

# Comments on Style

James R. Munkres

To write in good mathematical style, you should:

- (1) Write in complete sentences.
- (2) Punctuate! (Correctly, if possible.)
- (3) Write legibly. (An illegible proof is incorrect by definition.)
- (4) Avoid the “stream of consciousness” style popularized by William Faulkner. When you finish a thought, stop, put down a period, and take a good breath before you begin the next sentence (with a capital letter, please).
- (5) Steer a middle ground between too much detail and not enough. Give reasons for your answer sufficient to convince your reader (in this case, the grader) that your argument is correct and you know why it is correct. But do not fill the pages by checking each tiny detail in writing; it only bores your reader and gives you writer’s cramp. At one extreme of style are those sparsely-written texts (such as Rudin) that require the reader to ponder each sentence and fill in most of the details. At the other extreme are those solutions written by your most conscientious fellow-student, so full of details that the basic idea is invisible! Try to hit somewhere in the middle.
- (6) Do not use mathematical symbols as parts of speech in an ordinary sentence. Bad examples:
  - “Consider the set of all numbers  $< 1$ .”
  - “Consider the  $\cap$  of the sets  $A$  and  $B$ .”
  - “Consider a function  $f$  mapping  $A \rightarrow B$ .”Here is how to write these sentences correctly:
  - “Consider the set of all numbers less than 1.” or “Consider the set of all numbers  $x$  such that  $x < 1$ .”
  - “Consider the intersection of the sets  $A$  and  $B$ .” or “Consider the set  $A \cap B$ .”
  - “Consider a function  $f$  mapping  $A$  into  $B$ .” or “Consider a function  $f : A \rightarrow B$ .”
- (7) Do not use logical symbols **at all**. The symbols  $\exists$ ,  $\ni$ ,  $\forall$ ,  $\exists!$ ,  $\wedge$ ,  $\vee$ , as well as the abbreviations s.t., w.r.t., are to be avoided in mathematical writing. In papers in logic, these symbols constitute part of the subject matter and are completely appropriate. In informal mathematical discourse, on blackboard or paper, they are often used as “parts of speech,” in a sort of mathematical shorthand. However, they are not allowed by editors in formal mathematics writing. Just as you would not submit a history paper that is written partly in secretarial shorthand, do not submit a math paper written partly in mathematical shorthand!

- (8) One exception to the rule in (7) is the use of the symbols  $\Rightarrow$  (implies),  $\Leftarrow$  (is implied by), and  $\Leftrightarrow$  (is equivalent to). One of course does not use these symbols as word-substitutes, any more than one uses  $<$  or  $+$  or  $\cap$  as word-substitutes. But usage is allowed in phrases such as: “We show  $(a) \Rightarrow (b) \Rightarrow (c)$ ,” or “To show that  $(a)$  and  $(b)$  are equivalent, it suffices to show  $(a) \Rightarrow (b)$  and  $(b) \Rightarrow (a)$ .”

There is a reason why editors (at least those who are also mathematicians) enforce rule (7) strictly. Most mathematical readers find sentences in which this rule is violated quite unreadable, just as they find secretarial shorthand unreadable. They translate the sentence into the English language (or French, or German, or ...) mentally, before attempting to understand it. Occasionally a text-book editor (who is usually not a mathematician) will let an author get away with violating these rules. Here is a horrendous example, quoted from a well-known text, verbatim:

Let  $f : [0, 9) \rightarrow [0, \Omega)$  be s.t.  $f(\alpha) < \alpha$  for all  $\alpha \geq$  some  $\alpha_0$ . Then  $\exists \beta_0 \forall \beta \exists \alpha \geq \beta : f(\alpha) < \beta_0$ .

Some people can grasp the meaning of these two sentences immediately; most mathematicians cannot!

P.S. In this passage,  $[0, \Omega)$  denotes the minimal uncountable ordered set, or what we sometimes call  $S_\Omega$ . Can you rewrite this passage understandably?