

Tips for Preparing and Publishing Research Papers

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Why Am I Doing This?

- Because Liam asked me to. (So blame him!)
- Slightly more seriously
 - ① I have published papers in *AER*, *REStat*, *JME*, *JMCB*, *IER*, *JBES*, *JEconGrowth*, *OXREP*, *RED* and other journals.
 - ② I've also had papers rejected by *AER*, *QJE*, *JPE*, *REStat*, *JME*, *JMCB*, *JBES*, *EJ*, *EER*, *Economica*, *OEP*, *RED* and others.
 - ③ So I've done the School of Hard Knocks, University of Life thing also.
- Hopefully, I can pass on something useful about how to start, write up, and publish papers from what I've learned along the way.
- So, the talk will have three elements to it:
 - ① Getting started.
 - ② Writing.
 - ③ Publishing and career development.

Part I

Getting Started

Getting Started, Thinking About Ideas

There are no golden rules for how to do research but there are some common mistakes.

- ① Don't spend too much time reading other people's research, waiting for inspiration to strike you.
 - Reading research should be a regular part of any economist's routine.
 - But it is not a substitute for doing your own.
- ② Don't set the bar too high. You don't need to win the Nobel.
- ③ But don't set the bar too low!
 - Be wary of picking a topic that is of interest to a small number of people (e.g. you and your adviser).
 - In particular, think about topics that will interest those beyond this island.

Empirical Work: Get Your Hands Dirty

“Scientific” Model—Formulate Hypothesis, Get Data, Test Hypothesis, Report Results—over-rated in economics.

Three good ways to start an empirical paper:

- 1 Get some data and start playing with it.
 - Sometimes, this throws up an interesting pattern.
 - Write a paper exploring/explaining this pattern.
- 2 Read a paper that you found interesting? Get their dataset and replicate their results.
 - A good way to learn the area, but may also lead you to follow-up questions. For example, would you have done the analysis differently, or could it be applied to another example?
 - Maybe try it out on a new dataset.
- 3 Read about something interesting in the popular press or blogs?
 - Remember that the media often mis-represent the truth, lacking historical context, facility with statistics or analytical tools.
 - So check it out yourself with some data.

Lots of Great Data Sets Out There

- US Macro Time Series: www.bea.gov and www.bls.gov.
- US Financial Time Series: www.federalreserve.gov, Robert Shiller and Ken French's websites.
- Euro-Area Macro Data: Area Wide Model (JoseEmilio.Gumiel@ecb.int)
- Cross-Country Comparisons: Penn World Tables, Groningen Centre (www.ggdc.net)
- Trade Data: Robert Feenstra's website.
- The External Wealth of Nations: Lane & Milesi-Ferretti.
- Firm-Level data: *Amadeus*, Forfas surveys.
- Irish microdata: www.ucd.ie/issda

Part II

Writing

Writing Skills: More Important Than You Think

- Your ideas and results won't sell themselves.
- How you communicate your work is of *crucial* importance.
- There is no point in having an interesting piece of research that nobody understands or sees the point of.
- Many economists think of themselves as primarily experts in technical methods: Econometrics, economic theory, data expertise.
- This “white coat” mentality—that we are mainly scientists who then do a write-up of our results—is deeply wrong.
- Writing is an essential part of the research process, not a last-minute thing to be rushed.

Plenty of Good Advice Available

- There is lots of good advice on writing out there.
- My favourites are
 - ① Kwan Choi (How to Publish in Top Journals): Hard-bitten, cynical, very, very useful. From a guy who edits a journal, so knows the deal.
 - ② John Cochrane (Writing Tips for PhD Students): A master technician and one of the smartest guys in the profession gives his (admittedly idiosyncratic) tips on how to write. Ignore at your peril.
 - ③ Dan Hamermesh (Texas) has an advice page with tips on writing and other matters.
- I have provided links to these (as well as these slides) on my website, www.karlwhelan.com

The Crucial Bit: The Introduction

- Introductions are crucial because
 - ① Most people are busy.
 - ② There are lots of other papers they could read.
 - ③ And frankly, there's lots of bad research out there. So, there's good reason for people to approach your work with a skeptical attitude.
 - ④ Your paper needs to make a quick case for itself or you're sunk.
- How to do it? Quickly explain two things:
 - ① Why is the topic of your paper interesting?
 - ② What did YOU do? What is YOUR contribution? A new question? An existing question but new methodology? Existing question, existing methodology, new data (e.g. no previous Irish application)?
- Because of its importance, spend a high fraction of your time on the introduction.
- Personally, I start writing the introduction as soon I have some results and then keep adjusting it as the paper evolves.

