

Writing in Economics: a typical paper

1. Writing in economics can take any number of approaches, but all forms share one important characteristic: **you must have a question to which you purport to provide an answer**. Now this answer may be a good one, or it may be a counsel of despair, but at the end of the day you must address the main issue or issues that you pose, and you will need to characterize what it is that we have learned from your essay.
2. You need to pose the question that you decide upon in a context that asserts **this is an important question**. One way to do this is to explain the broad context. What are the grand themes in the general subject or topic in which your question will be embedded? What have other people said about this topic? Is there a debate? Is there an “accepted wisdom”, or is there a gap in the literature that you are about to address?
3. **You need to choose a topic**. This is not as easy as it sounds. When we first approach many essays we have only a general sense of what it is we want to talk about. We really have a subject area in mind rather than a specific topic.
 - a. Narrowing down the subject: “I want to write about the NAFTA” is not something that one can craft an essay about without some more specific goals.
 - b. What is it that you want to say in reference to the NAFTA? Do you want to know whether trade increased or decreased? Do you want to know what others said at the time? Who was right and who was wrong? Do you want to know whether the gains or losses to income were significant? Do you want to know who were the winners and losers? These questions provide the kind of specificity that makes an essay more likely to succeed, and give you an issue to which there may be an answer.
4. The first **paragraphs are important** for setting the stage and although you may end up rewriting them at the very end, writing the first paragraphs often provides a good opportunity for thinking about your essay each time you approach it.
5. What goes into a first paragraph? First, since it is the place where readers start, you have some responsibilities.

- a. **You have to capture the reader's interest.** Writing does not have to be boring. To be fair, you have to presume a certain amount of goodwill by the reader. You need not expect an ignoramus to follow your essay.¹
 - b. **You must convince the reader that this is an important issue.** There are many ways to do this although there is not one 'correct' way. Let me illustrate some ways
 - i. Move from an extremely broad view of social science. See, for example, *Irving Fisher's Theory of Interest*.
 - ii. Move from there to more narrow issues.
 - iii. Move to your issue.
 - c. Let us look at some additional examples:
 - d. *Fogel and Engerman*
 - e. *Jones and Easton*
6. Sometimes we are able to outline what it is we want to do with an essay from the very beginning, but sometimes we find only at the end of the day that we know what it is we want to say -- after we have written the essay!
- a. Carlyle and the "The French Revolution"
 "The French Revolution was written in dramatic language bringing the history of the revolution alive in a way that few historians have ever done. Carlyle had to rewrite the book after he had sent the manuscript to John Stuart Mill, whose maid burned it - the only copy - for waste paper. Mill offered the author £200 compensation, he eventually accepted £100." (<http://www.globusz.com/history.html> - April 19, 2006)
 - b. Hopefully, this will not happen to you: my computer crashed; my email folders disappeared; the dog ate my essay, etc. All of these suggest something that you know, and I know, but let me remind you. Make a copy of original data and keep it "off site": that is, off the computer with which you are working. Please back

¹ This is a double-edged sword. Harry Stack Sullivan, the famous social psychiatrist, characterized the reader as a gremlin perched on his shoulder watching his words roll out. The gremlin could not understand anything but the most clearly expressed argument, yet could see endless qualifications to every point that Sullivan wanted to make. Sullivan is noted for his clarity and his extremely limited output. This has been a sad outcome for those who valued his ideas.

up. Back up! Email it to yourself regularly; put it in Dropbox or another web site; put it into SFU's briefcase on email, etc., etc.

7. What is it we strive to attain? A distinguished social scientist I know has said, "**I would rather be clear and wrong, than right and unclear.**" Let that be your mantra for me!

9 Expectations for this course

- a. You will build an essay of fewer than 100 pages. Most of you will write less than this, but you will see how hard it is to write compactly. I do not want to play games with margins and fonts. **Think normal margins and font size of 12.** .
- b. Footnotes deal with substance. Attributed material may be in the text in parentheses
 - i. Footnotes deal with material that is not sufficiently important to the argument that you want to interrupt the flow of the text.
 - ii. Attributed material may be in the text in parentheses: (Doherty and de Souza, 12) means page 12 in the reference which is written in full in the **bibliography** or **references** – I don't care what you call it:
 - iii. Examples of References:

Doherty, Glen, and Paul de Souza (1995). Recidivism in Youth Courts, 1993-1994. *Juristat* 15, 16 [which means volume 15 of *Juristat*, of which this is paper number 16.]

You may use other forms for your references as well – I do not care what you use -- as long as I can find it if I want to find it. A couple of acceptable forms are:

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Visher, C.A. (1987) "Incapacitation and crime control: does a 'lock 'em up' strategy reduce crime?" *Justice Quarterly* 4(4): 513-543

Michael Tatone. (February 10, 2013). Mexico 8th in World for Identity Theft. Insight Crime. Retrieved (September 18, 2013) from: <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/mexico-8th-in-world-for-identity-theft>

Notice that material obtained from the internet must be dated: (a) the date the article was written and (b) the date on which you obtained it from the internet.

10 The general form of the overall essay:

- a. Introduction
 - i. Catch the reader's attention
 - ii. Why your topic?
 1. It is important
 2. It fills a gap
 3. It extends an argument
 4. It adds to a body of evidence
 5. It contributes to a debate
 6. It shows that others who have written are 'wrong'.
 7. It raises new issues that are more significant than others that have previously been developed
 8. It highlights an anomaly that others have missed or underemphasized
- b. The literature review: who has written before and why it is germane to your topic.
- c. The theory relevant to your topic that you plan to use.
- d. The evidence you plan to use to develop your argument.
 - i. You need to explain what it is.
 1. You need to describe the data in context.
 - a. You may need to present it in a table or graph
 - b. You need to characterize it
 - i. Show a table with means, standard deviations, and/or other characteristics that are relevant.
 - ii. Show trends: if relevant
 - ii. You need to explain their (data) shortcomings

1. For example, when it was gathered, it may have been contaminated by the fact that the gatherers had a vested interest in the outcome.
 2. The data may be incomplete. How have you filled the gaps?
 3. It may not correspond as well as you would like to the theoretical concepts you are developing.
- e. You need to explain how the evidence bears on the theory that you have used to answer the question that you are answering. This is often the heart of the matter, and while only a point on the outline, make no mistake, this is the crucial part of the essay.

If you do not have ideas of your own, or have not written previous essays, you should view these forms as firm suggestions. On the other hand, you want to be sure you have reasons for deviating from what is suggested rather than simply blundering along and seeing what turns out at the end. Finally, as Admiral the Lord Nelson so famously said, “**No battle plan ever survives first contact with the enemy.**”