

Good Advice for Academics

Caterina Urban

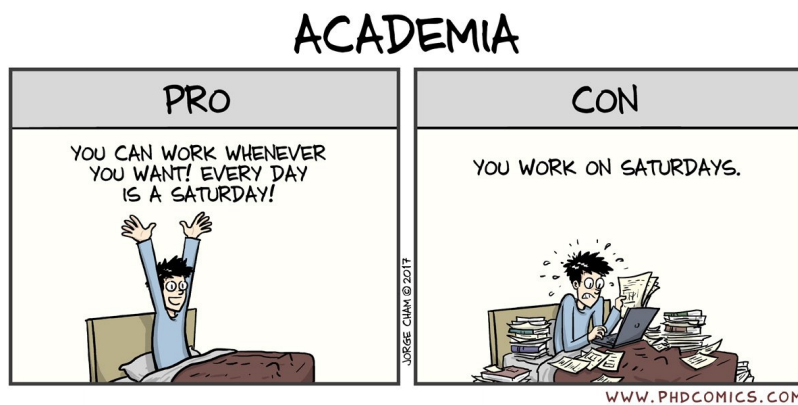
April 12, 2024¹

The purpose of this documents is to be an unordered collection of (what I think is) good advice for young (and not so young) members of the academic community. This is a personal selection gathered from several academic mentoring workshops that I have attended or organized in the past years, and my own experience.

1: I have been inspired to start this document during the [ETAPS 2024 Mentoring Workshop](#) that I co-organized. It is an incomplete work in progress, and it is not clear if and when I will find the time to finish it. In the meanwhile the date indicates when I last updated it.

1	Tracking Working Hours	2
2	Doing Research	2
3	(Paper) Writing	3
4	(Paper) Rejections	3
4.1	Poor (Paper) Reviews . . .	4
5	Foreign Languages	4

1 Tracking Working Hours



I have seen this talked about in the following occasions, with different messages:

- ▶ **ETAPS 2022 Mentoring Workshop:** Peter Müller suggested tracking working hours to realize how much time is wasted procrastinating;
- ▶ **FLOC 2022 Mentoring Workshop:** Kristin Rozier told how tracking her working hours made her realize that sometimes it is necessary to rearrange office furniture to be more productive ;)
- ▶ **ETAPS 2024 Mentoring Workshop:** Raphaël Monat suggested tracking working hours to avoid overwork;

Her slides are available [here](#), and contain tons of other excellent advice on time management.

His slides are great and available [here](#).

2 Doing Research

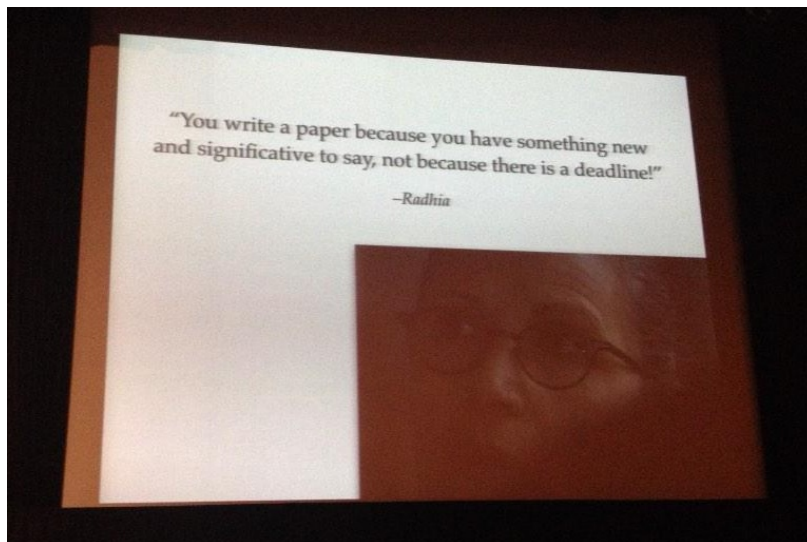
You need an idea.

(Patrick Cousot, École Normale Supérieure, 2012)

This is what Patrick Cousot replied when I told him that I was stuck at the beginning of my PhD. Like many, I was making the mistake of not realizing that doing a PhD was not the same as doing a Master's. I thought that the solution to my research problem was hidden in some book or some paper somewhere, and I just had to (re)search to find where it was. I had not realized that it was not even clear if my research problem had a solution in the first place. It did, and I found it, but only once I understood Patrick's advice and I started actually doing research to find the idea I needed.

See also [The illustrated guide to a PhD](#) by [Matt Might](#).

