

Travel Advice for Physics Graduate Students

Compiled by Brett McArther, for the Mentors (September 2011)

Updated by Linda Trower (August 2016)

A large part of the graduate student experience is travel to conferences, labs, and seminars to obtain/disseminate your data and to learn what your colleagues are doing. Unless you spend your entire tenure in St. Louis, chances are you'll be spending a good deal of money in these endeavors, and presumably you'll want to be reimbursed. This means that you'll need to follow certain rules and regulations put in place by the department, University, and Congress. Officially, it is the advisor's responsibility to notify and explain these policies to you, but as mentors we thought some more advice couldn't hurt. With help from Linda Trower in the main office, we've put together some points to remember when planning and reporting your trip, which will make lives easier... both yours and hers.

For more tips and information about traveling, be sure to talk with your advisor and the more experienced members of your group.

This document is intended to supplement the department's official "Summary of Travel Policy" document. Please talk to Linda for a copy of the official policy document.

1. GENERAL TRAVEL REIMBURSEMENT POLICES

Some information on travel expenses are well-known within the department, or just plain common sense (e.g. try to book flights as early as possible for lower fares, purchases of alcohol will not be reimbursed, get itemized receipts whenever possible, etc.). This document will only highlight some general points on the lesser known of the WUSTL travel policies relevant to graduate students. For a more full explanation of these policies, please see the "Summary of Travel Policy" document and/or talk to Linda.

2. TRAVEL ADVANCES

The department encourages you to get travel advances for your trips. With this method, you have most (if not all) of your expenses paid for. Because of volume, travel reports may at times take a month to be reimbursed, and it may conflict with payments you have due. Travel advances cannot be done earlier than 30 days prior to a trip, unless they are to reimburse you for a pre-paid purchase (like airfare, registration, or pre-payment for lodging). Naturally, if your actual expenses are less than the advance, you'll need to pay back the remainder.

3. PER DIEM MEAL EXPENSES

In the per diem method, the traveler is reimbursed at a flat rate per day, where the rate will vary depending on the destination. The main point here is that this method is only an option if your advisor allows it for their group. Ask before you go! Often, the advisor will allow it, but with contingencies to claim a lesser amount than the per diem allowance, which is acceptable with Accounts Payable. Again, you need to communicate with your advisor to know what is okay with them. See the "Summary of Travel Policy" document for further details on per diem.

4. AIR TRAVEL

Travel insurance can be purchased if you want, but it's NOT reimbursable. We take responsibility if your flight gets cancelled.

Fly America Act:

If your funds are coming from a government-funded account, you have to use a US Flag Air Carrier, regardless of cost or convenience, to be reimbursed. Unless you can prove absolutely that there are no US carriers available (e.g. flying from Rome to Athens), you need to fly in an American plane. If you're getting reimbursed from start-up funds, this doesn't apply, but it's probably best to check anyway.

5. CAR RENTAL

Get the cheapest car that is feasible. Unless your conference is in the backwoods of Alaska, don't expect them to pay for a roomy SUV.

DO NOT AGREE TO ADDITIONAL INSURANCE. If you are traveling on University business, you are covered by their insurance, which covers anything you or the University would pay. You will not be reimbursed for additional coverage when traveling for University business within the US, Canada, or a US possession. Ask Linda if you want some documentation to carry with you.

6. FOREIGN CURRENCY

When filling out the reimbursement form where you paid for an expense in a foreign country and need to convert the cost back to US dollars:

- Go to www.oanda.com
- Select "Currency Converter"
- Choose "Historical Rates" tab
- Enter the range of dates for your travel
- Set "Currency I Have" to your specific foreign currency
- Set "Currencies I Want" to "USD"
- Select "Table" tab

You can use either the average for the whole trip or do day-by-day. Either way, print out the screen to show where your conversions came from; an example screen is shown below.

The screenshot shows the OANDA website interface for historical currency rates. The user has selected the date range from July 29, 2016, to August 2, 2016, and is viewing the exchange rate for British Pound (GBP) to US Dollar (USD). The table displays the following data:

	USD
Period Average	1.32133
Period High	1.32221
Period Low	1.31954
Aug 1, 2016	1.32134
Jul 31, 2016	1.32221
Jul 30, 2016	1.32221
Jul 29, 2016	1.31954

Rates are updated and posted daily at 22:00 ET and represents the average value of the most recently completed 24-hour period ending on the same day.
Currencies marked with an asterisk (*) are obsolete or no longer available with current rates.

Example screenshot from www.oanda.com showing the exchange rate between the British pound and US dollar on July 29 through August 2, 2016. Note that the average exchange over the period is given, with £1 = \$1.3222.