

MEMO

Rules for Good Academic Writing in Applied Economics A Checklist of Dos and Don'ts

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This memo compiles concrete writing rules from the materials for the course I teach on navigating the research process in economics. The sole focus of this memo is form rather than the content of academic writing. These rules apply to applied microeconomics papers. It is intended as a practical reference to consult before writing a paper or, if that is too late, before circulating a draft, submitting a paper, or finalizing a revision. Within each topic, the DOs come first, followed by the DON'Ts.

Some of these rules may seem obvious to many of you; if so, that is excellent. However, I have compiled this memo because, as an editor, I see many manuscripts that violate even the most basic of these rules. In what follows, I sometimes repeat the same point in the form of both DOs and DON'Ts. This repetition reflects my frustration that these points are too often overlooked or ignored. A few points in this checklist are not general rules but instead reflect my own idiosyncratic writing style; whenever that is the case, I make it explicit.

1. General Principles

- One story per paper. Never put two great ideas in one paper. Two focused papers serve readers better than one cluttered one.
- A paper is a text with a narrative, not a collection of results. The narrative must hold together from introduction to conclusion.
- The text should make sense when read aloud. If what you hear does not make sense, it should not be used in academic writing.
- Writing is a learnable craft. You do not need to invent a new style. Master the existing conventions and use them well. Imitate well-published papers, this is different from plagiarism.
- Do not overclaim. Be explicit about the limitations of the analysis and alternative explanations.
- Always put yourself in the shoes of the reader. If it is not clear to a reader encountering it for the first time, it is not clear.
- Do not give the impression of being sloppy in any detail, no matter how tiny (check, recheck, proofread everything to the last letter in the last exhibit of the appendix). Sloppiness even in unimportant notes signals sloppiness everywhere.
- The reader (including an Editor and a Referee) takes poor English and typos as a signal of low quality. If the paper is full of typos, it signals that the author is not careful, potentially not only in language.

2. Paper Structure

DOs

- Follow the standard structure: Introduction → Background → Theoretical framework (if not obvious) → Data → Empirical methodology (including identification assumptions and tests) → Results (main, robustness, mechanisms) → Conclusions → Figures → Tables → Appendix.
- Each section follows logically from the previous one. Each paragraph should have a clear purpose within its section, and each sentence within each paragraph.
- Deviate from standard structure only deliberately: e.g., mix methodology with results when different tests require different methods, or add a model before or after results, depending on its prominence.
- Organize the appendix with clearly labeled sections. It is not just a dump of exhibits that you could not fit in the main text.
- My preference: Put tables and figures at the end. This makes it easier for editors and referees to flip through them and grasp the paper's main story before reading it closely. (That said, some others prefer the opposite. *Econometrica* even requires exhibits to be placed within the text.)

DON'Ts

- Do not repeat yourself. Repetition is not emphasis; it is noise. When the exposition circles back, you lose the editor and referees.
- Do not use the same formulations across the abstract, introduction, and conclusion, even when summarizing the same result.
- Do not write paragraphs longer than half a page. Longer paragraphs are very hard to read.
- Do not have the main text rely on appendix exhibits. The main text should be fully self-contained and should be read as such. Never discuss explicitly the parts of the appendix tables or figures (only give the punch line and refer to an appendix section, when needed).

3. The Introduction

DOs

- Treat the introduction as the most important part of the paper. You win or lose the editor and referees here.
- Follow the standard introduction structure: (1) Hook: motivate with a puzzle or problem (1–2 paragraphs). (2) Clearly state the research question (1 paragraph). (3) Empirical approach and data (1 paragraph). (4) Detailed results (3–4 paragraphs). (5) Optional: robustness summary. (6) Value-added relative to literature (1–3 paragraphs). (7) Optional: policy relevance,

limitations. (8) Roadmap (1 paragraph). Note: the optional robustness summary is good for a job-market paper but can be very short for a journal submission.

- Make the motivation of general interest. Ask a non-economist relative to read the introduction; if they cannot explain why the question matters, revise.
- Report what was found, not merely that something was found. The reader should understand the results from the introduction alone.
- Report magnitudes for the results, not just significance.
- Make the contribution to existing literature crystal clear. Explicitly.
- The introduction should be self-sufficient: reading it alone should be enough to understand what follows.
- Use effective hooks to start the intro: Y matters (people are hurt or helped); Y is puzzling (defies easy explanation); Y is controversial (reasonable people disagree); Y is big (like the service sector) or common (like traffic jams). The gaps in the literature can be highlighted, but they are not enough: the paper needs to deal with an important question.

