

How to Write a Social Science Research Paper

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ECON/POLISCI 151 Section, Week 9

One Paper = One Point

- Barry Weingast's "[Caltech Rules for Writing Papers](#)"
- One question, clearly stated
- Be able to summarize contribution in first paragraph/sentence of abstract
 - E.g., "This paper uses evidence from a natural experiment in Brazil to show how oil windfalls shore-up ruling regimes."

Elements of a Research Paper

- Gary King's "[Publication, Publication](#)"
 - Style section
- "Rigorously structured and organized into sections and subsections"
 - Research paper, not an essay
- Structure will depend on your goals/message
 - Today's outline is just a starting point/template, not a definitive rule
- Be clear and forthcoming about weaknesses

Structure

- Intro
- [Background]
- [Literature review/related work]
- [Theory]
- Data/methods
- Results
 - Discussion
- [Extensions]
- Conclusion
- References

Introduction

- Research question & its importance
- Existing research/answers, why your study is needed
 - Errors, unsettled debate, new dimension
- Your contribution
- Road map
 - “This paper proceeds as follows. Section 1 introduces...”

Data

- What data you use, where'd you get it
- Which variables you are interested in (and how they pertain to the Q)
- Descriptive stats
 - Summary
 - Trends over time
- Possible concerns
 - e.g. non-representativeness, measurement error

Methods

- What methods you use
 - OLS, RF, k-means, etc.
 - If applicable: model, e.g., $Y = \alpha + \beta_{\text{income}} \text{Income} + \dots$
 - Identification assumptions
- [(Casual inference) identification strategy]
 - [“Control” for confounders: selection on observables]
 - [If applicable: What source of exogeneity are you exploiting? e.g., regression discontinuity + why the discontinuity is valid]

Results

- Estimates
- [Goodness of fit, model evaluation]
- Interpretation
 - Significance
 - Causality?
- Problems, how it could be done better
- [Robustness checks]
- How supportive for your theory? Alternative interpretations?
- How should we update our understanding?

Presenting Results

- Dot-and-whisker plots
- (vs. regression table)