3 (Paper) Writing



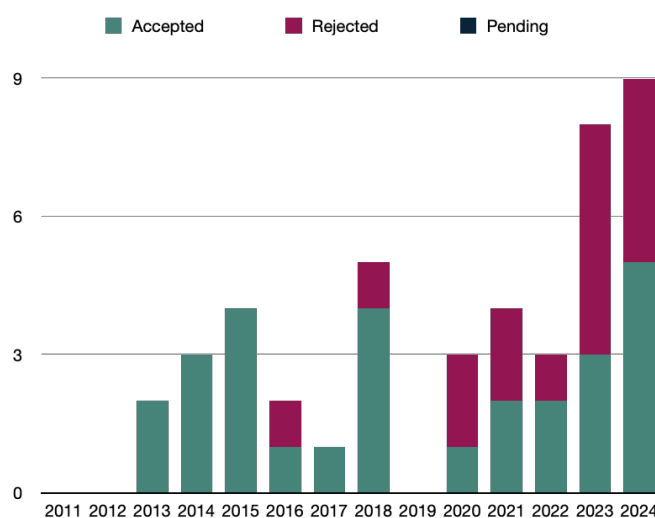
Words of advice from my late PhD advisor Radhia Cousot. From the memorial in her honor at [POPL 2015](#).

At almost every mentoring workshop there is a talk on how to write papers (but also research statements, proposals, etc.) so there are now tons of resources out there. A very incomplete list:

- ▶ [Stylish Academic Writing](#) by Helen Sword;
- ▶ [How to Write a Great Research Paper](#) by Simon Peyton-Jones;
- ▶ [How to Write a Good Research Paper](#) by Stephanie Weirich;
- ▶ [Researcher, Don't Make Your Readers Scream!](#) by Lawrence C. Paulson;
- ▶ [How to Write Papers So People Can Read Them](#) by Derek Dreyer;

4 (Paper) Rejections

Who never had a paper rejected? This is my current track record, from the beginning of my PhD:






For the curious, here are my rejection chains:

I had an unusually lucky track record during my PhD (I graduated in 2015). Someone told me I was not ambitious enough with the venues I was submitting my work to.

There is a period of adjustment for every time I changed job: I started my postdoc at the end of 2015 (hence the drop in number of paper submissions in 2016), and I started at my current position at the beginning of 2019 (hence the drop in 2019).

Plus, I was on maternity leave at the end of 2018, and in 2021 and 2023. One can see that having my first child required a much bigger adjustment than my other two ;)

IJCAR 2016 → 
 ESOP 2018 → SAS 2018
 PLDI 2020 → OOPSLA 2020
 SAS 2020 → 
 CAV 2021 → SAS 2021
 AIES 2021 → CIKM 2021
 ATVA 2022 → NFM 2023
 AISTATS 2023 → ICML 2023 → CIKM 2023 → VMCAI 2024
 PLDI 2023 → OOPSLA 2023 → POPL 2024 → ESOP 2024 → TASE 2024
 POPL 2024 → NFM 2024
 NFM 2024 → 

4.1 Poor (Paper) Reviews

I cannot count how many times I heard complaints about receiving very poor reviews. Almost always the person is complaining because their work got rejected, and a rejection is much tougher to digest when we think that the reviewers have done a bad job.

Do reviewers sometimes do a bad job? Yes. Reviewing is a burden. Necessary, useful, interesting, but still a burden that gets in the way of the huge pile of other things that accumulate in our todo lists. As a result, reviews sometimes (often, for some) are done just to get the job done and out of the way.

Do I think that reviewers are always right? Unpopular opinion but also yes. However poor the review is, it is what another person could think of when reading the work and rushing to get their review done. If I do not like what they wrote, it does not matter how loudly I complain about it on social networks, to the PC chairs, and to the people around me. The only thing that really matters is how to revise the work so that the next reviewers cannot use the same weapons against it.

5 Foreign Languages

If you are living in a country where you do not learn the language you are living in the wrong country

(Jasmin Blanchette, ETAPS 2024 Mentoring Workshop)

I moved to France for my PhD and, at first, I did not speak a word of French. Sitting in the office and not understanding what people were saying around me felt very isolating. At the same time, for me, this was a strong motivation to learn the language and my efforts paid off quickly as I soon felt integrated. The fact that I could speak French also made a difference and opened several doors for me further down the road. I know others that did not find the same motivation because learning the language would not directly contribute to their work and thus it was not a priority. As a result, they still do not feel integrated even after several years in the country. A pity, and also a missed opportunity.