



NO. 61 IN THE WRITING CENTER HANDOUT SERIES

Writing in Economics

As in all disciplines, writing an economics paper is a skill that takes lots of practice. You should strive for clarity in economics papers: most ideas in economics are actually quite simple! Good economics papers have a clear thesis statement, coherent organization, and logical arguments. They are also free of spelling and grammatical errors.

Choosing a topic is perhaps both the most difficult and the most important part of writing an economics paper. Take care to choose a topic that is not too broad. Do some basic reading and research in order to narrow your topic to a question that can be asked in one or two sentences and can be answered within your page limit.

General tips:

- It is usually acceptable to use “I” in economics papers. Do not use the “royal we” in a paper that you have written by yourself. Using “we” is usually acceptable for group papers.
- Visit the Writing Center for help. Don’t wait until the night before your paper is due!
- Start writing early in the process of doing a research paper. You’ll probably end up substantially revising your words, but writing early in the research process can help clarify ideas, improve flow, and generate additional areas for research.
- Save often and make back-up copies. Computer failure is not a good excuse for failure to turn in a paper on time.

Suggestions for tables and graphs:

- Any tables and graphs should be explained clearly in the paper but should also be able clear enough to stand alone.
- Use titles, labels, and notes to make tables and graphs self-explanatory. Anyone should be able to understand the gist of your tables and graphs without having to read your paper. Do not include tables or graphs that are not referenced in the paper.
- Look at a few published articles to get ideas on how to do tables and graphs.

References:

- If you used any sources, include a references section that provides the citation information for all works cited for your paper. Note that this is not a bibliography that lists all the materials you read or consulted; it only lists the materials you cite in your paper.
- Most economics papers use in-text citation (also called parenthetical citation) instead of footnotes or endnotes. Footnotes are usually for material that is somewhat tangential to the main text and should be used sparingly.
- Works that are paraphrased can either be included directly in the sentence:
“Keynes (1922) argued that animal spirits. . .”
or cited at the end of a sentence:
“Animal spirits affect the business cycle (Keynes 1922).”
- For direct quotations, include the page number in the in-text citation.
- If a work has two authors, the authors are both listed upon each mention. Three authors are listed in full on first mention (and in the references section) and as “et al.” thereafter. Four or more are listed as “et al.” always.

(continued on reverse)



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Writing in Economics, continued

The following is a general guide for how to cite various materials in a reference section.

Journal articles:

Lazear, Edward P. (1986). "Salaries and Piece Rates." Journal of Business 59 (July): 405-31.

Books:

Abrams, Stephen Y. and Edward B. Brown (1999). The Stock Market. 2d ed. New York: Econ Publishers.

Chapter in an edited work:

Smith, Brian B. (1999). "Bouncing Ball Economics." pp. 100-124 in Economics Today, ed. Brian B. Smith and James A. Katchaturian. Leavenworth, KS: Thinking Person Press.

Working papers:

Hubbard, Robert G. (1994). "Is There a 'Credit Channel' for Monetary Policy?" Working Paper no. 4977, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA.

Internet sources:

U.S. Department of Agriculture. Agricultural Statistics of Former USSR Republics and Baltic States, 1996. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data/sdp/view.asp?f=international/93009/> (accessed May 16, 2001).

For more information on writing in economics, see:

McCloskey, Donald (1985). "Economical Writing." Economic Inquiry 23(April): 187-222.

McCloskey, Deidre (1999). "Economical Writing: An Executive Summary." Eastern Economic Journal 25 (Spring): 239-242.

Wabash College's Guide to "Writing an Economics Term Paper," <http://www.wabash.edu/dept/economics/Student%20Resources/WritingGuide/TermPaper.html>.

Bates College's "Economics Writing Guide," <http://www.bates.edu/Prebuilt/economics-writing-guide.pdf>.