

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 crime” 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 crime? Do you want to know whether crime increased or decreased? Do you want to know what others said at the time? Is it because of more ‘children’ between the ages of 12-24? Do you want to know whether the costs of incarceration are significant? Do you want to know whether locking people up reduces crime or just postpones and increases it? 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 very important for setting the stage and although you may end up re-writing 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 and foremost 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

Move from an extremely broad view of social science to a more narrow view of the question.

¹ This is a double edged sword. Harry Stack Sullivan, the great 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.

Irving Fisher's Theory of Interest.
 (<http://www.econlib.org/library/YPDBooks/Fisher/fshToII.html>) provides a magnificent example of the sweep of theory from the general to the specific.

INCOME is a series of events.... According to the modern theory of relativity the elementary reality is not matter, electricity, space, time, life or mind, but events.

ii. Move from there to more narrow issues

For each individual only those events which come within the purview of his experience are of direct concern. It is these events—the psychic experiences of the individual mind—which constitute ultimate income for that individual. The outside events have significance for that individual only in so far as they are the means to these inner events of the mind. The human nervous system is, like a radio, a great receiving instrument. Our brains serve to transform into the stream of our psychic life those outside events, which happen to us and stimulate our nervous system....

In Man's early history he had little command over his environment. He was largely at the mercy of natural forces—wind and lightning, rain and snow, heat and cold. But today Man protects himself from these by means of those contrivances called houses, clothing, and furnaces....

And more specifically:

...neither these intermediate processes of creation and alteration nor the money transactions following them are of significance except as they are the necessary or helpful preliminaries to psychic income—human enjoyment....

...Enjoyment income is a psychological entity and cannot be measured directly. We can approximate it indirectly, however, by going one step back of it to what is called real income. Real wages, and indeed real income in general, consist of those final physical events in the outer world which give us our inner enjoyments....

And, finally, we see where he is going:

...These outer events, such as the use of food, or clothes, etc., are like the resultant inner events in not being very easily measured. They occur largely in the privacy of the home; they are often difficult to express in any standard units. They have no common denominator. Even the individual who experiences them cannot weigh and measure them directly. All he can do is to measure the money he paid to get them.

6. Let us look at some examples of what I think of as good first paragraphs or two:

a. *Fogel and Engerman*

If any single objective may be called the desideratum of economic historians, it is the explanation of industrial expansion. From the very beginning of the discipline its scholars have enshrined this aspect of their subject matter. They have given the eulogistic name of *industrial revolution* to the surges in the growth of manufacturing industries which began in the late eighteenth century in England and in the nineteenth century in the United States and elsewhere.

Over the years it has been easier to describe the phenomenon for which an explanation was sought than to provide the desired explanation. Until recently the thrust of research was toward the description of the main categories of factors on which an explanation would turn. Chief among these categories was the introduction of new machines and equipment. Thus every schoolboy has been taught about the mechanical inventions of the industrial revolution. The flying shuttle, the spinning jenny, the mule, and the power loom are presented as the revolutionary forces of the textile industry. The equipment which occupies the same position in the iron industry includes the puddling furnace, the rolling mill, and the coke or anthracite blast furnace. To many scholars the most revolutionary of all the mechanical innovations was the steam railroad. It has been singled out as a necessary condition for the advance not merely of a single industry but of regional specialization and over-all economic growth. Historians have, however, stressed the importance of increases in demand.

W. W. Rostow, for example, argued that the rapid expansion of the demand for rails was the main factor in the growth of the iron industry during the two decades preceding the Civil War. Others have provided evidence which suggests that the primary impetus to the growth of at least some industries was neither the increase in the demand for their products nor changes in their productive techniques. Rather, it may have been drastic reductions in the cost of the raw materials or other inputs which these industries purchased. Still other historians have investigated the economies of large-scale enterprise, which reduced the cost of both production and distribution.

Two factors have made such research fall short of an explanation of the growth of either particular enterprises or whole industrial sectors. The first has been the absence of a theory regarding the way in which the various explanatory factors are related to each other. Such a theory is a necessary condition for measuring the relative importance of these factors. The second has been the paucity of the data needed to estimate the parameters of an explanatory model. As it turns out, the theory required for the desired measurements follows rather directly from the economists' traditional analytic tools of supply and demand. This discovery has led to a number of recent studies which have for the first time attempted to assess the relative effect of increases in population, rises in income, the introduction of new machinery, and the reduction in the cost of inputs on the expansion of American industries during the nineteenth century.

Compared with the emphasis placed on new machinery and equipment, all other factors in the growth of industry have been slighted. Some...

7. 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 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.
8. 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 don’t care what you use - as long as I can find it if I want to find it. A couple of acceptable forms are:

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.

Finally: as Lord Nelson so famously said, "No battle plan ever survives first contact with the enemy." You should view these forms as suggestions particularly if you do not have particular ideas of your own, or have not written previous essays. 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.

Students typically use fewer maps, charts and equations than professionals. Sometimes, however, they can be most helpful. My favourite is:

Jonathan A. Schwabish “An Economist’s Guide to Visualizing Data”, Journal of Economic Perspectives *Volume 28, Number 1—Winter 2014—Pages 209–234*