

Zeitschrift: L'Enseignement Mathématique
Herausgeber: Commission Internationale de l'Enseignement Mathématique
Band: 16 (1970)
Heft: 1: L'ENSEIGNEMENT MATHÉMATIQUE

Artikel: HOW TO WRITE MATHEMATICS
Autor: Halmos, P. R.
Kapitel: 11. DO AND DO NOT REPEAT
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-43857>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 16.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

lected his wits and caught on to the trick that was played on him, it makes an undesirable separation between the statement of the theorem and its official label.)

This is not to say that the theorem is to appear with no introductory comments, preliminary definitions, and helpful motivations. All that comes first; the statement comes next; and the proof comes last. The statement of the theorem should consist of one sentence whenever possible: a simple implication, or, assuming that some universal hypotheses were stated before and are still in force, a simple declaration. Leave the chit-chat out: “Without loss of generality we may assume ...” and “Moreover it follows from Theorem 1 that ...” do not belong in the statement of a theorem.

Ideally the statement of a theorem is not only one sentence, but a short one at that. Theorems whose statement fills almost a whole page (or more!) are hard to absorb, harder than they should be; they indicate that the author did not think the material through and did not organize it as he should have done. A list of eight hypotheses (even if carefully so labelled) and a list of six conclusions do not a theorem make; they are a badly expounded theory. Are all the hypotheses needed for each conclusion? If the answer is no, the badness of the statement is evident; if the answer is yes, then the hypotheses probably describe a general concept that deserves to be isolated, named, and studied.

11. DO AND DO NOT REPEAT

One important rule of good mathematical style calls for repetition and another calls for its avoidance.

By repetition in the first sense I do not mean the saying of the same thing several times in different words. What I do mean, in the exposition of a precise subject such as mathematics, is the word-for-word repetition of a phrase, or even many phrases, with the purpose of emphasizing a slight change in a neighboring phrase. If you have defined something, or stated something, or proved something in Chapter 1, and if in Chapter 2 you want to treat a parallel theory or a more general one, it is a big help to the reader if you use the same words in the same order for as long as possible, and then, with a proper roll of drums, emphasize the difference. The roll of drums is important. It is not enough to list six adjectives in one definition, and re-list five of them, with a diminished sixth, in the second. That's the thing to do, but what helps is to say, in addition: “Note that the

first five conditions in the definitions of p and q are the same; what makes them different is the weakening of the sixth.”

Often in order to be able to make such an emphasis in Chapter 2 you'll have to go back to Chapter 1 and rewrite what you thought you had already written well enough, but this time so that its parallelism with the relevant part of Chapter 2 is brought out by the repetition device. This is another illustration of why the spiral plan of writing is unavoidable, and it is another aspect of what I call the organization of the material.

The preceding paragraphs describe an important kind of mathematical repetition, the good kind; there are two other kinds, which are bad.

One sense in which repetition is frequently regarded as a device of good teaching is that the oftener you say the same thing, in exactly the same words, or else with slight differences each time, the more likely you are to drive the point home. I disagree. The second time you say something, even the vaguest reader will dimly recall that there was a first time, and he'll wonder if what he is now learning is exactly the same as what he should have learned before, or just similar but different. (If you tell him “I am now saying *exactly* what I first said on p. 3”, that helps.) Even the dimmest such wonder is bad. Anything is bad that unnecessarily frightens, irrelevantly amuses, or in any other way distracts. (Unintended double meanings are the woe of many an author's life.) Besides, good organization, and, in particular, the spiral plan of organization discussed before is a substitute for repetition, a substitute that works much better.

Another sense in which repetition is bad is summed up in the short and only partially inaccurate precept: never repeat a proof. If several steps in the proof of Theorem 2 bear a very close resemblance to parts of the proof of Theorem 1, that's a signal that something may be less than completely understood. Other symptoms of the same disease are: “by the same technique (or method, or device, or trick) as in the proof of Theorem 1 ...”, or, brutally, “see the proof of Theorem 1”. When that happens the chances are very good that there is a lemma that is worth finding, formulating, and proving, a lemma from which both Theorem 1 and Theorem 2 are more easily and more clearly deduced.

12. THE EDITORIAL WE IS NOT ALL BAD

One aspect of expository style that frequently bothers beginning authors is the use of the editorial “we”, as opposed to the singular “I”, or the neutral