

Advice for Academic Research

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March 18, 2021

Version vo.1

This is a mix of collective wisdom and some original thoughts distilled into separate points of advice for academic research.

An extensive body of advice has been written on research and academic economics more generally. To cite only a few per theme, see: doing research (Varian, 1997; Pischke, 2012; Niehaus, 2019), writing research (Cochrane, 2005; Goldin and Katz, 2008; Chaubey, 2018), presenting research (Cox, 2000; Shapiro, 2012; Meager, 2017; Storesletten, 2020), applying to PhDs (Athey, 2016), thriving in (or surviving) the PhD (Eble, 2018), and succeeding in the job market (Blattman, 2015; Cawley, 2018; La Ferrara, 2018).

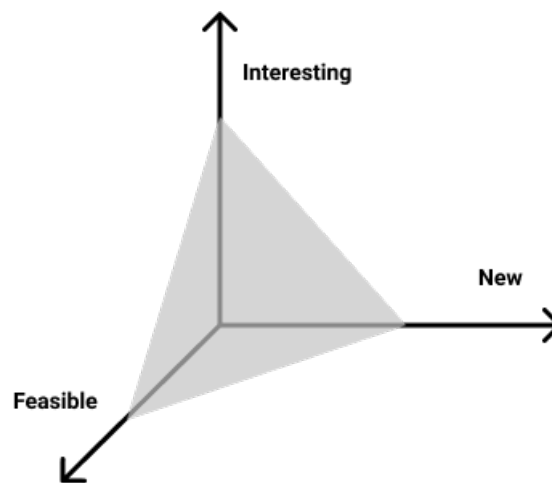
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I A good project: the impossible triad

A project is *good* if it is (1) interesting, (2) new, and (3) feasible, as in the Figure below.



The problem, of course, is that most research ideas check at most two out three boxes. If an idea is interesting and new, then probably nobody wrote about it because it is unfeasible. If an idea is interesting and feasible, then probably somebody already took it. If an idea is new and feasible, then it probably is just not that interesting.

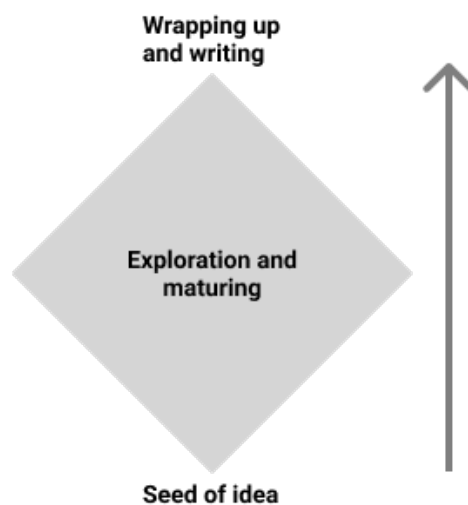
But the obvious question is "how to come up with good ideas?". The answer to that, however, seems elusive (Pavlina, 2007; Newport, 2016; Schilbach, 2019; Perez-Truglia, 2020).

2 Writing a bad paper takes the same time as writing a good one.

Time is a scarce resource, so choose wisely what projects to work on. Try identifying early if a paper is worth the effort. Kill it as quickly as possible if it is not. Learn to say no to new projects. Apply an exception early on because there is learning by doing in writing a first set of papers.

3 A project's scope evolves like a diamond.

Research projects develop in roughly three stages. First, it starts with an idea seed. That is often an intuition, a puzzle, or maybe already a clear question. Second, its scope is enlarged as one explores various theories, data sets, and empirical specifications. Finally, the findings are summarized and trimmed down for writing, presenting, and publishing.

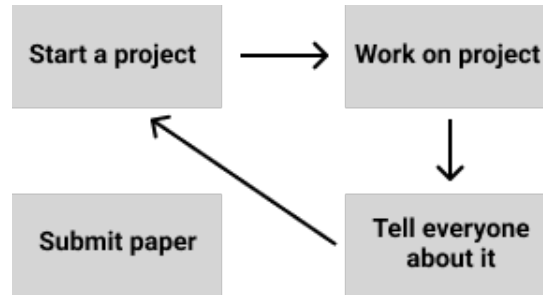


4 No result is as bad or as good as it looks initially.

So practice emotional regulation.

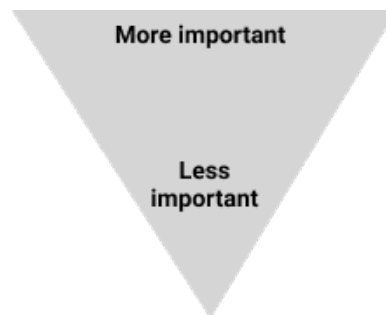
5 Submit papers.

Publishing papers is a long, hard, and frustrating process. But it is crucial for a researcher's career. So make sure to wrap up projects and to push them until publication. It is tempting to just follow the Figure below and skip submitting papers.



6 Pyramidal writing.

Writing should be done as in an inverted pyramid style. The most substantial, interesting, and important information comes first, and vice-versa. And this applies recursively within each section and paragraph.

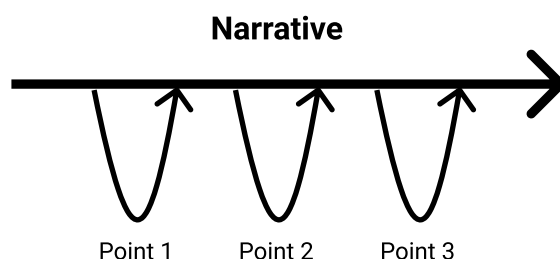


7 What do you study. Why does it matter. What do you find.

If you only have a few seconds or slides to summarize your research, structure your *spiel* so as to maximize signal over noise.

8 Only as much depth as the narrative requires.

When writing or presenting research, the goal is to convey a clear linear narrative. One should provide details and depth to points only to the extent necessary, and always connect the reader back to the narrative.



9 Tell them what you'll tell them. Tell them. Tell them what you told them.

People have short attention spans, and are often not interested in what you have to say. To maximize effectiveness, get used to speaking in a structured way.

A script: What is the big point? Divide it into subpoints. Number it. Name it. Explain it. Shut up. Move to the next point.

10 Practice out loud. A lot.

It takes training to move from written, thought, or mathematical language to spoken language. One has to build a habit of speaking one's research in a clear but conversational manner.

During a talk or conversation, all cognitive effort made should be put only into reshuffling paragraphs around, but not in the content itself.

11 Stay sane.

Academia is not conducive to mental health: deadlines are long, work is lonely, credit attribution is individual, criticisms abound, and competition is fierce. The field of Economics, in particular, is in a dire situation (Bolotnyy et al., 2021). So standard mental

health advice applies. Do physical exercise, foster rewarding relationships, have hobbies, eat and sleep well, etc.

But it goes beyond that. Life is more than any job, and it is more than publishing papers. The world is a big place full of meaningful and exciting opportunities. Think hard whether you really want to stay in academia. If you stay, then stay for the right reasons. Not because you expect to necessarily do groundbreaking research or to get famous or rich, but because you enjoy the *compensating differentials*: the lifestyle, the teaching, the mentoring, the day-to-day life on campus, among others.

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