

## Economics 426

### Guidelines for Written Work

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There will be two written assignments in this course. Each paper will be 5 pages long (double spaced with normal margins). The 5 page constraint does not include the title page or the page listing your references (more information on this below). Each paper will be worth 25% of the course grade. These guidelines apply to both papers.

A draft of the first paper is due on **Friday Oct 8**. I will return these drafts in class with my comments on October 15. The final version is due on **Friday Oct 22**. A draft of the second paper is due on **Tuesday Nov 16**. I will return these drafts in class with my comments on Nov 23, and the final version is due on **Tuesday Nov 30**.

NOTE: normally I would like to receive a printed copy of your paper in class on the due date. However, if you are feeling unwell and cannot come to class that day, please send me an electronic version in Word or PDF as an email attachment.

I will not grade the first drafts. The purpose is to give you suggestions for improvement, not to assign a grade. I will assign letter grades for the final versions.

For each paper, I want you to choose one journal article from a bibliography I will post on Canvas. Each item in the bibliography is something written by an economist about the subject matter of the course. You might need to look at two or three different articles in order to find one on a topic that seems interesting.

The goal of these assignments is to help you learn how economists construct hypotheses, present evidence, argue for a particular interpretation of observed facts, relate their work to the work of others, and so on; in short, how economists think and write. By describing and criticizing a written product from an economist, I hope you will see how economists carry out these tasks.

For whichever reading you choose, I want you to do the following things within the five-page limit:

- (a) Briefly say what the paper is about and why it is important. Is the goal to explain a collection of empirical observations? If so, what are they? Is the goal to make a theoretical point? If so, what is it? Is the goal to make a normative argument? If so, what is it? In simple understandable language, tell the reader what the author is trying to achieve and why.

- (b) Say how the author approaches the task described in (a). What methods are used? If the paper is empirical, describe the data and statistical techniques. If the paper is theoretical, explain how the model was constructed. If the paper is normative, give a detailed presentation of the author's normative argument.
- (c) What is the main conclusion reached by the author? How does the author justify this conclusion? What are the crucial steps in reaching the conclusion?
- (d) Assess the contributions of the author. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the paper? You might consider issues like the following: Are the data reliable? Are the theoretical assumptions reasonable? Is the economic logic convincing? Why or why not?

This is a lot to do in five pages, but I am limiting the length for several reasons. First, I want you to learn how to distinguish major issues from minor ones. A tight page limit will help you learn how to edit your own work. The emphasis should be on quality, not quantity, so ask whether each paragraph (or sentence, or word) really needs to be there. Does it contribute anything vital to your paper? If not, hit the delete key and replace it with something more important.

Second, economists in the real world often have to digest a long complex journal article or working paper and then explain it to other economists (or non-economists) in a brief, well-organized way. The best way to develop this skill is through lots of practice.

Third, sometime you might have to write a long paper about an economic problem (let's say 20-30 pages). In that case, your introduction will probably be about five pages, and in that space you will have to address the four points above: (a) what is the paper about? (b) how did you approach the problem? (c) what are your key conclusions? And (d) why should anyone believe your results? If you can't convey this information in a short and clear introduction, few people will bother to read the other 15-25 pages.

Evaluation criteria for finished papers will include the accuracy of factual information, good judgment in separating major issues from minor ones, quality of economic logic, awareness that empirical observations can often be interpreted in multiple ways, coherent organization, and clear writing.

NOTE: In 2018, I published a new book called "The Labor-Managed Firm: Theoretical Foundations". We are not using this book because there is a lot of math and it is written for professional economists or graduate students. I do not expect undergraduates to read it. I definitely DO NOT want to see recycled versions of my comments from this book in your papers. So don't look at the 2018 book when doing your assignments for Econ 426. If you are really curious, wait until the course is over and then look at it.

Your title page should be complete in the sense that it includes all relevant information: the title of the paper, your name and ID number, the date, the course number, whether the paper is the first assignment or the second assignment, and whether it is the first draft or

the final draft. You should use page numbers and divide the main text of your paper into sections as in (a)-(d) above. It is not necessary to have explicit headings for each section.

You should also include a reference list on a separate page at the end with full citations for all of the readings mentioned in the text. I am not expecting you to do any additional reading, so normally this will just be the particular journal article you are discussing. But you should get into the habit of using a reference page because it is what economists do. If you are unsure how to give citations, look at the references at the end of the textbook and use them as a model.

Every professional economist has to think carefully about the audience for their written work. For example, if you are addressing the general public, then you can't use calculus or econometrics. But if you are addressing other economists and you don't use graphs or equations, your readers may wonder why you are avoiding technical concepts that would help make the economic logic clear.

For these assignments, I want you to think of your reader as a student who has roughly the same background in economics as you do. You should assume the reader has taken Econ 201 and 302, as well as a wide range of upper division electives in economics. If you have taken Econ 333, you can assume your reader is familiar with this material.

You should not assume that your reader has taken Econ 426. If you need to use ideas, concepts, terminology, or acronyms that would be new to a student who has not taken Econ 426, you should give the reader brief definitions or explanations.

If you think it would be helpful to include a few equations or graphs, go ahead and do it, but don't load up the paper with this kind of material. Most of the paper should be verbal. Also keep in mind that when you include an equation or a graph, you will need to define or explain all of the symbols used, so your reader will know what you are talking about.

When doing the assignment, you may find that the journal article uses math techniques that are too advanced for you, or concepts you have never heard of. If that occurs, try to extract as much information from the article as possible and do the best you can. Since your paper is designed to be read by a student who has an economic background similar to your own, it is fine to say, "there was some complicated math at this point that I was unable to follow, but I think the author's point was . . ." or something like that.

I will be happy to answer questions about these assignments in class, during my office hours, or through individual emails ([gdow@sfu.ca](mailto:gdow@sfu.ca)).