

Econ 390: Introduction to Programming with Economic Data

Spring 2026

Instructor Information

Name: M McMain
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Office Hours: MR 11am-12:30pm or By Appointment

Class Information

Dates: Tuesday January 20th, 2026 – Friday May 8th, 2026
Time: TR 2:30-3:45pm
Classroom: 594 Van Hise

Course Description

This course provides an introduction to computer programming using the Python programming language, with an emphasis throughout on economic applications and the analysis of economic data. Research in economics often involves the use of computers for simulation and/or estimation. The computing component of a project will ideally be efficiently coded, well organized, fully documented, and replicable. Students will be introduced to these skills, and by the end of the class will feel comfortable using Python (along with libraries such as pandas and matplotlib) to manage, transform, and analyze data.

This course is intended for those who do not have previous experience programming in Python. If you already know Python, then you should instead take Econ 570 (Fundamentals of Data Analytics for Economists), where students who are proficient in Python tackle more advanced methods in data analytics.

Course Objectives

Following the completion of this course, students will be able to...

- Understand the fundamentals of coding with Python, including being able to import packages, store data with built-in Python data types, manage control flow with loops and conditionals, and write user-defined functions.
- Retrieve cross-sectional, time-series, and panel data from websites and public APIs, store the data in Pandas Series and DataFrames, merge data from different sources, and transform/clean data so it is ready for analysis.
- Calculate economic statistics for Pandas DataFrames as a whole, and also be able to stratify the analysis to determine whether there are heterogenous results for different sub-groups of the population.

- Visualize economic data with Matplotlib line plots, histograms, bar charts, and scatter plots to effectively communicate quantitative ideas through figures.
- Understand the importance of efficient, well-organized, and fully-documented code when conducting economic analysis so results can be replicated and extended.

Textbook, Laptops, & Software

Textbook: [Python For Data Analysis 3e](#) by Wes McKinney & [Coding for Economists](#) by Arthur Turrell.

Laptop: This course requires a laptop (Mac, Windows, or Linux) that you can bring with you to every class meeting and use to complete the weekly problem sets. You will also need access to a reliable internet connection. If you do not have a laptop, or for some reason do not have a laptop for a short period of time, I would recommend looking into UW Madison's [Short Term Laptop Rental](#) for up to one week and the [Computer Lending Program](#) for semester long. **Due to the limited amount of outlets in the classroom I would highly recommend always coming to class with a fully charged laptop.**

Software: I will be using Jupyter Lab via Anaconda for all of my coding throughout the course. You are welcome to use whatever IDE you would like. However, I will only provide "tech support" for Jupyter Lab via Anaconda. All of the software we will use in class is free and while you're welcome to install it on your own, I will dedicate time in the first class to do so.

Course Webpage

Lecture notes and other course materials will be posted to my [Personal Website](#) and linked on the Canvas Page.

Problem Sets

There will be weekly problem sets, which together are worth 40% of your overall grade – so completing them will be critical to your success. For full credit, problem sets must be submitted in Canvas before the submission deadline. Late problem sets may be submitted after this deadline, but will receive a 20% deduction per 24 hours after the due date (e.g. an hour late is -20%, 26 hours late is -40%, etc...). As you think about the assignments, you're welcome to chat about the problems with your classmates, ask questions in office hours, search the internet, and even consult artificial intelligence. However, when it comes time to write-up your answers, you must do so independently. In other words, as you write your own answers, you should NOT simultaneously be looking at text written by anyone else. If you wish to paste in text from another source (e.g., from a website or from an AI like ChatGPT) as part of your answer, then you must clearly indicate you have done so and let us know the source of the text. If you submit text that isn't your own without attribution, your entire submission will not be accepted (i.e., you will receive zero credit for the assignment).

Attendance

I track attendance in lecture and discussion section using Top Hat. Attendance is worth 20% of your overall grade. If Top Hat marks you absent in error, you are responsible for coming to the

front of the classroom to let me know immediately after class. To allow everyone a bit of flexibility, everyone is allowed six excused absences. Save these excused absences for a rainy day (illnesses, family emergencies, etc), since I will not, under any circumstances, excuse additional absences.

Exams

There will be a pen-and-paper midterm, which is worth 20% of your overall grade. The midterm exam will be held in-person during our regularly scheduled lecture on Thursday March 12th, 2026. Ensure you are available to come to class that day. If you are unable to take an exam due to a circumstance that is beyond your control, let me know and we will discuss how best to proceed. To qualify for an accommodation, the circumstance must make it impossible for you to complete the midterm at the scheduled time, it must be fully documented, and you must notify me in advance of the midterm.

There will be pen-and-paper final exam, which is worth 20% of your overall grade. The final must be taken in-person during our official final exam block on Friday May 8th, 2026 from 2:45pm to 4:45pm. If you have another exam at exactly the same time, let me know within the first two weeks of the semester and we'll discuss how best to proceed.

