

THOUGHTS ON WRITING (AND READING)

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POLL : do you like writing?

WRITING IS DIFFICULT

- Writing well is difficult and it can be daunting
- Writing is probably the main task for academics so we might as well try to do it well (and minimise our suffering in the process)

CAVEAT: I finished my PhD < 2 years ago

SOME REFERENCES

- Paul Silvia (2007) How to write a lot
- Joli Jensen (2017) Write no matter what
- Lynne Bruss (2003) Eats, shoots & leaves
- Strunk and White (1959) The elements of style
- Joseph Williams (1981) Style: lessons in clarity and grace

FEW POINTS ON STYLE

- You want to be understood: be concise and to the point
"The preservation of limits by right adjoint functors is well-known"
- Academic writing is different from school essays
- Avoid very bad punctuation mistakes
"Eats, shoots and leaves" "Jane, was writing a paper"
- Be merciful to your readers
" Q_{x_m} " "Suppose that T is monoidal" " Ω "
- Reviewers will thank a well-written submission

MINIMISE SUFFERING

- Give up binge writing
 - ↳ fix regular meetings with yourself,
be protective of them, and
turn notifications off
- Slack, Zulip and emails are amazing for procrastination
- Try to be intentional with time allocation

START WRITING SOON

- Don't wait until you have a magnum opus
 - ↳ small preliminary results are worth writing too
 - "Can you prove it?" "No, it's just an observation"
- You'll need to prioritise (which is difficult)
- Get early genuine feedback

DISCUSSING VS WRITING

- Research is partly a social endeavour
 - ↳ other people's interests shape your own
 - collaborating can be a lot of fun
- But, in the end, you need to sit down and write

NO MYSTICISM, PLEASE

- Research ideas don't come from divine inspiration or extraordinary skills
- Research is more prosaic than it might seem

WRITING STEPS

- Decide what's the main point
- Decide on a narrative
- Sit down, and write
- Every paragraph has a claim:
context → claim → support

READING : WRITING IN THE OPPOSITE CATEGORY

- Give up binge reading
- Read regularly : ideas come from reading
 - ↳ keep a reading list
- Reading is difficult
 - ↳ take notes while reading

READING IS IMPORTANT

- Shape your interest beyond your immediate colleagues
- Ideas come from reading
- Examples of well/badly written papers

SUMMARY

- Prioritise writing (and reading)
- Start small: writing can be overwhelming
- If I followed all my own advice,
I'd probably be a better researcher