

Some Points of Etiquette for Mathematicians

Papers

Acknowledge those who helped you mathematically in writing the paper. If someone explained the proof of a lemma to you, acknowledge that near the statement of the lemma, etc.

A co-author is usually someone who made a significant contribution to your paper. The contribution usually will not be equal to yours. (Your thesis advisor is an exception to this rule. In most cases, their contribution to your thesis would be considered collaboration if it were any paper other than a PhD thesis.)

If you discovered something for yourself, but later you found out that your discovery already existed in the literature, then it's someone else's discovery, and you shouldn't try to take credit for having rediscovered it.

After writing a paper, you'll submit it for publication. If your paper is rejected by a journal, and unless the referee or editors made a clear and irrefutable error, and sometimes even if they did, it's probably best to submit it elsewhere. There's not much to be gained by asking the journal to reconsider, and there are plenty of journals to approach with your paper.

When you've finished writing your paper, put it on the web, and send a brief email to those mathematicians who would want to know about your result. Make a list of recipients in BCC, and just send a short email that doesn't directly ask for a reply. For example,

Dear Colleagues, My coauthors (name them) and I have a new result that you may be interested in on (short phrase of content of the paper). You can see it by selecting the link below. Thanks.

But you should let people know. They'll want to know.

Talks

Stop when your time is up. If it's a seminar, and if there's the possibility that someone has a class to teach, or has to leave to pick up their kids, then stop when your talk is scheduled to stop, even if it started late. It's not the audience's fault that your organizer started your talk late.

Always begin by thanking the relevant parties for the opportunity to speak and by noting your coauthors. Be sincere about your gratitude, for example by looking at the people you are thanking. There's no need to explain that it's your first visit to the town, or to tell a joke, etc. When you're done, say thank you. It lets the audience know for sure that your talk has ended, and it's polite.

It's OK if no one asks a question at the end of the talk. It is possible that everyone understood and enjoyed what you had to say regardless. This is also important to remember as the moderator: don't feel the need to throw a silly softball question and don't make a big fuss or get nervous if there are no questions. On the flip side, make sure to pause long enough for questions - very often an extra two seconds will produce a question.

Conferences

When meeting someone, give your last name as well as your first. Your last name is your professional name, and it's what you'll most often be known by. A handshake is always a good idea too. This doesn't feel natural for many of us, but do it anyways.

The goal of socializing in these settings is to get to know the people in the field whose papers you have been, or soon will be, reading. The goal is not to be everyone's best friend. You don't have to be entertaining. But do be polite.

If you meet someone whose work is related to yours, let them know what you've been up to. They'll want to know. Keep in mind, that they may have just seen a good friend that they haven't seen in a while, and so they might seem less than enthused at the moment you meet them. That's OK. Keep it short, and you can talk later in the conference.

Don't start conversations with people you just met that would be considered off limits by most people. For example, don't talk about religion, politics, don't attack what others value, even if you're particularly clever about it, and don't tell someone that you don't like where they are from. All of these examples have happened often. They really shouldn't happen ever.

Letters

You probably will be asking people who have very many letters to write each year. Keep in mind that it takes a full day of work to write a letter sometimes, and that writing letters probably isn't the most important part of their job. That is, give them months of advanced notice, and make it as easy on them as possible. Don't ask for a letter until you have all of your stuff together - a research statement, cv, etc.