

Avertissement [2] : People have often asked us what research we're doing. Despite our best efforts to be vague and barely comprehensible, our parents and friends invariably reply 'yes, yes,' while more or less sighing, more intrigued than ever. So we have resigned ourselves to describing not our work, but the life of a Ph.D student to the astonished masses. Going by the first reactions, it would appear that we have succeeded.

What's a PhD? [1]

The Supervisor

To start a PhD, you need to have a boss. A boss is a very very clever man, who sets me a problem and who is going to help me solve it. That's my boss being photographed by Christian Mercatier-Bresson.



The Research

At first, it's so complicated that you can't understand anything.



THEOREME 1. - On a l'inégalité

$$\sum_{r \in G} \frac{|K_r|(|K_r| - 1)}{K^2} \log \left(\frac{|K_r| - 1}{K \in \Lambda_r} \right) + \frac{K-1}{K^2} \sum_{r \in G} \sum_{s \in K_r} |\log |a_{s,r}||$$

$$\leq \left(1 - \frac{1}{K}\right) \frac{2D}{K} \sum_{k=1}^K h(a_k) + \frac{D}{K} \left(1 + \frac{|G|}{2D} + \log \frac{K}{2}\right)$$



You can spend hours looking and not find anything. Sometimes like this, my dad and mum are really worried. One time my mum asks if it was a good idea to make the kid (that's me) do a PhD, my dad opens his arms without speaking, he looks at his arms and he goes off to get a newspaper in the living room.

The Discovery

Sometimes, it's great, because I discover things that my boss asked me to. Of course, this can happen at any time, and my parents are not always delighted.



They wonder if I'm completely crazy, but that my dad doesn't know that.



I think it's rather normal to be happy. Besides, when my boss discovers a theorem, he's really proud and his friends (who are also really really clever people) are really happy with him. But my parents don't know that.



As well, sometimes, it goes badly because I make a mistake. And when I make a mistake, my boss does not put up with any messing about, none at all. 'Look me in the eyes, Nicholas,' he says to me, not in the least bit pleased. 'You call that work, perhaps?' he asks me. Well, that seems to be a question,

Nicholas does a PhD

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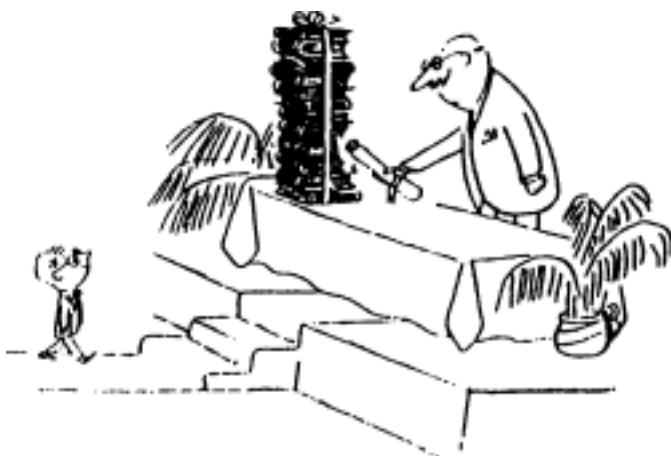
but you should certainly not answer, because if you do, he gets all red and angry!

The Seminars

From time to time, a very, very important and really clever man (but even so, not as clever as my boss) talks about really complicated things. This is called a seminar, and during a seminar, you can't mess about either. When the man has finished talking, my boss asks him loads of really complicated questions, and he doesn't always know how to answer. And then, it's not fair, because he doesn't get told off!



The Viva

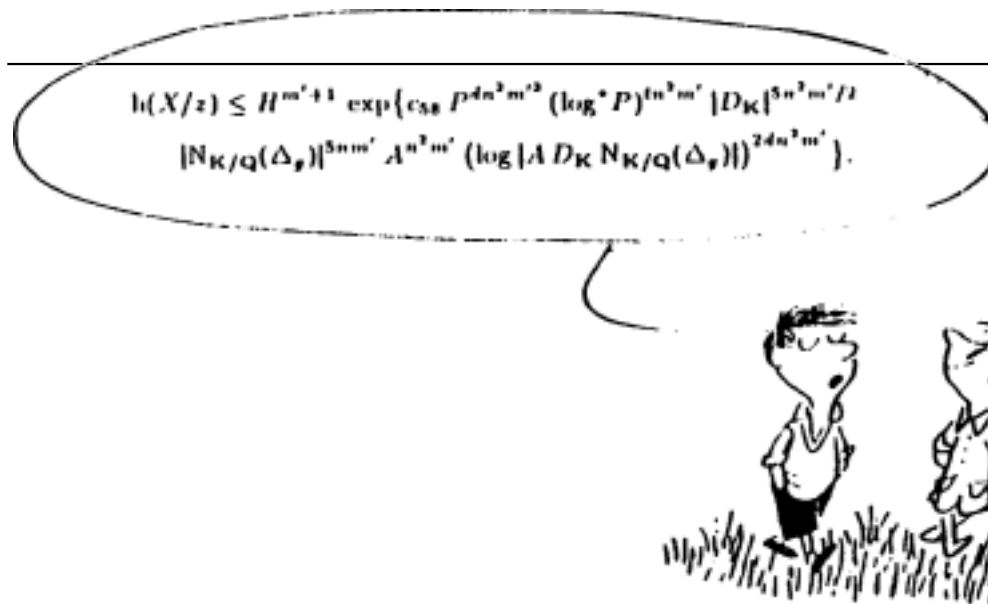


When I've finished, there will be a big ceremony with all the really, really clever people (there will even be people from other countries) and there will be a very very important man who will say to my dad that's very good, my boy, the path to success is now gloriously open to me and I'm the honour of my country, and all that nonsense. And then there will be a great party with all my friends. Brilliant!

And when he reads all that in the paper, my dad will be really proud and my mum will be so happy that she'll give me a second helping of caramel custard, my favourite dessert. A Ph.D is really great after all!



The Glory



What's more, girls already know that you've done and that you've found theorems. Even Marie looks at me now, when I was a very unruly little

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[1] Told in the style of Sempé and Goscinny's popular children's books, from the point of view of a schoolboy called Nicholas.

[2] We would like to thank Arnaud Maes who was kind enough to let us reproduce 'Le petit Nicolas en thèse'. The official address is <http://petitnicolas.home.dyndns.org/nicolas.htm>