

ECON 8090: RESEARCH METHODS

Random Remarks on Writing

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No short list of dos and don'ts is going to make a good writer out of anyone. Indeed, you can work your way painstakingly through a shelf of reference works—Fowler's, Follett's, The Chicago Manual—mastering every tidbit, and still be a perfectly lousy writer. So I'm not pretending to do here what those lengthy guides alone can't possibly do. Instead, I'm offering a few positive suggestions that I think especially important, along with a short list of pet peeves.

Some suggestions:

1) Expose yourself to good writing. It's simple: the better the prose you read, the better the prose you write. You pick up good writing habits from good writers, and bad habits from bad ones, just as you tend to pick up good speaking habits from good speakers and bad speaking habits from bad ones.

Unfortunately for you, most academic writing is perfectly awful, so that you are likely to pick up some bad habits from all those journal articles you have to read in preparing your own research. Consequently you need to set some time aside for good prose. The most obvious place to look for it is in classic works of fiction; but you can also read some of the better so-called "literary historians," like Macaulay, Prescott, and Gibbon. (All three have authored multi-volume works, but you need only read some selections of each: try, for example, Macaulay's famous chapter on "The State of England in 1685"—<http://www.strecorsoc.org/macaulay/m03a.html>; or Gibbon's controversial Chapter 15, concerning the progress of Christianity – <http://www.ccel.org/g/gibbon/decline/volume1/chap15.htm>.) Although each has his own unique voice, you'll be hard-pressed to find a grammatical lapse in anything they've written.

2) Write only when you have something to say. Writing can be rather like vomiting: unpleasant enough when you can do it; agonizing when you want to do it but

can't. Writing flows best, so to speak, when you have reached a point in your thoughts such that you absolutely have to get them out of your system, by putting them on paper. If, on the other hand, you try to write without having digested your thoughts first, you will find yourself experiencing the authorial equivalent of dry heaves. Much as it's worth getting something on paper, there is such a thing as trying to do so prematurely.

3) Remember that to write well is to *rewrite* well. Even the best prose writers seldom get things right the first time around. Instead, they revise, and revise, and revise again, sometimes going through a dozen versions or more, making slight improvements each time.

4) Read your work out loud. If what you've written sounds unnatural or awkward, it probably is. You will be surprised to catch yourself using terms and expressions that seem ridiculous when spoken out loud. For example, just try saying "The regressions were run utilizing the latest software" out loud. Do you sound like a robot? Compare that with: "I used the latest software to run the regressions." More natural? Of course it is — and it's better prose on that account.

5) Get help. Most people are at least partially blind to problems with their own prose, so having someone else read your work is a good way to improve it. Of course, the greater that person's own writing skills, the better. If you can't find any good volunteer, you can always pay for professional help. It may be worth it.

Pet Peeves:

1) Do not start your paper by referring to some recent work by other economists. Openings like "In recent years, there has been considerable research," or "Several recent studies..." have become clichés. Moreover, the fact that someone else has written about something, recently or not, is itself not a compelling reason for writing more about it. Unless you are making a contribution to the history of thought, your paper should appear to address, not someone else's research, but some economic problem or phenomena. If that problem or phenomena is worthy of readers' attention, then it is so whether or not others have already written about it.

2) Don't assume a phony voice. There is *nothing wrong* with using the first person voice when you are sole author of a work. On the contrary: it is far better to say

“I assume that the economy is a closed one, with a constant population” than “My model assumes...” or “A closed economy and constant population are assumed” or “We assume...” It is better because it is more honest.

So, say “I” if you are indeed the subject of your sentence. But don’t overdo it. For example, you don’t have to write, “I thus arrive at the result that the coefficient on income is negative,” when you can simply say, “The coefficient on income is negative.” The thing is that the coefficient here simply *is* negative, given the model and data employed; an assumption, on the other hand, has to be made by *someone*, so it’s best to reveal who made it. Get it?

Of course, if you have coauthors, you must generally employ “we” instead of “I.”

3) Don’t, please don’t, write “methodology” when you mean “method.” The suffix “logy” means “study of”. “Methodology” therefore means the study of methods. It follows that, while it’s perfectly proper to speak of, say, the *method* of undetermined coefficients, to speak of the *methodology* of undetermined coefficients, or of some econometric *methodology*, is to talk nonsense. Imagine someone pointing to a shooting star and saying, “Look up there: a *meteorology*!” Pretty stupid, right?

The reason this happens, by the way, is insecurity. One has doubts about the scientific merit of one’s work. One feels a need to...prop it up somehow. How to do this? Having lots of tables, figures, and equations helps. But here’s something easier: use fancy words (see below) or, where nothing comes to mind, add a syllable or two here and there to words already at hand.

Here’s a good principle to bear in mind when reading: the more vacuous their ideas, the more tempted authors are to dress them up in pseudo-scholarly jargon. No wonder bureaucrats (and business school teachers) feel compelled to coin such verbal monstrosities as “prioritize” and (even) “incentivise”!

4) avoid fancy words. What is it that makes an otherwise normal person write “utilize” instead of “use,” “delineate” instead of “show,” or “integer combination” instead of “addition” (I am not making this up!)? It is that same insecurity I just referred to; that lack of confidence concerning what it is that makes for a scholarly paper. So, let it be said once and for all: scholarship is not a matter of using unfamiliar or stilted words; still less is it a matter of using words incorrectly (a very *unscholarly* thing, that).

It is a matter of careful thought conveyed in the clearest possible way. When an author assails you with jargon, acronyms, unnecessary latinisms, or otherwise pretentious language, it's a good bet that he or she (observe: "they" is improper) is trying to make up for a lack of substance.

You will find a brief list of pretentious words and phrases, with unpretentious alternatives, here: <http://www3.sympatico.ca/bill.cutler/GG-PAGE2.HTM>

5) This one is admittedly a lost cause, but for my sake please do not use "due to" when you mean "because of" or "owing to." "Due to" is adjectival, which means that it modifies a noun. Example: In "His absence was due to a cold," "due to" modifies the subject noun "absence." "Owing to," on the other hand, is adverbial: it serves to modify a verb or verbal phrase. Example: "He was absent owing to a cold." Observe that "because" alone can replace "owing to," whereas "because of" replaces "due to."

6) Do not mismatch pronouns, subject nouns, and verbs. Every pronoun has its own gender and number, which should correspond to the gender and the number of the noun to which it refers. Simple, right? Yet almost every student paper I read gets it wrong. The error I see most often consists of using a plural personal pronoun (they/their) when a singular impersonal pronoun (it/its) is called for. Example: "The Federal Reserve lowered their discount rate." (The correct phrase is "*its* discount rate.")

Some people resort to "their" as a politically-correct substitute for "he" or "she" or "he or she" in sentences with a personal subject noun of unspecified gender. Example: "If a student's grade point average falls below 3.0, they lose their HOPE scholarship." Actually, any student who prefers being politically correct to writing a grammatically-correct sentence *ought* to lose *his or her* HOPE scholarship.

7) Don't use vague words when precise alternatives are available. For example, don't write "In the short run, the unemployment rate is correlated with the inflation rate" if the evidence allows you to conclude that "In the short run, inflation and unemployment tend to move in opposite directions." (If the magnitude matters, you could go further by supplying an actual correlation coefficient.) Although resorting to vague words reduces the risk of saying something wrong, it also reduces the likelihood of saying anything valuable at all!