

Economics 8090 :
RESEARCH METHODS
Syllabus, Fall 2007
Prof. G. Selgin

Description: It's tempting to describe this class as a sort of “finishing school” for economics Ph.D. students. But that would perhaps be selling it short. In fact, it might be more accurate to call the core classes you've taken so far “starting school,” for they “merely” remind you of some basic economics principles, while teaching you techniques for writing down and solving formal models and for running regressions. This class is supposed to teach you *everything else* you need to know to be a successful economist, including the nuts-and-bolts of research and writing.

There are no full-length lectures. Instead, the class is an exercise in learning by doing: we generally meet just long enough each week for me to introduce some aspect of “the job,” give some pointers concerning it, address questions, and discuss an assignment aimed at honing your skills. (The exceptions will mainly have to do with exercises involving the entire class, as when students present their work.) Collectively the small assignments are designed to add up to a one large assignment: the beginnings of an actual research project which, with luck, may serve as the starting point for your dissertation.

Schedule, Readings, and Assignments: The course is divided into five parts reflecting the stages of research: (I) Deciding (two weeks); (II) Reading (two weeks); (III) Researching (two weeks); (IV) Writing (four weeks); (V) Presenting (three weeks); (VI) Publishing (two weeks). Each Arabic number in the schedule below represents a week, not a class meeting, with the assignment for the week following the number. In general assignments are due one week after they have been given. Because this class is relatively new, the schedule is tentative: be prepared for changes along the way.

The assigned texts, which should be available at the University Bookstore, are: *The Craft of Research*, 2nd. ed., by Wayne Booth, Gregory Colomb, and Joseph Williams (**CR**); *Doing Economics* by Steven Greenlaw (**DE**); *A Guide for the Young Economist* by William Thompson (**GYE**); and *Economical Writing*, 2nd ed., by Deirdre McCloskey (**EW**). Other assigned readings are available on-line or will be otherwise supplied.

Besides the assigned readings you are expected to do lots of reading related to your research topic. Obviously I can't provide you with a schedule for such reading, but I take for granted that you will read the equivalent of at least two journal articles per week, and preferably more than that: after all, to do good research you must know your subject!

Grades. Assignments are graded Acceptable or Unacceptable; you will be expected to revise and resubmit assignments until they are accepted. Acceptable assignments can earn up to **10** points of credit each. Letter grades will be based on total points earned, with the usual scale of grades (A = 90+; B = 80+, etc.). **Whether an assignment is acceptable or not will depend on its presentation, including writing quality, as well as on its content.** Unless otherwise instructed, you should include a cover page on all written assignments giving your name, date, and the number (e.g. 1 (a) for the first assignment

under topic 1 below) and brief name of the assignment. (A sample cover page can be viewed [here](#).) The text of your paper should be double-spaced throughout, left justified only, with numbered pages (the cover is not counted among these), standard margins, and no unusual fonts. *Pages must be stapled.* For further details consult any standard research-paper writing manual. See also my own "[Random Remarks on Writing.](#)" You will of course receive further instructions on writing in the course of the class, but you should have the basics (formatting etc.) down from the start.

Students are required to maintain a binder containing copies of all of their written assignments, in the order assigned. The completed binder is your record of work completed. Besides being of some potential value to you as you proceed with your dissertation research, it will prove valuable should I misplace any of your assignments.

I. Deciding . (CR 3 and 4)

0) (Introductory meeting). (a) Write a 3-4 page essay explaining (a) your reason for pursuing an economics Ph.D and (b) what field or fields interest you most and why. Please do not write something that sounds like it came from a textbook or econ. department webpage. I'm looking for a personal essay, giving your (preferably idiosyncratic) reasons for having chosen the discipline. **5 points.** (b) Read and be prepared to discuss Jim Buchanan's "[What Should Economists Do?](#)" and Deirdre McCloskey's "[Aunt Deirdre's Letter to a Graduate Student.](#)"

1) Using Galin, Google Scholar, and EconLit, find a *recent* book or long article surveying your chosen field, get hold of it, read it and submit a brief (1-3 page) review of it. Advice on writing a review can be found [here](#) and [here](#). **5 points.**

2) (a) Prepare a list of ten key issues of current interest in your chosen field, explaining the matter in layman's terms, and stating briefly what conclusions have been reached concerning it, and what points remain controversial; (b) Prepare a list of ten imaginary paper titles, each corresponding to one of the "open questions" mentioned in your other assignment. (Titles may be in question form, but they need not be.) Be creative! **5 points.**

II. Reading. (DE 3, 6 and pp. 236-9; CR 5-6)

3) Prepare a three-part bibliography for your chosen topic, the parts consisting of (a) books; (b) published articles and (c) online documents or working papers. Good coverage of recent and highly pertinent works is essential, but older "classics" should also be included; try keep the whole bibliography under 5 pages in length. Make a point of getting hold of as many of these works as possible: you will need them. A good, up-to-date survey article can save you loads of time. Try browsing the *JEL* and *JEP* contents for one (see <http://www.aeaweb.org/jep/contents> and <http://www.aeaweb.org/journal/contents>) **10 points.** [Here](#) (and in associated links) are some guidelines for preparing your bibliography.

