

Types of Writing in Economics

Essentially there are two kinds of economics papers: *empirical* papers, which run data through a model (a series of mathematical equations); and *theoretical* papers, which begin with a model based on certain premises and then prove that certain outcomes will ensue. These two kinds of papers reflect what the discipline considers to be legitimate economics. You will not find qualitative studies, for instance, nor will you find papers without a mathematical model.

Both kinds of papers typically have abstracts and both are written in sections with subheadings. The format of sections and their content have become fairly standard over the years.

For empirical papers, the sections (with some variation here and there) include: Introduction; [Literature Review]; Data; Methodology/Model; Results; Conclusion.

For theoretical papers, there will be an Introduction and a section introducing the basic model. Then there will be usually lots of subsections and further sections discussing various scenarios that can be acted out as the basic model is extended. Theoretical papers have lots of math, and usually the proofs are put in an appendix.

Title

The title of your paper should reflect as much as possible the subject of your paper and the question it tries to answer. Think about the two or three keywords that would apply to your paper and work them into the title. You may find it useful or necessary to have a title and a subtitle (e.g., “The Economic Costs of Conflict: A Case Study of the Basque Country”). Avoid titles that are too general or insufficiently descriptive (e.g., “An Analysis of Retirement Plans”).

Introduction

Introductions in both types of paper almost always contain two kinds of information: what the paper will do (“In this paper I will estimate the effect of X on Y”); and what contributions the paper makes, or how it differs or extends or improves upon existing studies. Introductions often contain a literature review, in which the writer establishes what has been done already on the topic and, more important, what hasn’t been done. (Note that sometimes the literature review appears in a section of its own, with its own heading.)

The principal findings may or may not be stated. In addition, the general subject of the paper may or may not be introduced. For example, a paper on, say, the impact of a particular change in the minimum wage may or may not begin with a paragraph discussing the minimum wage in general. Introductions almost always end with a “table of contents” paragraph (“In section 2 I will do this; in section 3 I will do that; etc.”). Introductions can be of any length, but are usually 5 to 6 pages long (double spaced). There is never a discussion of how the author came to be interested in the topic or much about the trial and error involved in conducting the study.

At a minimum, your introduction should do the following:

- Introduce your topic, and in a way that indicates its importance
- Indicate briefly the research that has been done on the topic
- Identify a gap, problem, controversy, etc., in the existing research
- Explain how the present paper will fill that gap, solve that problem, etc.
- State the thesis of the paper—the answer to the research question that the paper attempts to answer
- Indicate briefly the limits of your study
- Describe the organization of the paper (usually in last paragraph of introduction)

It may be helpful to conceptualize your introduction as a series of three broad “moves” (adapted from *Academic Writing for Graduate Students*, by John M. Swales and Christine B. Feak [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994]):

- *Move 1: Establish a research territory* by showing that your topic is important, interesting, problematic, or relevant in some way.
- *Move 2: Establish a niche* by indicating a gap in previous research, raising a question about it, or extending previous knowledge in some way.
- *Move 3: Occupy the niche* by stating the purpose or nature of your research.

It is essential that your introduction be consistent with your conclusion, and that both be consistent with the body of your paper.

Literature Review

Your literature review should describe the studies of your topic that are relevant for your present study. Begin with a brief general assessment of the literature (e.g., it is abundant, there’s not much there, most studies focus on methodological issues, data problems beset research on this topic, most studies look at X, little has been done in the past thirty years, etc.). Then get down to brass tacks by describing the aspects of the literature that are most relevant to your study. (It is not necessary or even desirable to comment on every feature [data, methodology, findings, policy implications, etc.] of a previous study.) For example, if the main contribution of your paper is to extend an existing model, it may make sense to focus your review on a discussion of the models used in other papers. Organize your review along those same lines. For instance, you may first describe the papers that use the model you will extend. You may then describe those papers that have extended that model in a certain way.

Data

The Data section (which you’ll see only in empirical papers) identifies the source of the data and any problems or special features of the data. Your data section should do at least the following:

- Identify the source of your data
- Describe the source
- Explain why you use that source
- Identify any caveats: features of the data that may affect your results or that a reader should keep in mind in evaluating them (e.g., the data over-represent a certain demographic population, the data is plagued by self-selection bias, etc.)

Methodology/Model

Your methodology and/or model section should do at least the following:

- Identify your methodology/model
- Describe your methodology/model
- Explain why you use that methodology/model
- Identify any caveats: features of your methodology/model that may affect your results or that a reader should keep in mind when evaluating them

Results

Your results section should do the following:

- Identify the results that answer your research question
- Identify and comment on any unusual or surprising or intriguing results
- Identify and comment on any results that you have told your reader you will comment on
- You may wish to begin your results section by reminding the reader of the question you are trying to answer and any caveats the reader should bear in mind. Note: It is not necessary or even desirable to comment in detail on every single result.

Conclusion

The Conclusion sections of economics papers are the least standardized, and are an often neglected section. Conclusions may consist of a single paragraph restating the main points or main findings. Sometimes they suggest lines of future research. Your conclusion may do any or all of the following:

- Restate the question you have attempted to answer
- Restate your main contribution and/or findings
- Indicate lines for further research
- Remind readers of the limitations or caveats of your study
- Identify broader implications (e.g., policy implications)

It is essential that your conclusion be consistent with your introduction, and that both be consistent with the body of your paper.

Other Conventions

- Quotations are rarely found in economics papers.
- Economics is not interdisciplinary. Literature reviews will only deal with other economics articles.
- Papers may be written in the first person singular (“I”); in the third (“this paper,” “this study”); or in the first person plural (“we”), even if there is only a single author.
- Economists almost always use “this” and “these” where most other readers would expect “that” and “those.”
- Two items are often joined by (indeed, sometimes it seems they cannot exist) without the use of both (“I examine both wages and unemployment...”).
- Synonyms for “model” seem to be “framework” and “approach.”
- Economists are fond of using “in particular” (“In this paper I study the effect of minimum wage hikes on unemployment rates. In particular, I examine data from New Jersey . . .”), even if it doesn’t seem to be needed or logical.

- Three terms especially important in economics are “equilibrium,” “utility,” and “marginal.” Equilibrium refers to a state in which supply equals demand; it is the desired state for things to be in. Markets always tend toward equilibrium, in theory. Utility means pleasure or satisfaction, which may come from eating food, earning a certain amount of money, sitting on the couch—whatever gives someone pleasure or satisfaction. People (sometimes called “agents”) and firms are forever trying to “maximize” their utility, according to economic theory. Marginal refers to a slight change in an existing state of affairs; economists are interested in the impact of small, incremental changes to the status quo.
- Economists are allured by the temptation of elegant variation. In a single paragraph they may refer to “this study,” “this paper,” “this analysis,” etc., all to avoid repeating, say, “study.”
- The author-date in-text style of documentation seems to predominate.

The Writing Studio thanks Paul Dudenhefer, assistant editor in Duke’s Economics Department, for contributing the material for this document.