

# data management theory

adam okulicz-kozaryn

`adam.okulicz.kozaryn@gmail.com`

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## outline

the golden rule

basic theory

programming principles by computer scientists

the zen of Python

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## Know thyself

- ◇ old proverb; can google, see wiki at home
  - *<https://www.google.com/search?q=Know+thyself>*
  - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Know\\_thyself](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Know_thyself)
- ◇ fascinating book <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674013827>
- ◇ but in this class, something else is even more important

## Know Your Data

- ◇ simply cannot manage it well if you don't know it well
- ◇ again, be prepared to invest a lot of time into your data
  - use data that either is of your interest
  - or that can make \$ (say use in future career)
  - or ideally both!
- ◇ and use descriptive stats
  - `des sum tab edit list inspect`, and especially graphs!
- ◇ think about it! don't be mindless!
  - ask questions, be investigative
- ◇ double check, cross check, give to others to check

## the silver rule

- ◇ keep it as simple as possible
  - especially if overwhelmed or struggling
- ◇ say retain only 10var and 100obs
  - much easier to manage such data!

## the three key rules

- ◇ simplicity transparency clarity:
  - use fancy code: macros, loops and ados iff they simplify
- ◇ have chunks of code only once
  - use root .do, macros, loops, ados to accomplish that
- ◇ code it all from raw to final (replication principle)

## all rules in simple words

- ◇ the fancier the code, the more time/effort to write it
- ◇ don't do fancy things unless they save time in the long run
- ◇ it's all about managing complexity
- ◇ automate as much as you can
- ◇ simplify and be clear
- ◇ have general modules (sections or separate dofiles)
  - that can be reused for different projects
- ◇ don't reinvent the wheel—google often



## things usually overlooked

- ◇ have chunks that you do not use but may be useful (commented out)
- ◇ clarity and logical organization; clear sections

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## disclaimer

- ◇ it'll be abstract at first
- ◇ but i want you to start getting familiar with this
  - by the end of the course have it in your blood
- ◇ we'll be coming back

## general idea

- ◇ data management (or academic research in general) is like any other occupation, say carpentry or masonry
- ◇ you need some tools and principles to be good at it
- ◇ tool is PC and stata; principles are in this pdf
- ◇ now that we're pretty good with tools, it's time for theory
- ◇ still, it will be back and forth:
  - some stuff will be more relevant later
  - and so we will be coming back to these rules

## Long's book

- ◇ most of this section is based on
  - Long's "The workflow of data analysis using stata"
- ◇ Long is a sociologist
- ◇ in later section we have some computer science theory
- ◇ Long mentions many things:  
planning, organization, documentation, execution
- ◇ in general, Long's book has many good ideas
  - but also many unnecessary things
  - and focuses on ms windows only

## the principles

- ◇ some principles follow
- ◇ they should help you in your future data endeavors
- ◇ they should help with the grade
  - all ps will be graded according to these
  - (and future) principles

## accuracy or correctness

- ◇ it's fundamental and obvious: code cannot be wrong
- ◇ we'll cover some commands/tricks (eg `assert`)
  - to make sure stata did what you think it did
- ◇ the bottom line and best advice:
  - double check (if not 100% sure or always for rookies)
  - especially at the beginning do not assume things
  - double/triple check the whole dofile once finished
  - use as much `des stats` as possible

## **efficiency: few lines of code do many things**

- ◇ efficiency==programming (macros, loops, ados)
- ◇ but also think how you can optimize your code
  - do more in fewer lines, drop unnecessary things
- ◇ reorganize and rewrite!
  - just like your papers: you print them out
  - and move paragraphs and words around
  - and you simplify and strike out unnecessary words
- ◇ do the same with code! drop everything you can!
- ◇ code should be “tight”
  - as few lines as possible to perform given task



## efficiency: on the other hand

- ◇ but you also want to be extensive in a way
- ◇ in a good way...
- ◇ like with free writing, so with code
  - do “free writing”
- ◇ be expressive and dump your ideas into dofile
- ◇ just be organized so that you know what is going on!
- ◇ yes, by all means, be efficient—drop unnecessary things
- ◇ but do not drop things that may be useful
  - say in the future or other projects
  - may comment them out (useful!)

