

Logic Mentoring Workshop

23 June 2025

# THOUGHTS ON WRITING (AND READING)

Elena Di Savore  
University of Oxford

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 Truss (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  
" $Q_{\text{sem}}$ " "Suppose that  $T$  is monoidal" " $\mathfrak{A}$ "
- Reviewers will thank a well-written submission

# MINIMISE SUFFERING

- clive 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 magnus 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