

Style Guide

The following is a list of rules that you should follow when writing your term papers, honors theses, MPP projects, and PhD dissertations. While some of these rules are arguably pet peeves of mine, the vast majority are rules that you should follow in and of themselves. For students who write their term papers, honors theses, MPP projects, or PhD dissertations under my guidance, I insist that you follow these rules. I am in no way suggesting that I write well. But I know what a research paper looks like.

Upon rereading McCloskey's "Economical Writing" and Strunk and White over the holidays, I realized that some of the advice below is directly inspired by these two sources. I wish to acknowledge both and encourage you to read them instead of this document if you have the time.

Formatting

1. Don't follow periods by a double space. This is a remnant of the old days, when people still used typewriters. When justifying documents left and right, your word processor will take care of properly spacing out your sentences. Double spaces can make written documents too long, and space comes at a premium, at least until all scientific writing is no longer published in print.
2. Footnote numbers always come after punctuation marks such as periods, commas, colons, and semicolons. The contents of your footnotes should be justified left and right.
3. Speaking of acronyms, when you first introduce an acronymized phrase, you should spell it out, followed by the acronym in parentheses. For example: "The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) adopted strict guidelines [...]" You can then use the acronym for the remainder of your paper. There is no need to define an acronym if you only mention the acronymized term once in your paper.
4. You should define even the most common of acronyms before using them. For example, "ordinary least squares" should be defined before you start using "OLS".
5. Your tables of descriptive statistics should be self-contained. In other words, your reader should be able to understand the table without having to read your summary of it. This means that, at the very least, you should present the number of observations, the mean, and the standard deviation for each variable, as well as the units of measurement and how the variable was constructed. In some cases, it is acceptable to have a table describing how variables were constructed, and another table presenting descriptive statistics for the same variables.
6. When presenting descriptive statistics, if you are looking at mutually exclusive categories, it is always a good idea to make sure they sum up to 100 percent.

7. Your tables of empirical results should be self-contained. In other words, your reader should be able to understand your estimation results without having to read your summary of it. This means that, at the very least, you should present the dependent variable for each equation, the coefficient estimates, their standard errors (and whether those are robust, clustered, bootstrapped, etc.), the number of observations on which your regressions were run, tests of joint significance, whether you included fixed effects and for what, the number of bootstrap iterations, and measures of goodness-of-fit. The title of your table should tell your reader what estimation procedure was used (e.g. “Logit Estimation Results for the Decision to Drop Out of College”).
8. In economics, a research paper is not a collection of loosely related bullet points, unlike in the hard sciences.
9. If you conduct your own econometric analysis, it is amateurish to write a regression function such that $EDUC_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 EXPEND_i + \varepsilon_i$. The norm is to present a generic equation (e.g., $y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_i + \varepsilon_i$) after which you define what each variable means.
10. Never start a sentence with an acronym.
11. The numbers rule is such that, except in tables, numbers from one to ten should be spelled out, and numbers 11 and up should be written as numbers.
12. If you absolutely have to start a sentence with a number, spell it out, even if it is 11 or more.
13. The percentage rule is such that, except in tables, “percent” should be spelled out.
14. Generally speaking, your abstract and the first paragraph of your introduction should not cite anyone else’s work, unless you are correcting someone else’s mistake and writing a note or a comment about it. Your work should stand on its own two legs in your abstract, and it should be of general interest enough that introducing it should not require the crutch provided by other people’s work. Some people also say that you should tell the reader what your paper does by the end of the third paragraph.
15. Don’t include a literature review section. Position your work within the relevant literature (i.e., at the very least three, at most ten other papers) as part of your introduction instead, when you “sell” your paper to your reader.

Grammar and Spelling

1. Know the difference between “effect” and “affect”. A variable affects another when it has an effect on it. Confusing the two is a sign that you should be reading more.
2. Likewise, know the difference between “principal” and “principle”. This is especially important if you happen to write about principal-agent models, which often rely on the Revelation Principle and which concern moral hazard and adverse selection, which brings me to...
3. People are risk-averse, not risk-adverse. Also, we talk about risk aversion, but individuals are risk-averse. Note where there is a hyphen and where there isn't. When two words form an adjective (e.g., “developing-country agriculture”), they should be hyphenated, unless one of them ends in “-ly” (e.g., “increasingly obvious”).
4. “Women” denotes more than one woman. Confusing the two is a sign that you should be reading more.
5. The apostrophe denotes a possessive (e.g., “Marc’s students”) or a contraction (e.g., “It’s about time I heard from that journal!”) If you wanted to write about tropical livestock units, you would write “TLUs” rather than “TLU’s”. This used to be widely understood, but with the advent of the Internet, this understanding has been lost.
6. If you have a hard time making the difference between it’s and its; there, their, and they’re; you’re and your; than and then; loser and looser; etc., or if you think it is perfectly normal to write “could/should/would of” instead of “could/should/would have,” you spend too much time online.

Writing Decently

1. Research has supposedly shown that when presented with the same information written in plain English vs. flowery, Creative Writing 101 English, individuals were more likely to denote the writer of the latter as less intelligent. Think about that. Your goal should be to distill a high amount of complex information as simply as possible while preserving the essence of the argument. You should write plainly, not like what your idea of a social scientist sounds like (or worse, like a management consultant who talks of low-hanging fruit, synergies, etc.)
2. Repeating the same word or phrase within one sentence is allowed if it improves the clarity of your writing. Research papers are not creative writing essays.
3. Avoid writing “note that”. In well over 95 percent of cases, these two words are unnecessary.

4. Never start a sentence with “however.”
5. Ask yourself whether your adverbs are necessary. For example, do your empirical really strongly support your hypothesis, or do they simply support it?
6. Know your Latin. You can use “i.e.” (short for *id est*, meaning “that is”), and “e.g.” (short for *exempli gratia*, meaning “for example”). Both are always followed by a comma. Also, when you want to shorten list of authors, use “et al.” (short for *et alii*, meaning “and others”) The phrases *ex post* and *ex ante*, as well as *prima facie*, *bona fide*, and *caveat* should always be italicized, as are most foreign words such as *vis-à-vis*, *Zeitgeist*, *joie de vivre*, *farniente*, etc.
7. Avoid qualifying anything as “unique”, unless you are showing mathematical uniqueness. For example, all data sets are unique, just like the next one. Why one would feel compelled to note uniqueness of their data set is anybody’s guess.
8. Data is already in the plural form. Datum is singular. So one should really write that “these data allow estimating [...]” rather than write “this data allows estimating [...]”
9. Please avoid using buzzwords without defining them. For example, “sustainable” development is a fuzzy concept, as is “local” agriculture.
10. Please avoid writing in bureaucratese or legalese. No one uses “utilize” in casual conversation. There is a simple yet elegant three-letter verb that is a perfect synonym for “utilize”. Likewise, “leverage” should never, ever be used as a verb.
11. Some suggest reading your work out loud. I have never tried it (I have my wife read all my papers before I submit them instead), but if you think it may work for you, by all means, do it.
12. Don’t rely on your word processor’s grammar and spelling tools. I write words that get branded with the scarlet squiggle (e.g., endogenize, heteroskedasticity, etc.) on a daily basis, as well as sentences that my word processor tells me I should change. Your computer is no substitute for having read enough good writing.