

Effective Programming Practices for Economists

Software engineering

Naming things

Janoś Gabler and Hans-Martin von Gaudecker

Naming is hard but important!

There are only two hard things in Computer Science: cache invalidation and naming things.

– Phil Karlton

You should name a variable using the same care with which you name a first-born child.

– Robert C. Martin

One of the miseries of life is that everybody names things a little bit wrong, and so it makes a little bit harder to understand things than it would have been if they had been named differently.

– Richard Feynman

What happens here?

```
%wage grid
nw = 20;%number of grid points past real wage
wbupper = 4.25;
wblower = 1.25;
wb = log(wblower):(log(wbupper)-log(wblower))/(nw-1):log(wbupper);
wb = exp(wb(:));
n = ny*nd*nw;
q = ones(ny,nd,nw)/(1+rstar); %q(i,j,k)=q(yT_t=y(i),d_t+1=d(j), w_t=wb(k))
qnew = q;
yTix = repmat((1:ny)',[1 nd nw]);%yT = y(yTix);
dix = repmat(1:nd,[ny 1 nw]);

%note now everything is just ny by nw
yTaix = repmat((1:ny)',[1 nw]);
yhat_d0 = -0.35;
yhat_d1 = (1-yhat_d0)/2/max(y);
yhat = y - max(0,yhat_d0*y+yhat_d1*y.^2);
yTa = yhat(yTaix); %output of tradables under bad standing
cTa = yTa; %consumption of tradables under bad standing
wfa = (1-a) / a * (hbar^alfa./cTa).^(-1/xi) * alfa * hbar^(alfa-1);
wba = repmat(wb',[ny 1]);
```

General recommendations

- Avoid abbreviations, especially if ambiguous
 - is ``constr`` a constraint or a constructor?
 - is ``p`` a path or a probability?
 - However, ``max`` is often better than ``maximum``
- Avoid misspelled words
 - ``rsnbrck``; use ``rosenbrock`` instead
 - ``lambbda`` to avoid the ``lambda`` keyword; use ``lambda_`` instead
- Do not use meaningless or hard to see distinctions
 - Do not use ``Beta`` and ``beta`` for different concepts

Variable names

- Describe the variable, not what you want to do with it
- Do not append the type to the variable name
 - Bad: `names_list`
 - Good: `names`
- Avoid built in keywords like `list`, `var`, `dict`, `type`
- Never use `n`, `c`, `u` and `s` (they make using debuggers harder!)
- Never use `l` and `I` (they are hard to distinguish)

Function names

- Function names start with a verb in imperative mode
 - Good: ``create_``, ``calculate_``, ``convert_``, ``get_``
 - Bad: ``return_``, ``call_``
- Describe what the function does at a sensible level of abstraction
 - Good: ``process_model_specification``
 - Bad: ``convert_user_provided_model_dictionary_to_model_class_and_set_defaults``
- If you want to use ``and`` you need to split your function in two!

The scope rules

- The length of a variable name should be proportional to its scope
 - `'i'`, `'j'`, `'sr'` and `'df'` are acceptable names if their scope is a few lines
 - they are completely unacceptable if their usage extends over 20 or more lines
- The length of a function name should be **inversely** proportional to its scope
 - Functions that are used a lot and well known can have short names
 - Example: `'minimize'` in `estimagic`
 - Functions that are used internally and not well known should have descriptive names
 - Example: `'convert_list_of_dicts_to_dict_of_lists'`