

7. Organize always

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before or after it's written, even if you don't plan to print section titles. The purpose is to test how well the section is planned: if you cannot find a title, the reason may be that the section doesn't have a single unified subject.) Sometimes I write tomorrow's first sentence today; some authors begin today by revising and rewriting the last page or so of yesterday's work. In any case, end each work session on an up-beat; give your subconscious something solid to feed on between sessions. It's surprising how well you can fool yourself that way; the pump-priming technique is enough to overcome the natural human inertia against creative work.

7. ORGANIZE ALWAYS

Even if your original plan of organization was detailed and good (and especially if it was not), the all-important job of organizing the material does not stop when the writing starts; it goes on all the way through the writing and even after.

The spiral plan of writing goes hand in hand with the spiral plan of organization, a plan that is frequently (perhaps always) applicable to mathematical writing. It goes like this. Begin with whatever you have chosen as your basic concept—vector spaces, say—and do right by it: motivate it, define it, give examples, and give counterexamples. That's Section 1. In Section 2 introduce the first related concept that you propose to study—linear dependence, say—and do right by it: motivate it, define it, give examples, and give counterexamples, and then, this is the important point, review Section 1, as nearly completely as possible, from the point of view of Section 2. For instance: what examples of linearly dependent and independent sets are easily accessible within the very examples of vector spaces that Section 1 introduced? (Here, by the way, is another clear reason why the spiral plan of writing is necessary: you may think, in Section 2, of examples of linearly dependent and independent sets in vector spaces that you forgot to give as examples in Section 1.) In Section 3 introduce your next concept (of course just what that should be needs careful planning, and, more often, a fundamental change of mind that once again makes spiral writing the right procedure), and, after clearing it up in the customary manner, review Sections 1 and 2 from the point of view of the new concept. It works, it works like a charm. It is easy to do, it is fun to do, it is easy to read, and the reader is helped by the firm organizational scaffolding, even if he doesn't bother to examine it and see where the joins come and how they support one another.

The historical novelist's plots and subplots and the detective story writer's hints and clues all have their mathematical analogues. To make the point by way of an example: much of the theory of metric spaces could be developed as a "subplot" in a book on general topology, in unpretentious comments, parenthetical asides, and illustrative exercises. Such an organization would give the reader more firmly founded motivation and more insight than can be obtained by inexorable generality, and with no visible extra effort. As for clues: a single word, first mentioned several chapters earlier than its definition, and then re-mentioned, with more and more detail each time as the official treatment comes closer and closer, can serve as an inconspicuous, subliminal preparation for its full-dress introduction. Such a procedure can greatly help the reader, and, at the same time, make the author's formal work much easier, at the expense, to be sure, of greatly increasing the thought and preparation that goes into his informal prose writing. It's worth it. If you work eight hours to save five minutes of the reader's time, you have saved over 80 man-hours for each 1000 readers, and your name will be deservedly blessed down the corridors of many mathematics buildings. But remember: for an effective use of subplots and clues, something very like the spiral plan of organization is indispensable.

The last, least, but still very important aspect of organization that deserves mention here is the correct arrangement of the mathematics from the purely logical point of view. There is not much that one mathematician can teach another about that, except to warn that as the size of the job increases, its complexity increases in frightening proportion. At one stage of writing a 300-page book, I had 1000 sheets of paper, each with a mathematical statement on it, a theorem, a lemma, or even a minor comment, complete with proof. The sheets were numbered, any which way. My job was to indicate on each sheet the numbers of the sheets whose statement must logically come before, and then to arrange the sheets in linear order so that no sheet comes after one on which it's mentioned. That problem had, apparently, uncountably many solutions; the difficulty was to pick one that was as efficient and pleasant as possible.

8. WRITE GOOD ENGLISH

Everything I've said so far has to do with writing in the large, global sense; it is time to turn to the local aspects of the subject.