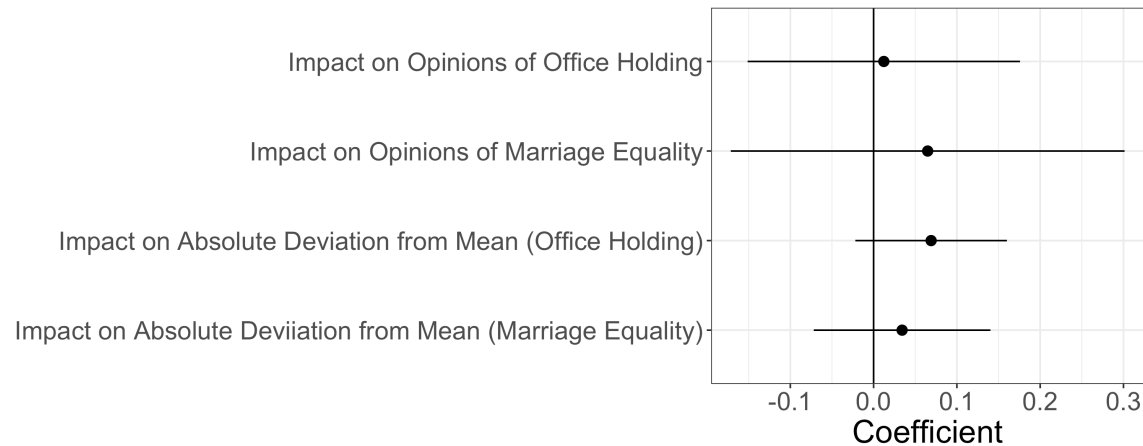


Table 3: Effect of LARI on attitudes

	Office	Marriage	Office (ADM)	Marriage (ADM)
LARI_lag1	0.01 [-0.11, 0.14]	0.06 [-0.15, 0.28]	0.07 [0.01, 0.13]	0.03 [-0.06, 0.13]
age	-0.01 [-0.02, -0.01]	-0.03 [-0.04, -0.02]	0.00 [0.00, 0.01]	0.00 [-0.01, 0.00]
ideology	-0.02 [-0.06, 0.02]	-0.02 [-0.07, 0.02]	0.00 [-0.01, 0.02]	0.01 [-0.01, 0.02]
male	-0.49 [-0.61, -0.38]	-0.70 [-0.88, -0.51]	0.04 [-0.03, 0.11]	-0.12 [-0.20, -0.04]
rural	-0.25 [-0.37, -0.12]	-0.22 [-0.34, -0.10]	-0.05 [-0.13, 0.02]	-0.08 [-0.15, -0.01]
education	0.10 [0.08, 0.13]	0.06 [0.03, 0.08]	0.00 [-0.01, 0.02]	0.00 [-0.01, 0.01]
poli_attendance	-0.12 [-0.17, -0.06]	-0.12 [-0.18, -0.07]	-0.01 [-0.04, 0.03]	-0.04 [-0.07, 0.00]
household_income	0.08 [0.05, 0.10]	0.02 [0.00, 0.05]	0.01 [0.00, 0.03]	0.02 [0.01, 0.03]
rel_importance	0.28 [0.21, 0.35]	0.45 [0.37, 0.53]	-0.02 [-0.05, 0.02]	0.05 [-0.02, 0.12]
news	-0.12 [-0.18, -0.07]	0.00 [-0.04, 0.03]	-0.04 [-0.07, -0.01]	-0.02 [-0.05, 0.01]
evangelical	-0.84 [-1.00, -0.69]	-0.91 [-1.18, -0.64]	0.10 [-0.04, 0.23]	-0.04 [-0.20, 0.12]
Num.Obs.	56 741	51 563	56 741	51 563
R2	0.192	0.240	0.031	0.103
R2 Adj.	0.192	0.240	0.030	0.103
Std.Errors	by: country	by: country	by: country	by: country

Conclusion

- Summarize
- Limitations
- Future work

*My Writing Order

- Abstract
 - Check that your paper is sufficiently focused (one paper, one question)
- Figures
- Results + discussion
- Data, methods, literature
- Conclusion
- Introduction
 - At this point, you will know what it is you are introducing
- Cut, revise, revise, revise...

Style

- [Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*]
- Clear and concise
- Tempting & easy to write a lot. Harder to be concise.
- “write not merely so that the reader can understand but so that he cannot possibly mis-understand” (McCloskey, *Writing of Economics*)
 - You won't be there to explain to the reader

Language

- Academic writing is terse and straightforward
 - Your goal for the reader to understand your results
 - Goal is not to impress them with your vocab. This isn't the SATs. Save your 12-syllable words for the LSAT.
- Avoid “flabby” writing
 - Active > passive
 - Direct > flowery/circuitous
 - Try putting a paragraph into the [Writer's Diet](#) test
- Helen Sword on “[Zombie Nouns](#):" avoid unnecessary -ity, -tion, -ism

Soft “Rubric”

- Main text should be 10-15 pages
 - May vary slightly depending on figures, but no longer than 20
- Include citations (in text citations + references section at end)
- Style of writing matters
- Correctness & extensiveness of analysis matter
- Must include:
 - Clear research question, properly introduced
 - Data & methods
 - Results & interpretation/discussion

Some papers I like

- Theory heavy: Blaydes and Chaney, “[The Feudal Revolution and Europe’s Rise](#)”
- Formal (game theory): Weingast, “[The Political Foundations of Democracy and the Rule of the Law](#)”
- Empiric (probably the closest to what you will be writing):
 - Fouka, “[How Do Immigrants Respond to Discrimination? The Case of Germans in the US During World War I](#)”
 - Dell, “[The Persistent Effects of Peru's Mining Mita](#)”
 - Jha, “[Trade, Institutions, and Ethnic Tolerance: Evidence from South Asia](#)”