Attributes of Writing Economics

- The discourse is often mathematical, with lots of formulas, lemmas, and proofs.
- Writing styles vary widely. Some authors are very dry and technical while a few are quite eloquent.

Economics writing is different from many other types of writing. It is essentially technical, and the primary goal is to achieve clarity. A clear presentation will allow the strength of your underlying analysis and the quality of your research to shine through.

Unlike prose writing in other disciplines, economics research takes time. Successful papers are not cranked out the night before a due date.

General Guidelines for Quality Research

Getting Started

The hardest part of any writing assignment is starting. Economics research usually begins with a strong understanding of literature, and papers require a section that summarizes and applies previous literature to what the paper at hand. This is the best way to start.

Your writing will demonstrate that you understand the findings that relate to the topic.

Structure

Economists use the first few paragraphs to set up research questions and the model and data they use to think about it. Sure, it can be dry, but this format ensures the write and reader have strong grasp on the subject and structure of the work that follows.

Clear and Concise Work

Clarity is hard to achieve, but revising and reworking a paper ensures it is easy to read

- Organize your ideas into an argument with the help of an outline.
- Define the important terms you will use
- State your hypothesis and proceed deductively to reach your conclusions
- Avoid excess verbiage
- Edit yourself, remove what is not needed, and keep revising until you get down to a simple, efficient way of communicating
- Use the active voice
- Put statements in positive form
- Omit needless words (concise writing is clear writing)
- In summaries, generally stick to one tense

Time Management

Poor time management can wreck the best-planned papers. Deadlines are key to successful research papers.

- Start the project by finding your topic
- Begin your research
- Start and outline
- Write a draft
- Revise and polish
The language of Economic Analysis

Economic theory has become very mathematical. Most PhD students are mathematicians, not simply economics majors. This means most quality economic research requires a strong use of mathematical language. Economic analysis is characterized by the use of models, simplified representations of how economic phenomena work. A model’s predictions about the future or the past are essentially empirical hypotheses. Since economics is not easily tested in controlled experiments, research requires data from the real world (census reports, balance sheets), and statistical methods (regressions and econometrics) to test the predictive power of models and hypotheses based on those models.

The Writing Process

Finding a Topic

There are a million ways to find a topic. It may be that you are writing for a specific subfield of economics, so topics are limited and thus easier to pick. However, must research starts organically, from passive reading or striking news articles. Make sure to find something that interests you. Be sure to find a niche and make a contribution to the subfield.

You will also need a project that can be done within the parameters of the assignment (length, due date, access to research materials). A profoundly interesting topic may not be manageable given the time and other constraints you face. The key is to just be practical.

Be sure to start your research as soon as possible. Your topic will evolve along the way, and the question you begin with may become less interesting as new information draws you in other directions. It is perfectly fine to shape your topic based on available data, but don’t get caught up in endlessly revising topics.

Finding and Using Sources

There are two types of economic sources: empirical data (information that is or can be easily translated into numerical form), and academic literature (books and articles that help you organize your ideas).

Economic data is compiled into a number of useful secondary sources:

- Economic Report of the President
- Statistical Abstract of the United States
- National Longitudinal Survey
- Census data
- Academic journals

The Outline

A good outline acts as an agenda for the things you want to accomplish:

- Introduction: Pose an interesting question or problem
- Literature Review: Survey the literature on your topic
- Methods/Data: Formulate your hypothesis and describe your data
- Results: Present your results with the help of graphs and charts
- Discussion: Critique your method and/or discuss any policy implications
- Conclusions: Summarize what you have done; pose questions for further research

Writing a Literature Review

The literature review demonstrates your familiarity with scholarly work on your topic and lays the foundations for your paper. The particular issues you intend to raise, the terms you will employ, and the approach you will take should be defined with reference to previous scholarly works.
Presenting a Hypothesis

Formulate a question, problem or conjecture, and describe the approach you will take to answer, solve, or test it. In presenting your hypothesis, you need to discuss the data set you are using and the type of regression you will run. You should say where you found the data, and use a table, graph, or simple statistics to summarize them. In term papers, it may not be possible to reach conclusive results. Don’t be afraid to state this clearly and accurately. It is okay to have an inconclusive paper, but it is not okay to make overly broad and unsupported statements.

Presenting Results

There are essentially two decisions to make: (1) How many empirical results should be presented, and (2) How should these results be described in the text?

• Focus only on what is important and be as clear as possible. Both smart and dumb readers will appreciate you pointing things out directly and clearly.
• Less is usually more: Reporting a small group of relevant results is better than covering every possible statistical analysis that could be made on the data.
• Clearly and precisely describe your tables, graphs, and figures in the text of your results section. The first and last sentence in a paragraph describing a result should be “big picture” statements, describing how the results in the table, graph or figure fit into the overall theme of the paper.

Discussing Results

The key to discussing results is to stay clear of making value judgments, and rely instead on economic facts and analyses. It is not the job of an economist to draw policy conclusions, even if the research supports strong evidence in a particular direction.

Referencing Sources

As with any research paper, source referencing depends on the will of a professor a discourse community. However, economists generally use soft references in the literature review section and then cite sources in conventional formats at the end of papers.