Reading and Review Guide

This guide is intended to guide you through the review of a paper and to facilitate in-class discussion. Since the papers we will read apply different empirical approaches and their focus differ, some of the questions will be more appropriate for certain readings than other. You are free to make your responses as broad or detailed as you think is appropriate — the main goal of this guide is to help prepare you for class discussion and ensure you have read the paper carefully paying attention to as much elements as possible. Although you might have different backgrounds and different level of knowledge of econometric approaches, try to grasp the main picture and its implications.

The in-class discussion is intended to help you understand in detail how the authors empirical investigate a research question and how they use econometrics and rhetoric to convince the reader that the effect they have identified is indeed real. The order in which we discuss the issues in this guide will vary somewhat by paper and by the flow of the discussion, so you should expect a lot of skipping around these questions, as well as some discussion of questions and comments that are somewhat off-topic if they seem useful.

Discussion Questions

Background/Significance:

1) What is the motivation for this paper? What is the focus of inquiry (i.e. in a general way, what is the broad research question)? Is this question policy relevant?

Overview:

2) What is the main causal question being asked? Is there any causal question?

a. This paper estimates the impact of _____(X) on _____(Y).
b. How are X and Y measured?

3) What is the basic empirical challenge that the paper faces in tackling this causal question? (For, example, you know the association between X and Y from a large observational retrospective dataset. Then, what are the sources of bias here (confounding, unobservables, selection, etc)?

Data:

7) How is the dataset constructed?

a. What kind of dataset is this (observational, experimental, etc)?
b. At what level(s) are the data measured (individual, household, municipality, etc)?
c. At what level(s) are the data grouped (household, region, hospital, etc.)?
d. Are there issues with measurement error? Attrition?
e. Do all variables actually capture the intended concept? E.g. does data on income adequately capture household consumption?

Findings:

8) What are the main findings?

a. Does the magnitude of the estimated coefficients seem reasonable? Does it seem like a meaningful effect size? (e.g. is it so small that it would never make a difference?)
b. What do you think of how the main findings are presented? (e.g. are they only in tables and should be presented graphically? Are the tables hard to interpret?)
c. How do the findings compare to previous research (if relevant)? Are the differences between these findings and previous results what you would have expected?

Theory/Mechanisms:

9) Does the paper discuss its theory of change or proposed mechanism? That is, what is the proposed pathway from intervention to outcome? Is it plausible in your opinion?

10) Is the paper able to assess the theory or mechanism? For example, does it collect data on intermediate outcomes or behaviors? Or is it a black box where T goes in, Y goes out, and we don't really know why?

11) If the intervention is found to have a significant impact, what evidence is provided for why the program was successful? If the program was not successful, what evidence is provided for why the program was not successful?

Threats to internal validity:

12) Any potential sources of bias still remain? How realistic are these and how large of a source of bias might they be (e.g. would they change the impact estimates a lot or a little? Would they change the sign of the coefficient/direction of the impact?)?

13) Can you think of any additional placebo/falsification tests that could have been done?

External validity:

14) Think about the program/problem being evaluated, the method of intervention (e.g. government run, private management, etc.) and the population that is being considered.

a. How representative are these of the sort of interventions that might address a similar problem and the sort of populations that might be affected by this intervention?
b. Does the paper discuss the generalizability of the results? Do you find it convincing?

Improvements to the Study:

15) What would you have done differently?

a. If you had the same or similar dataset, is there a better/more realistic intervention to analyze?
b. Could you answer the same question with a different kind of data? Example: use better data on final or intermediate outcome. See whether results generalize in a different population.
c. Would you have discussed limitations or advantages of the design differently?

Guide to table/charts and figures

1) What results does the table/figure show?

   a. If this is the result of a regression equation, what is the regression equation (including controls, fixed effects, etc)?

   b. How is the table/chart sub-divided?

2) Why is this table/chart in the paper?

   a. Are these the primary/secondary results? Robustness/falsification tests? Data description?

   b. What does this table/chart tell us about the identification strategy in the paper?

   c. Why are results sub-divided in this way?

3) What are the main take-away points from this table/chart?

   a. What are the most important variables here?

   b. Do the estimated values of the main variables change within the table/chart for different specifications?

   c. Can you interpret these differences?

4) Does this table/chart agree with the authors' interpretation of their results?

   a. Are there any results shown which seem to undermine the argument of the authors?

   b. Is there anything missing from this table/chart which you would have liked to see?

   c. Do the authors address these issues?

5) Is the design of the table/chart appropriate?

   a. If this table/chart stood alone, would you be able to understand it?

   b. Would you have organized it differently?