

Tips for Second Year Paper (and other) Authors

Important Stuff

Students tend to underestimate the importance of writing. Often, they work frantically, say, on getting empirical results, but leave the writing to the last minute. In fact, most academics will tell you that putting it down on paper is half the job. You should aim to have a paper available for review by August and then spend the next six weeks on polishing the writing and filling in the gaps in your analysis.

It's a good idea to put together a draft of your paper as soon as possible, especially the introduction. Some of the best academics will not even begin to write a paper until they've put together an introduction that they think will convince others that the paper will ask an interesting question and that the research is worth pursuing. (Harry Johnson is famous for the quip "Something not worth doing is not worth doing well"). Chase down references to make sure that you aren't rediscovering the wheel. Often the introduction will evolve as you make progress on the paper, but you should think about it as soon as possible. Getting an early draft out has a number of advantages. It's much easier to comment on your work if it's written and so you'll get better advice from your colleagues and supervisor if they can read a rough draft. In fact, even including section titles alone (without the results) helps to make it clearer what you intend to do. An additional benefit from writing early drafts is that you can see the structure of your own arguments more clearly and often can gain an understanding of what needs to be done to make the paper more complete.

Things to aim for in the final draft:

1. Your introduction should put your paper into perspective. How does it fit into the literature and what are the paper's contributions? Cite relevant and closely related papers, but don't spend too much time on the literature review for its own sake. Get on to presenting your own work.
2. Avoid unnecessary tangents. Your paper should be focused on one or two key questions. Make sure that you spend the space required to make your points, but evaluate each section from a critical perspective: Does the paper need this section to make my point or can I simplify? The optimal lengths of the different parts of a paper are usually only weakly related to the amount of time they took to complete.
3. Anticipate the critical response to your arguments and your evidence. Take space in your paper to address the questions and doubts that you expect will be raised in your reader's mind.

Small things that make your paper look more professional (and you look less stupid)

1. Get your paper in on time. It's due in early September. Although you may have a few more weeks after that date for polishing, there is no excuse for handing in the paper the day before it is to be presented.
2. Learn how to make pdf or ps files so that they are readable by others. Don't leave this to the last minute. Acquire the necessary skills during the summer so that you can work on substantive problems in the last days before your paper is due.
3. If your paper has a lot of equations, make the investment and learn how to use LaTeX (or Tex or Scientific Word).
4. Use a spell-checker. There is no excuse for subjecting the reader to page after page of spelling mistakes!
5. Make sure that all works cited in the paper appear in the list of references.
6. Provide a complete reference, i.e. author, title, journal, etc. Follow the style guide for one of the major journals.
7. Make sure that all Tables and Figures are properly labelled and that they can be read and understood without reading the text.
8. Eliminate basic grammatical errors. Use articles (both definite and indefinite) when needed. Make sure that your sentences are complete (i.e. have both a subject and a verb). Make sure the subject and verb agree (first/second/third person, singular/plural). Do not switch back and forth between tenses in the same sentence or within the same paragraph. Don't use adjectives to modify a verb or adverbs to modify a noun.
8. Eliminate poor grammatical choices. Avoid the passive voice. Avoid the "royal we". Avoid pronouns when their use may cause confusion.

Claudia Goldin's Ten Rules for Writing Economics Papers (Sept 2002, from the Harvard web site)

Rule #1 *You will probably not have a great idea.* Theorem #1: You can always transform a good idea into a great paper and a great presentation. Theorem #2 Even if you have a great idea, you can always make it into a poor paper and a lousy presentation. This theorem will probably never be needed. See Rule #1.

Rule #2 *The insights of your paper will first be judged by how you present them.* If your paper is written in an unprofessional manner, your empirical work, mathematical proof or model will be viewed with initial skepticism.

Rule #3 *Your paper is an exercise in persuasion* (I mean in positive not normative economics). Your readers are your audience. They have better things to do than read your paper. Make them interested in your thesis and convinced of your argument.

Rule #4 *No great paper no matter how well constructed, brilliant, and well written first emerged from the author's printer in that form.* It was rewritten at least 20 times. Rewriting is the true art of the writing.

Rule #5 *No author no matter how humble can see all (or even most) of his or her writing errors.* Trade papers with another student. Be tough; there will be some initial pain, but gratitude will follow.

Rule #6 *Most paragraphs have too many sentences and most sentences have too many words.* Repetition is boring. I repeat: repetition is boring.

Rule #7 *The foot-in-the-door parts of your written work are the abstract and introduction.* Write them clearly and concisely. The abstract is not simply the first paragraph of your paper (or the last paragraph for that matter).

Rule #8 *Verbalizing your argument is more difficult than writing it.* Giving a presentation on your paper will reveal to you where your argument falls flat and will show you how to redraft the paper. Give many presentations before you send out your paper. Give them to your workshop and your friends. Even giving them to your dog, cat, or the wall will force you to confront the inconsistencies in your argument.

Rule #9 *Be your own worst enemy. If you won't someone else will.*

Rule #10 *There are many other rules. I cannot cover all of them. A few are:*

- All tables and figures must have enough information to allow the reader to figure out how to replicate them, even if the source is see Data Appendix
- Use Appendixes for descriptions of data sources, certain proofs, and other matters. For empirical work, make certain that your work could be replicated.
- ..
- Use meaningful variable names. You may know ps102, plop49, and oink34 like the back of your hand, but they don't mean a thing to your reader.
- Don't present every result you have ever produced. Boring. Ask yourself what you need in the presentation and include that. Use an Appendix for other results.

- Check for typos, spelling errors, missing pages, incorrect table or figure numbers, missing references, and the like. These are the cockroaches of writing. Eradicate them.
- Use a style manual or a journal as a guide for references, footnotes, etc. Consistency is what matters.

Here are 2 helpful books on economics writing.

Economical Writing (2nd edition, Waveland Press) by Deirdre McCloskey (Economics, Rhetoric, Philosophy; University of Illinois)

From the book jacket: If you want to be read (and who doesn't) and remembered (better yet) *Economical Writing* is for you. This entertaining volume will teach you how to write meaningful and joyful economics. A dose of McCloskey banishes the dismal from the dismal science. McCloskey is the Strunk and White of economics and *Economical Writing* should be required reading for all economists.

A Guide for the Young Economist (MIT Press, 2001) by William Thomson (Economics; University of Rochester)

This book is an invaluable guide for young economists working on their dissertations, preparing their first articles for submission to professional journals, getting ready for their first presentations at conferences and job seminars, or facing their first refereeing assignments. In clear, concise language—a model for what he advocates—William Thomson shows how to make written and oral presentations both inviting and efficient. Thomson covers the basics of clear exposition, including such nuts-and-bolts topics as titling papers, writing abstracts, presenting research results, and holding an audience's attention.

See also: William Thomson "The Young Person's Guide to Writing Economic Theory," *Journal of Economic Literature* 37 (March 1999): 157-83.