## rewrite/revise

- ◇ do “free writing” with code, too (i often come up with some idea out of sudden, and then just write it down...)
- ◇ start simple and keep on adding things
- ◇ rewrite/revise your code
- ◇ improve, add, modify, optimize
  - (there is often a tendency to over optimize, i.e. spending weeks on small chunk of code that does not really matter that much)

## **simplicity: different, often opposite, from efficiency**

- ◇ people don't realize this!
- ◇ be as simple as possible in writing the code (papers, too)
- ◇ the more code you have and the more complicated it is:
  - the more likely you have mistakes
  - and the more difficult it is to find them
- ◇ do not complicate your code for the sake of fanciness
  - yes, we do it all the time! don't do it! simpler is better

## **standardization (see my template organize.do)**

- ◇ standardization helps to make fewer mistakes
  - and make your code more transparent
- ◇ whole research process should be standardized; eg:
  - have the same style for graphs, tables (more later)
  - have the same tables of descriptive statistics
- ◇ you should have a template for a dofile (and for a paper)!
  - why waste time on tedious boring sections and parts
  - you could use your time on creative and fun parts instead!
  - research production is like car production
  - don't do everything by hand every time!

## modularity

- ◇ break large tasks into small (manageable) blocks/components
  - (like in dissertation—don't overwhelm yourself doing everything at once)
- ◇ the components are like sections in a paper, step-by-step
- ◇ it is easy then to reuse these components

## automation (closely related to standardization)

- ◇ everything should be coded
- ◇ no copy-paste, point-and-click, etc
- ◇ automate as much as possible!
- ◇ practical reason: much faster!
- ◇ technical reason: computers *\*never\** make mistakes
- ◇ programming (macros, loops, ados) help a great deal

# documentation

- ◇ you may want to have notes...but mostly:
- ◇ documentation is just about having a commented dofile
- ◇ difficult to overestimate the dofile comments
- ◇ note, typically, i undercomment, too

## singularity

- ◇ as discussed in organization and documentation class:
  - have only one chunk of code and one file in one place
- ◇ this principle is often overlooked
- ◇ LaTeX (now even ms word) and html with css do it:
  - take out the (common) formatting
- ◇ do a similar thing in dofile: take out the common code
- ◇ otherwise, it's inefficient, and leads to errors
- ◇ take out the common code and put into common
  - (root or parent) dofile
- ◇ make programs (.ado) (more later)



## singularity example

```
<font size=2 face="Helvetica" color=red>formatted text  
</font> regular text <font size=2 face="Helvetica"  
color=red> formatted text again</font>
```

----

```
aokTag1{font size=2; face="Helvetica";color=red;}
```

-----

```
<aokTag1>formatted text<aokTag1> regular text  
<aokTag1>formatted text again</aokTag1>
```

%% then you can just change tag definition and all  
instances in 150 files are changed automatically !

## portability

- ◇ your code should run easily on other computers
- ◇ say **version 14**
- ◇ use macros for paths
- ◇ always install needed packages
- ◇ say where data come from and load from url
- ◇ usually repost on your site, say goog drive  
(data at source may change)

## tradeoffs: life is not so simple

- ◇ simplicity is sometimes inversely related to efficiency
  - say in programming (loops, macros, ados)
- ◇ simplicity is usually inversely related to automation
- ◇ so make some choices
- ◇ the more serious you are about coding
  - the more you should care for automation and efficiency
- ◇ the more data management you do
  - the more automation/efficiency actually simplifies
- ◇ like stata v excel: excel simpler for simple tasks
  - but stata is simpler for complicated tasks

## a matter of style

- ◇ apart from all these rules, different people have different styles of programming
- ◇ just use whatever you like—a matter of taste
  - eg i do not use global macros (i work on linux), you may find them useful on windows
  - i use `foreach` loops, but not `while` loops
  - i have few big dofiles, but why not have many small ones ?
- ◇ still, all dofiles must be clear and replicable

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## intuition

- ◇ it occurs to me that this class really is more like computer science than social science
  - CS have classes about c, python, etc.
- ◇ we have a class about stata
- ◇ but we still do programming, just in different language
  - so i've read actual computer science lit
  - and what i found useful is in this section
  - great reference!
  - `essp Box 1 Summary of Best Practices`—let's see it!

<http://journals.plos.org/plosbiology/article?id=10.1371/journal.pbio.1001745>

## more principles

- ◇ some more programming principles follow
- ◇ these are rather general programming principles
- ◇ they are applicable to any programming, not only stat software; e.g. c, python, php, etc.
- ◇ yes, there is some repetition/reformulation of the earlier rules
  - but these are really important, so doesn't hurt to repeat
- ◇ these principles come from 2 books about general programming (classics and free!)