DON'Ts

- Do not raise expectations you cannot meet. The introduction is a contract with the reader. If you promise more than the paper delivers, you lose credibility.
- Do not write an overly lengthy introduction. Be concise but informative. However, subject to the constraint that reading intro gives the full picture of what the paper does. The introduction of an applied paper without a model or structural estimation should typically not exceed 5–6 pages in a standard format.
- Do not include a standalone literature review section. Integrate the literature into the introduction (1–3 paragraphs). Some papers can better be cited in the body of the paper when you present and discuss how your results relate to others.
- Avoid long footnotes that merely note that many related papers exist. Always explain how your work relates to the literature.
- My preference: have no citations in the conclusions.

4. Titles and Abstracts

DOs

- Make titles informative and short. Groundbreaking papers often combine two key concepts directly; follow-up papers benefit from a subtitle.
- Make every word in the abstract count. Shorter is almost always better. 100–150-word distilled abstract is hard to get to, but once you do, it is usually effective—try to meet that constraint even if the journal does not require it.
- The abstract should tell the entire story: question, approach, key findings.

DON'Ts

- Do not use sexy but uninformative titles. Informative is always better.
- Do not use cultural references in the title unless you are certain the broad audience will recognize them.
- Never use parentheses in the abstract.
- One-word titles rarely work (though exceptions exist). A title should convey the relationship being studied, and doing so usually requires at least two objects.

5. Literature and Citations

DOs

- Cite all relevant papers.
- Formulate your contribution clearly relative to the closest existing work.
- Keep the reference list clean: no mistakes, no typos. Always proofread the reference list (just as everything else). Keep it up to date—authors notice when recent work is missing, and they are often the referees.
- In LaTeX, use `\citet` and `\citep` correctly to avoid double parentheses. If references are in parentheses, the years should not be, to avoid “)”)”. Note that sometimes one also needs references without years in parentheses—a third style beyond `\citet` and `\citep`.
- Within each list of citations in the text, use chronological order by year of publication; within the same year, alphabetical.
- Reference properly all data sources at their first mention in the text. The dataset references should be part of the reference list. (This is a rule of data and code availability for all journals with a data editor.)

DON'Ts

- Do not undercite. A thin citation list from a paper in a large literature signals ignorance or strategic gaming (citing only people who would make friendly referees). This alone can cause a desk rejection.
- Do not overcite. Listing many tangentially related strands signals a scattered contribution.
- Do not review papers; cite them. Only review a paper in detail if it is directly central to your question. For closely related work, explain the difference between their paper and yours.
- Do not have a standalone literature section. Integrate citations into the introduction.
- When related literature is very large, rely on citing literature reviews not to overcrowd the related literature section.

6. Tables

DOs

- Exhibits and text must each be self-sufficient. A reader who examines only the exhibits should understand what was found; a reader who reads only the text should understand the same thing.
- Each table should be self-explanatory and make one clear, distinct point.
- Make the dependent variable obvious: put it on the first line of the table. State that this is the dependent variable. Stating the dependent variable in table caption is not enough.
- Spell out all column headers and variable names fully. Use intuitive names (“wealth,” not “tot_assts”).
- Report the mean of the dependent variable in each column so readers can assess effect sizes without additional calculation.
- State the unit of observation in the table notes, especially when it changes between tables.
- State what samples, estimation models, etc. are used. This needs to be explicit and clearly indicated for all columns of the table.
- Use legible font sizes. Never use font below footnote size in any exhibit or its notes.
- Report 2–3 decimal digits, always with two informative significant figures: 0.095 is more informative than 0.1; the distinction between 0.059 and 0.095 matters.
- Aim to report the same number of digits for the point estimate and the SE (unless there is a reason to deviate).
- For SEs, make sure that the number of digits reported allows the reader to infer their value within a margin of error of 5%.
- Show only the main coefficients in the table. But, list all the controls in the table notes and indicate which columns use which control sets with checks at the bottom of the table.
- In the main text, spell out what the reader should take from each exhibit. Do not assume readers see what you mean by looking at the table.
- Describe appendix tables and figures in appendix text, not in the main text. The main text should just give the takeaway from an appendix exhibit and refer to the appendix for details.

DON'Ts

- Never abbreviate dependent or explanatory variable names. The reader needs to understand what they are even without reading one word of the paper.
- Do not use fonts too small to read in tables or their notes.
- Do not make tables that require reading the text to understand. If the reader must leave the table to figure out what it shows, you have lost their attention.
- Do not show uninformative digits. If SE is 0.012, no need to show point estimate of 0.346789.

7. Figures

DOs

- Invest serious time in figures. Spend days thinking about them. A well-designed figure conveys a finding more immediately than any table.
- Always include a clear legend.
- Prioritize figures over tables when possible for presenting results. However, include the underlying tables in the appendix for reference.
- Print the point estimates, and not only confidence intervals, on coefficient plot figures.

