

# Asking questions to yourself and others

Gabriel Scherer

Parsifal, INRIA, France

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Asking questions to yourself and others  
or: How to stay awake at talks or when reading papers

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# Gabriel “gasche” Scherer

2010-2012: Master programme (MPRI, Paris)

2012-2015: PhD at Gallium, INRIA Rocquencourt, France, with Didier Rémy  
Which types have a unique inhabitant?  
(program equivalence meet proof theory)

2016-2017: postdoc, Northeastern University, Boston, with Amal Ahmed

- Multi-language programming systems
- Speculative optimization in JITs (also with Jan Vitek)

2017-∞: researcher at Parsifal, INRIA Saclay, France

# Parsifal



Proof theory, focusing, automated theorem proving,  
logic programming, proof assistants.

Me: expertise and application goals in *programming languages*.  
(OCaml expertise)

# Asking yourself questions

Talk or paper. Helps:

Concentration.

Understanding.

Assessment.

## Kinds of question

**Understanding** questions: I don't follow X, can you explain?

**Curiosity** questions: what if X?

## Reading a paper

The authors want you to follow the paper.

If you don't understand, re-read.  
It clarifies, or it is obscure.

Curiosity questions: **write them down.**

After finishing the paper: it's normal to email your questions to the authors – if you care about their answers.  
(It helps the authors, the reply helps you, it starts a conversation.)

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  - Is there a precise connection?
5. Something feels odd.
  - Why do I feel that way?

## At a talk

The speaker wants you to follow the talk until the end.  
Questions can help along the way.

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**Live exercise:** try to come up with questions for this talk!

## When to ask

Depends on the formality level: higher stake, less questions.

Hiring talk, short conference talk:

wait until the end, be considerate with time

Longer workshop talk, seminar talk

ask understanding questions as they arise

Willing speaker, informal talk: ask whenever

## Questions are your duty

As a speaker, I *hate* when people gets lost.

I would rather spend two more minutes right now than lose you forever!

It is your collective *duty* to ask questions before that.

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Speaker has no question...  
(but: terrible talks deserve the embarrassment)

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(Also: power dynamics.)

## Bad question: out-of-scope question

Questions that are not about the work being presented.

You could have asked this question at any talk within the same general domain.

For example, at a formal verification talk:

*What's the point of verifying software if the CPU can be buggy?*

Heard in real life.

Bad question: mean question

Don't.

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... so let me make you worry about being perceived as a plagiarizing impostor on-stage.*

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If they should have known: blame the advisor.

## Bad question: the not-question

Questions that do not end with a question mark.

(Sometimes comment are fine. Rambling comments are not good.)

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*I always make the same kind of joke at conference talks, so here is a variant of the joke using words of your talk.*

## Multi-questions and offensive rebounds

Several in a row: no problem, if you also let others ask.

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Pressing on with the same question again: not a good idea.

## Offline questions

Any question, you can ask offline. Even naive understanding questions.

At a conference, people love to connect with their audience.  
Excellent conversation opener.

You can also give feedback on the talk, but be gentle.

Thanks

Questions ?