Guidelines for Writing Papers in Economics

This handout is designed to provide you with a brief introduction to writing economics papers. In order to make this handout as user-friendly as possible, I have written it in a “question and answer” format.

What is special about economics papers? Not much. As with papers written for your other courses, your economics paper should be clearly written, you should obey the laws of English grammar, and you should carefully proofread the final draft of your paper. However, economics papers do possess a few unique characteristics. You will be discussing graphs and/or math in your economics paper, and you must do this in a manner that is clear and concise. Your reader needs to understand the graphs/equations that you have included in your analysis, yet you do not want to turn your economics paper into a lab report. Economics is a social science, and your paper should read that way. Furthermore, you should strive to write concisely. More isn’t always better.

One mistake that students commonly make is that they fail to discuss the tables, graphs, charts, or maps that they include in their papers. You should always refer to these “extras” in the text of your paper, and you must explain their significance! For example, if you attach a map to your paper, then you should tell your reader what the map shows and – more importantly – you should tell your reader why they are looking at the map. And, while this should be obvious, please keep in mind that simply including the map at the end of your paper is useless if you don’t tell your reader that it is there.

What rules do I need to follow for citing other authors’ works? I suggest that you look at a writing handbook, and I have included a short list at the end of this handout. You must cite anything that you have taken directly from another author. Examples of this include: direct quotes, close paraphrasing, and bits of information that are not common knowledge. In general, if you have a doubt about whether or not something should be cited, then you should cite it. If you have questions about this, then please come by and talk to me.

What format should I use for my citations? I don’t care what format you use, but you should use one of the many “widely” accepted formats. Remember, there are two reasons that you cite a source. First, you want to give credit where credit is due. Second, you want to allow your reader to find the source that you used so that the reader can use the source to learn about the topic that you are writing about.

While I do not care what citation format you use, I would recommend the following:

Author Date Citations

For example, if you were to cite one of my articles, then you might place the following at the end of the relevant sentence:

(Smith 2003)

Please note: If you use author date citations, then you must provide the appropriate Works Cited page at the end of the paper. The correct listing for my article would look like this:

If you had quoted my article, then you would need to modify your citation. For example, a quote from page 142 would be cited using the following format:

(Smith 2003, 142)

Finally, if you consulted two works by me, and they were published in the same year, then you would need to modify the citation in the following way:

(Smith 2003a)

The listings on the Works Cited page would look like this:


**What should my final draft look like?** Your final draft should be typed, double spaced, and the font should be size ten or larger. The margins should be approximately an inch on each side. Graphs, tables, charts, and pages of equations/math do not count towards the page limit. If the page limit for your assignment is three pages, then you should not submit a five-page document. A portion of the assignment is to determine if you can write about a difficult subject in a clear, concise manner.

Your final draft must do the following: All of your tables, charts, graphs, etc. should be labeled and included in the document in sequential order. Furthermore, you must discuss the tables, charts, graphs, etc. in sequential order in the text of your document. Do not discuss table 16, then table 4 then table 7.

**Are there any sources I should avoid?** You should avoid relying too much on the Internet. You should rely first and foremost on commonly accepted sources – peer reviewed journal articles, edited volumes, and books from reputable publishers. There is a lot of great stuff on the Internet, but you should always be careful when using Internet sources. In particular, you should be very careful about the biases that your sources may have. It is fine to use information from a liberal or conservative think tank, but you should know that they are looking to push an agenda. These documents may – or may not – look to address research questions or policy issues from an objective stance. Furthermore, not all think tanks are created equal. Some think tanks are very upfront about their perspectives; others are not. Finally, you should never cite an article from Wikipedia. Please feel free to use Wikipedia for background reading, but it should never appear as a source in a research paper that you complete for my class.

**How important is the introduction?** It would be impossible for me to overstate the importance of writing a good introduction. Your introduction provides the "hook" that will cause your reader to want to read your work. A poorly crafted introduction will leave your reader feeling ambivalent – at best – about reading the rest of the paper!

**Any hints?**

1. Spell checking a paper is not the same as proofreading. Their is not the same as there. Its and it’s are not the same. Affect and effect are different words! A spell checker will not catch these mistakes, so re-read your final draft.

2. You must cite the source for your data. You didn’t collect the data (at least not initially), so you need to be sure to tell your reader how the data were obtained!
3. You will typically be given the opportunity to turn in a first draft, and I encourage you to take advantage of this opportunity. However, if you turn in a first draft, then you should be aware that I reserve the right to keep a Xerox of the draft. I will check to see if you have (at least) corrected the mistakes that I have found. Do not turn in a rough draft if you have no intention of using my comments to better your paper!

4. Avoid the passive voice (when you can).

5. **You must** have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. If you fail to include an introduction and a conclusion, then you will not receive an "A" grade on the paper. It is essential that your paper be organized, and it is impossible for a paper to be well organized without an introduction and a conclusion.

6. If you have created your tables or maps in color, then don’t print them out in black and white! The colors will make the table and maps come to life, and if you print out color documents in black in white they become very difficult to read/interpret.

7. Use the resources available to you. Ask your roommate to read your paper. Take your paper to the writing center. Have me read your paper. In other words, don’t be afraid to get help!

**Sources to Consult:**

McCloskey, Deirdre; *Economical Writing*; Waveland Press