4) Read up to four key works from your bibliography, preparing a one-page critical résumé of each that concludes with an assessment of its usefulness for your project. Try to

include a survey article among the four. *Do not crib from article abstracts: bear in mind that doing so is plagiarism, and that you will be asked to submit article copies with your résumé.* Also, a critical résumé is more than just an abstract: it should include your personal assessment of the work's merits and shortcomings in relation to your chosen research. **2 points per résumé.**

III. Researching . (DE 7-10; CR 7-11)

5) Prepare a four-page report concerning the *institutional* background (market structure, regulations, etc.) relevant to the issue you plan to investigate. Start with the basics, and offer some historical background as well as background concerning present circumstances
or

6) Prepare a report concerning available *statistics* and formal economic *models* that may prove helpful in your research. Make sure to indicate all sources clearly, and to point out any potentially problematic shortcomings of data or formal models you refer to. (Useful on-line data sources: http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/links/data_free.htm ; http://zimmer.csufresno.edu/~johnsh/econ/econ_EDL.htm ; <http://www.bized.ac.uk/dataserv/freedata.htm> (general); <http://www.econdata.net/> (U.S. regional); there are many other on-line sources for more specific data.) **5 points.**

IV. Writing . (DE 4-5 and 231-50; CR 2, 12-14, 16; GYE 1; EW (entire); Eric Rasmusen, "Aphorisms on Writing, Speaking, and Listening." You will also find several excellent short articles on writing for professional journals on the *Journal of Management*'s home page at <http://www.journalofmanagement.org/> . McCloskey offers the following "[Executive Summary](#)" of her *Economical Writing*; read it by all means but please don't treat it as a substitute for the book. Here, once again, are some of my own "[Random Remarks on Writing.](#)"

7) (a) Prepare a project proposal, as if writing for grant money. State the purpose of the intended research, explain why it is important and to whom, summarize the research strategy, and list major works you plan to draw and build upon. Aim the proposal at a *general* reader. Eight pages. (For guidance, with background on the NSF grant reviewing process, see Matthew Jackson and Laura Razzolini, "Postcards from the NSF," www.hss.caltech.edu/~jacksonm/nsfpost.pdf ; also see **DE** Appendix 2A.) **10 points.**

8) (a) Prepare a working outline for your paper. No boilerplate: each component should include some substance specific to your project. (For helpful hints and an example see <http://www.lvc.edu/psychology/guides/guide-outline.html> .) **5 points**; (b) (Class exercise) Re-write a section of the paper linked below, in accordance with McCloskey's suggestions. Collectively the class will re-write the entire paper. www.econ.ubc.ca/riddell/cprn.pdf. **10 points.**

9) (a) Prepare a three-page draft of the opening section of your paper, introducing your topic and motivating your research; (b) prepare a three-page draft "literature review" section for your paper. (Note: In general it isn't the case that papers require literature

reviews. However, dissertations often do, so this can serve as a precis for that part of your dissertation.) **5 points.**

10) (a) Give editorial assistance to one of your fellow students by line-editing that student's introduction and literature review. Using correct proofreader's marks (see <http://www.mw.com/mw/table/proofrea.htm>) you should correct mistakes and suggest stylistic improvements. Also, the revised introduction and literature review must be cut to only *four* pages altogether: suggest how. **5 points**; (b) Rewrite your own introduction and literature review according to your own "editor's" comments. **5 points.**

V. Presenting . (DE 250-60; CR 15; GYE 2) For both **IV** and **V** you should also read Daniel Hamermesh's "The Young Economist's Guide to Professional Etiquette," <http://pages.stern.nyu.edu/~wstarbuc/Writing/Etiquette.htm> .

11) Prepare a presentation outline and visual aids--preferably a set of Powerpoint slides--to accompany a presentation. You might include some "mock" charts or tables that will serve as examples of what you might end up finding. You should be prepared to introduce your topic, review past work concerning it, and discuss your research goals and strategy. In preparing visual aids, remember that they are *visual* aids, which means that you shouldn't use them merely to convey what you can convey just as well through speech. (For example, it isn't necessary to prepare a "Title" slide. Just begin your talk by telling everyone what it's about.) For more advice read Tom Kehoe's excellent "[Suggestions on Preparing for Presentations of Economic Research.](#)"

12) (a) Present your work as if giving an actual seminar. However, bear in mind that you will have only 15 minutes. (See Matthew Jackson, "Notes on Presenting a Paper," www.hss.caltech.edu/~jackson_m/present.pdf .) **10 points**; (b) Participate in other students' presentations by asking serious (but polite) questions. Despite what some economists seem to believe, the purpose of a seminar is *not* to see whether it's possible to put the seminar speaker in tears!

VI. Publishing . (GYE 3); Daniel Feldman, "The Devil is in the Details: Converting Good Research into Publishable Articles," http://www.journalofmanagement.org/devil_in_details.php .

15) (a) Prepare a list of names and addresses of persons from whom you hope to solicit comments on your working paper; (b) draft a "referee's report" on one of the articles in your bibliography. On the refereeing process see Hamermesh, "Facts and Myths about Refereeing," <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0895-3309%28199424%298%3A1%3C153%3AFAMAR%3E2.0.CO%3B2-5> . **10 Points.**

16) (a) Prepare a "Publication Strategy," consisting of a paragraph or two concerning your target audience and journal selection criteria, followed by a ranked list of target journals. (See T. Boompramote, "Writing for Economics Journals: Elements of Publication Success," www.mines.edu/Academic/courses/lais/licm598/TT.doc . **5 points**; (b) Prepare a submission "Cover Letter" for your article. **5 points.**

