

## Econ 452W

### Seminar in Economic Prehistory

#### Guidelines for Written Work

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There will be two written assignments in this course. Each will be five pages long and is worth 25% of the course grade. These guidelines apply to both papers.

A draft of the first paper is due on **Friday Feb. 4**. Comments will be provided on Feb. 11 and the final version is due on **Friday Feb. 18**. A draft of the second paper is due on **Friday Mar. 25**. Comments will be provided on Apr. 1 and the final version is due on **Friday Apr. 8**.

I will not grade the first drafts. The purpose is to give you feedback and suggestions for improvement, not to assign a grade. The evaluation criteria for the finished papers will include accuracy of factual information, good judgment in separating major issues from minor ones, quality of the economic logic, awareness that empirical observations can often be interpreted in more than one way, coherent organization, and clear writing.

For each paper, I want you to choose a journal article from a list I will distribute (details will be given later). I want you to do the following things within the five-page limit:

- (a) Say what the paper is about. What is the central question the author is trying to answer? Is the goal to make a theoretical point? If so, what is it? Is the goal to explain empirical observations? If so, what are they?
- (b) Explain how the author approaches the task described in (a). What methods are used? What are the main elements of the theory? What are the main features of the data set?
- (c) Identify the central conclusion reached by the author. How does the author justify this conclusion? What are the crucial steps in reaching the conclusion?
- (d) Assess the strengths and weaknesses of the paper. How you do this will depend on the nature of the paper, but you might consider issues like the following: Do the data seem to be reliable? Are the theoretical assumptions reasonable? Could a different researcher have approached the problem from another point of view or come to different conclusions? How convincing are the author's results?

The goal of the assignments is to help you learn how economists construct hypotheses, present evidence, argue for a specific interpretation of observed events, relate their work to the work of others, and so on; in short, how economists think and write. By describing

and critiquing a written product from a particular economist, I hope you will begin to see how economists carry out these tasks. If you get a job as an economist, you may not be expected to know about prehistory, but you will definitely be expected to understand, summarize, and evaluate the written work of other economists.

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

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 302, as well as a reasonable range of upper division electives in economics. If you have taken Econ 333, then you can assume your reader is also familiar with that material. However, do not assume your reader has taken Econ 452. You will have to explain ideas from Econ 452 that students are unlikely to have seen in their other courses.

You may find that an article uses some mathematical techniques that are too advanced for you, or concepts you have never heard of. If that occurs, try to get as much information from the reading as possible and do the best you can. Since you are directing your paper toward a student whose background is similar to yours, 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 am limiting the page length for several reasons. First, I want you to focus on the major points and ignore the minor ones. A tight page limit will help you learn how to do that. The emphasis is on quality, not quantity, so ask whether each paragraph (or sentence, or word) is really necessary to your paper as a whole. If not, hit the delete key.

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 may have to write a longer paper about an economic problem or issue (let's say 20-30 pages). In that case, your introduction will probably be roughly five pages, and in that space you will have to address the four points above: (a) what is your paper about? (b) how did you investigate the problem? (c) what are your principal conclusions? And (d) why should anyone believe your results? If you can't convey this information clearly in an introduction, people are unlikely to read the rest of the paper.

I will be happy to answer questions about these assignments in class or during my office hours.