Explaining the Relationship to Other Work

- You need to explain your contribution.
- So it needs to be put in context.
- This will probably require discussion of previous studies in this area.
- But the purpose is to set up *your* contribution, and distinguish it from previous work.
- Usually, this can be done in the introduction.
- If not, maybe you need a section that explains what you're doing, and while you're at it explains precisely how this connects with previous work.
- But whatever you do, don't do a boring "literature review" mindlessly listing various weakly related studies.
- People tend not to read this stuff (and it marks you out to referees as a beginner.)

- People have limited time on their hands.
- And most of us are impatient.
- Most people don't want to read a 50 page paper written by you. (Of course, if it was Barro or Blanchard)
- Try to keep papers to no more than 20 pages of text.
- If you have a lot more material, maybe it should be two papers (are there two ideas in the paper?)
- Try limit introductions to 2 or 3 pages.
- Don't litter your paper with lots of footnotes.

Describing Your Results

- People tend to skim papers, so charts and tables should essentially speak for themselves.
- The “write-up” of the results isn’t as important as you might think—people tend not to read it closely. From the set-up of your paper, they should be able to get the main points from looking over the tables.
- And they don’t care about the 100 variations on the base regression.
- Don’t put too many numbers in tables, and don’t have too many tables or charts.
- Space out your paper. Short paragraphs, regular section demarcations. Bite-size bits that people can absorb.
- Don’t over-do technique: Are there simple ways to summarise or explain the results?

Presentation: Be Professional!

- A well-written good-looking paper helps convince serious readers that you too are serious, and that your paper is worth the time.
- Read, re-read, edit, and re-edit: This can correct most of the common errors of style, grammar, and spelling that occur in the writing process.
- But if you have particularly poor writing style or grammar, then get help. Take a course. As with most things, this can be improved with hard work.
- Read your stuff aloud. Does it sound right? Are you writing proper sentences? Are you over-using jargon or certain particular phrases?
- Use LaTeX—it's free and it looks much better. Used in 95% of leading research papers—not a coincidence.
- Get your references right. Copy AER style.

Part III

Publishing and Career Development

The Publication Process

- Don't hide your work away “perfecting” it.
- Get it out, get feedback, get rejected start learning the process.
- Develop a thick skin if you want to get published. The process is unfair and biased towards experienced and well-connected people.
- Referees and editors are rarely as careful as you would like. Don't bother raging against “stupid” referees or writing back to editors.
- Do background research: Who edits the journal? Are they likely to be interested in your results? Have they published similar before?
- Remember that referees regularly come from people you have cited.
- Journal success has a large random element and you learn from your early failures. Betting it all on your one big idea is probably a mistake.
- Best strategy: Write a lot of papers.

- You get a revise-and-resubmit? Get excited.
 - Acceptance rates on these are higher than you think. But only if you know how to deal with them.
 - Be meticulous in responding to editors and referees.
 - Provide detailed point-by-point responses. Even if the referee has made silly points, try to give a few words of response on each of them.
- You get rejection letters?
 - It happens to everyone. Lots of famous examples (Lucas “islands” paper, Akerlof on lemons ...)
 - Remember nobody lists their rejections on their CVs.
 - Don’t worry too much about the criticisms. Often these are idiosyncratic to the referee you got.
 - Only make suggested changes that are easy and strike you as improving the paper.
 - Then send it out again quickly.

Developing Your Research Career

- You've got your PhD, maybe published a paper. What next?
- Keep developing your thesis material but don't fall in love with it!
- What else can you work on? Now you've done it once, your next research project will probably be better.
- Specialisation: Expertise in one sub-field is required. But once this is achieved, there are great benefits to becoming an expert in another. Some sub-fields go together (e.g. macro and time series.)
- Keep multiple projects going at the same time and work with co-authors. If one project is going slowly, or you're a bit sick of it, you (or your co-author) can make progress on another.
- One publication in a top journal will do more for you than many publications in lower-tier ones.
- So be ambitious when thinking about what to work on, how to market your work, and where you're sending it.
- Like the Lotto, if you're not in, you can't win.