DON'Ts

- Do not let file compression pixelate figures. If you reduce PDF size for submission, check that figures remain sharp. It is best to use the vector figure format.
- Do not use illegible fonts in figures or their legends. Even if you only use a large screen, put yourself in the position of a person who prints your paper or reads it on a mini tablet.
- While using the scaling of figures (for instance, in latex), do not forget to check the font size, as it appears on the page.

8. Ordering and Numbering of Exhibits

DOs

- Number tables, figures, and appendix sections consecutively in the order they first appear in the main text.
- The first table cited must be Table 1; the first figure, Figure 1; the first appendix table, Table A.1; the first appendix figure, Figure A.1. Then 2, 3, 4, and A.2, A.3, etc.
- Appendix sections should be lettered A, B, C in order of first mention in the text.

DON'Ts

- Never let the first reference be to Table A6 or Appendix B. This signals sloppiness.

9. Footnotes

DOs

- Use footnotes sparingly. Rule: maximum 1 per page on average, maximum 3 footnotes on any single page.
- Place footnote markers after punctuation, at the end of the sentence. This applies to American English formatting, British English has its own rules.

DON'Ts

- Never interrupt a sentence with a footnote. Read the text aloud in order, including footnote text where the marker appears, and you will immediately understand why this disrupts comprehension.
- Footnotes need to consist of full sentences. Do not use parts of sentences or lists in footnotes.

10. Language, Grammar, and Formulations

DOs

- The word “Data” is plural: write “data are,” “data illustrate.”
- Use dashes correctly: Hyphen (-) for compound words (“part-time”). En dash (–) for ranges (“Monday–Friday,” “10–15 pages”). Em dash (—) for strong breaks in a sentence (use sparingly; note LLMs seem to overuse Em dash.) This applies to American English formatting, British English has its own rules.
- Spell out contractions in formal writing: “do not” instead of “don’t.”
- Use “the paper shows” rather than “I show” in most contexts. It sounds softer and more humble.
- General rule (to repeat!): if a formulation is awkward when read aloud, do not use it in writing.
- Keep acronyms to a bare minimum. Whenever possible, spell terms out. Introductions and conclusions should not contain acronyms. Any acronym that is used should be defined at first use.
- When you use notation in the theory part, remind the reader of what it stands for, when stating key results, so that the reader does not need to memorize all the symbols to be able to read the paper.

DON'Ts

- Avoid “I” when not obviously needed.
- Almost never write “my data,” “our data,” “my strategy,” “our strategy.” Most of the time, the data are not yours.
- Avoid “my analysis” as well, even though it is technically yours. It sounds awkward most of the time.
- Do not use “royal we” in single-authored papers. It is even more awkward.
- Avoid parentheses in the main text. Never write “increase (decrease).” Example of what NOT to do: “Strong Republican (Democrat) journalists are 50% (20%) less credible...”
- Avoid the slash (“/”) as a conjunction. Write “firms and households,” not “firms/households.” Do not write “firm/household responses” or “urban/rural households.”
- Do not use contractions (“don’t,” “isn’t”).
- Do not use “data is.” It is “data are.” (Note: LLMs systematically get this wrong.)

- Do not use notation when discussing empirical results. Instead of saying that coefficient β_1 is positive and significant, spell out the effect this coefficient measures and describe the result directly.

11. English and Copyediting

DOs

- Invest in a good copy editor (human or AI-assisted). LLMs are useful for grammar and sentence-level flow.
- If using an AI copy editor, use smart prompts that avoid obvious LLM markers: “delve,” “illuminate,” “enduring,” em dashes everywhere, etc.
- Always critically assess every suggested change from any copy editor, human or machine.
- Always ask the copy editor to highlight changes and understand the logic behind each one.
- Consider using AI consistency-checking tools to check consistency across theory, empirical methodology, tables, and their discussion in the text and appendix.
 - I find Refine.ink (~\$40/paper) very useful. Disclosure statement: I have no relationship to Refine.ink founders or a stake in it. If you rely on other means of checking your draft, great.

DON'Ts

- Do not overestimate what a copy editor (human or AI) can do. AI copy editors are not reliable for argument structure or research-level errors.
- Do not let LLM-generated prose stand without careful review. LLMs are often wrong.

12. Rewriting and Revision

- Re-reading and re-writing should be your main writing habit. Proofread constantly.
- Read aloud, record, and listen. If it sounds awkward, it is awkward.
- The mantra: cut and clarify. Apply this at every stage of revision.
- Do not treat your text as sacred. Re-write. Sometimes re-write fully.
- If referees got it all wrong, it means you explained it badly. Re-write more clearly.
- Never treat poor writing as a minor issue. It is a major problem.