Grade Scale

Final grades will be assigned according to the better of the two following scales:

Raw Score:

A	[92 – 100]	C	[70 – 78)
AB	[88 – 92)	D	[60 – 70)
B	[82 – 88)	F	[0 – 59)
BC	[78 – 82)		

Percentile in Class:

A	[75 – 100]	BC	[10 – 30)
AB	[50 – 75)	C, D, F	[0 – 10)
B	[30 – 50)		

For instance, if you do better than 75% of the class, you will get an A. If the worst grade in the course is a 70%, everyone will get at least a C. The curve can **only help you**. I strive to make all of the grading transparent and fair. If you are unhappy with the way a problem has been graded, I encourage you to discuss it with me, but you must bring the concern to me within two weeks of when you were first able to view the graded problem set or exam.

Students with Disabilities

If you have approval from the McBurney Center for disability-related accommodations, please contact me to discuss how these accommodations will be implemented for this course. This should be done within the first two weeks of the semester.

Faith/Tradition Observances Policy

If an exam or problem set conflicts with a religious observance, let me know and we'll work together to make an accommodation. This should be done as soon as possible, and no later than two weeks before the conflict.

Grievance Procedure

The Department of Economics has developed a grievance procedure through which you may register comments or complaints about a course, an instructor, or a teaching assistant. The Department continues to provide a course evaluation each semester in every class. If you wish to make anonymous complaints to an instructor or teaching assistant, the appropriate vehicle is the course evaluation. If you have a disagreement with an instructor or a teaching assistant, we strongly encourage you to try to resolve the dispute with them directly. The grievance procedure is designed for situations where neither of these channels is appropriate.

If you wish to file a grievance, you should go to room 7238 Social Science and request a Course Comment Sheet. When completing the comment sheet, you will need to provide a detailed statement that describes what aspects of the course you find unsatisfactory. You will need to sign the sheet and provide your student identification number, your address, and a phone where you can be reached. The Department plans to investigate comments fully and will respond in writing to complaints.

Your name, address, phone number, and student ID number will not be revealed to the instructor or teaching assistant involved and will be treated as confidential. The Department needs this information, because it may become necessary for a commenting student to have a meeting with the department chair or a nominee to gather additional information. A name and address are necessary for providing a written response

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is critical to maintaining fair and knowledge based learning at UW-Madison. Academic dishonesty is a serious violation: it undermines the bonds of trust and honesty between members of our academic community, degrades the value of your degree, and defrauds those who may eventually depend upon your knowledge and integrity.

Examples of academic misconduct include, but are not limited to: cheating on an examination (copying from another student's paper, referring to materials on the exam other than those explicitly permitted, continuing to work on an exam after the time has expired, turning in an exam for regrading after making changes to the exam), copying the homework of someone else, submitting for credit work done by someone else, stealing examinations or course materials, tampering with the grade records or with another student's work, or knowingly and intentionally assisting another student in any of the above. Students are reminded that online sources, including anonymous or unattributed ones like Wikipedia, still need to be cited like any other source; and copying from any source without attribution is considered plagiarism.

The Dept. of Economics will deal with these offenses harshly following [UWS14 procedures](#):

1. The penalty for misconduct in most cases will be removal from the course and a failing grade
2. The department will inform the Dean of Students as required and additional sanctions may be applied
3. The department will keep an internal record of misconduct incidents. This information will be made available to teaching faculty writing recommendation letters and to admission offices of the School of Business and Engineering.

If you think you see incidents of misconduct, you should tell your instructor about them, in which case they will take appropriate action and protect your identity. You could also choose to contact our administrator (Tammy Herbst-Koel: therbst@wisc.edu) and your identity will be kept confidential.

Email Policy

All email communication in this course should be done using your @wisc.edu email account. Due to federal laws, such as FERPA, emails coming from a non-UW email may not receive a response. Please, title emails with Econ 390: [Email Issue], where “[Email Issue]” is a summary title of the content of the email. This is to help ensure that your email is noticed and responded to.

Tentative Schedule

The following is a *tentative* schedule for the course.

Week of...	Sections	Week of...	Matplotlib Style & APIs
01/20	Intro & Using Jupyter	03/17	More APIs & Merging
01/27	Markdown & Variables and Types	03/24	More Merging & Groupby
02/03	Data Structures & Conditionals	03/31	Spring Break
02/10	Loops & Slicing	04/07	OLS
02/17	Functions & Pandas DFs	04/14	Categorical Variables & Stata Integration
02/24	Pandas IO & Calculations	04/21	Topics
03/03	Plots with Matplotlib	04/28	Review
03/10	Review & Midterm	05/05	Final Exam on Friday 05/08