<http://catb.org/esr/writings/taoup/>

<http://www.htdp.org/2003-09-26/Book/curriculum-Z-H-1.html>

and free mit courses <http://ocw.mit.edu/courses/>

## clarity

- ◇ “design for transparency and discoverability”
  - write clean code
  - avoid fancy code
  - fancy code is buggier
  - clarity is better than cleverness
- ◇ eg:
  - group logical chunks together
  - more than twice nested loops gets confusing
  - if your code is mostly loops and macros, consider ado file



## modularity

- ◇ “write simple parts that are cleanly connected”
- ◇ “controlling complexity is the essence of computer programming”
  - debugging dominates development
- ◇ eg:
  - better many small loops that each do one thing than one huge ( $>100$  lines) loop that does everything
  - clear sections of one dofile
  - or many dofiles instead of one dofile without sections

## modularity

- ◇ code should be organized logically not chronologically
  - do free writing, but then reorganize
  - like with papers, code should be rewritten, eg:
  - no data management in data analysis part
  - move "generate, recode" to the beginning

## composition

- ◇ “design programs to be connected to other programs”
- ◇ dofile will produce output for another dofile
- ◇ eg: you clean up data in one dofile to make data ready for another dofile to analyze it
  - or just have one big file
- ◇ but the workflow needs to be logically organized
  - use master dofile if many dofiles

## optimization (fancier, fewer lines)

- ◇ yes, but “get it working before optimizing” !
- ◇ eg:
  - recode data using simple commands
  - then make it into macros
  - then into loops
  - then into ado
- ◇ if you are advanced you may skip some steps
  - but make sure it is time efficient
  - do not spend hours on fancy loops for sake of fanciness
  - (hours spent on ado files are fine because you will reuse them in the future)

## extensibility

- ◇ “design for the future because it will be sooner than you think”
  - you will reuse your code in the near future
  - so write it clean
  - have sections, etc
  - use lots of comments
  - reorganize, rewrite
  - optimize

## silence

- ◇ “when a program has nothing surprising to say, it should say nothing”
- ◇ drop unnecessary code
  - if you think it may be useful in the future comment it out, or better yet commit in git and delete
- ◇ do not generate unnecessary output, do not lose your reader in unnecessary clutter, eg use **silently**
  - eg: do not present all the descriptive statistics that stata produced
  - only the meaningful output
  - if the output has nothing to say it should be dropped
  - (or commented out)

## automation (again)

- ◇ “rule of generation: avoid hand-hacking”
- ◇ because humans make mistakes and computers don't, computers should replace humans wherever possible
- ◇ automate anything that you can
- ◇ your data management/analysis is repetitive and involves few if...then...
  - write a program that can do it and do more creative tasks instead
- ◇ don't assume things... use **confirm** and **assert**
- ◇ write ado programs – they are not that difficult
- ◇ write other programs – start with python or bash

## save time: reuse, don't reinvent the wheel

- ◇ if someone has already solved a problem once, reuse it !
- ◇ it is very unlikely you are doing something completely new
- ◇ if anything, the problem is that people do not share their code
- ◇ usually all you need to do is to adjust somebody else's code or your old code



## save time: reuse, don't reinvent the wheel

- ◇ ask people for code:
  - your supervisor
  - journal article authors
  - your colleagues, friends, etc
- ◇ share your code
  - you may want to protect some parts of it
  - (critical, innovative research ideas, etc)
  - but share as much as possible
- ◇ acknowledge others' work—then they will be happier to share

## defensive programming

- ◇ “people are dumb-make program bullet-proof”
  - you will find negative income, age over 200, people change gender over time etc...
  - numbers saved as strings, etc
- ◇ think of all possibilities/instances; especially if you suspect some specific problems...  
and make your program bullet-proof, e.g.:
  - `confirm numeric variable price`
  - `assert sex == 0 | sex == 1`

## construct functions

- ◇ construct your own functions  
in stata these are called ados
- ◇ especially if you have lots of code ( $>1k$  lines)
  - write functions (new primitives) to perform common tasks
- ◇ then a bunch of your code will be your functions
- ◇ and you will be calling (using) them to manipulate your data

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- ◇ Beautiful is better than ugly.
- ◇ Explicit is better than implicit.
- ◇ Simple is better than complex.
- ◇ Complex is better than complicated.
- ◇ Flat is better than nested.
- ◇ Sparse is better than dense.
- ◇ Readability counts.
- ◇ Special cases aren't special enough to break the rules.
- ◇ Although practicality beats purity.

- ◇ Errors should never pass silently.
- ◇ Unless explicitly silenced.
- ◇ In the face of ambiguity, refuse the temptation to guess.
- ◇ There should be one— and preferably only one —obvious way to do it.
- ◇ Although that way may not be obvious at first unless you're Dutch.
- ◇ Now is better than never.
- ◇ Although never is often better than *\*right\** now.
- ◇ If the implementation is hard to explain, it's a bad idea.
- ◇ If the implementation is easy to explain, it may be a good idea.