stick to your initial plan if the conversation is moving in another (productive) direction.
- The meeting ends if the time is over (probably the next person is already waiting) or if you feel that everything has been said. Nobody will be unhappy to gain a couple of minutes.
- Often enough, people may invite you to send them your paper once it's finished. Do it! You may also proactively offer to send the (final) paper.

## Afterwards:

- If it was a nice meeting: Enjoy! If it did not go well: Forget and try again next time!
- In the former scenario, follow up via email. Thank you, it was great meeting you. I just implemented the robustness check X that he/she recommended and it looks great. Repeated interaction creates trust. No problem if they don't respond, these are busy people.
- Store your notes. I keep a document for each of my projects that collects and organizes all of my notes from bilateral meetings. It is super useful to look at these notes later on.
- It is appropriate to thank people from bilateral meetings in the acknowledgments of your paper (no need to ask them for permission to do so).

## Final thoughts:

- No person is too senior/famous to talk to them
- I even used bilateral meetings to (also) talk about the possibility to visit their department as a visiting researcher
- Are people going to steal my ideas if I talk about them?
  - Most colleagues are honest and friendly. Especially if they come to your department because they know someone here, they would want to build bridges, rather than burn them.
  - Chances are that professors from top places in Europe/US will have more and better ideas anyways, no time to steal yours
  - How easy would it be for someone else to copy-paste your project?
  - If you are unsure, you can ask the guest to treat the conversation as confidential, which creates another safety barrier.
- If somebody approaches you inappropriately, thanks and goodbye.

Final words:

This guide is based on my personal experiences. There are tons of other experiences out there and I am happy to update this guide based on your suggestions. Just get in touch:

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<https://sites.google.com/view/lmergele/home>