

Econ 402: Topics in Health Economics

Guidelines for the Back-to-the-Future Project

Aim of Project

The purpose of the project is to give you an opportunity to develop critical thinking and research skills while introducing you to pertinent topics in health economics. Following Northrop Frye's notion that: "poetry can only be made out of other poems; novels out of other novels," we arrive at the idea that articles can only be made out of other articles. This project gives you the opportunity to track innovation in the ideas of other economists and, in doing so, develop skills in critical appraisal and an eye for future innovation.

Why do we call it the Back-to-the-Future project? Notice that most of what we study deals with the past, be it context or method. This means that relative to all but the most recent articles in health economics, we have one advantage over the author(s): we are from the future. By traveling back to the future from some past point, not only can we anticipate innovations relative to a past article, in many cases we can observe the execution of subsequent innovation.

Structure of Project

Your project will be structured around a published research article in the field of Health Economics. To put you in the right frame of mind, consider each article as a piece of research at a point in time, reflecting the past and informing the future. A good research article adds a significant contribution to the field or topic (the past) and will also serve as a basis for subsequent research (the future). This path is easily documented using the reference list and "cited-by" lists, and your aim in the project is to investigate this progression through time for your chosen article. Since progress is often multi-faceted, part of the assignment is to pick an angle or specific thread of innovation upon which to base your project.

The project is designed to develop written and oral communication skills. The oral presentation is a precursor to the written project; it follows the general format of the written project and hence allows you to discuss your project with your classmates and refine your thinking during the writing process. The final written project demands more than a simple article summary but is less involved than a full literature survey on the topic of that article.

Due Dates

The project is due in four phases including oral presentation, self-editing assignments, and peer feedback. The first phase, topic selection, is due on March 1. Oral presentations will be held in three separate groups during the tutorial period in the weeks running from March 1 to March 15. A complete draft is due on March 22, and at this time we will be holding a peer review and self-editing workshop in the tutorial period. The final project is due on April 5. Details on each phase are given below.

Phase 1 - Topic Selection (6% of grade)

By now you are aware that the course is made up of 11 topics in Health Economics.¹ These topics form the basis of selection for your project. Once you have chosen a topic, start researching the literature in this area in search of a candidate research article. To align with Tutorial 2 and 3's focus on understanding empirical evidence in health economics, your choice of article should have an empirical component to the analysis. I also strongly suggest you restrict your choice of articles to "higher quality" economics journals (a search on journal rankings in economics will inform this list). NBER working papers, or other

¹ For the purposes of the project, topic 11 will include only "The Economics of Bads: Smoking, Obesity" (i.e. not "Health System Comparisons").

reputable working papers, are also acceptable sources. Articles without an * on the reading list are fair game.

You will post the chosen article's reference information to the course website, and to avoid replication of articles among your peers, your chosen article cannot already be listed on the group forums (i.e. time is of the essence). You can subscribe to the discussion board if you would like to be updated on your classmates' posts in real time. Before you select your article, you may wish to consult the list of common Phase 1 pitfalls given at the end of this document.

Here is an overview of the Phase 1 deliverables:

1. Research and choose one article related to a course topic.
2. Post the article on the course blog at any time before 10am on March 1st.
To post your article, go to the "Discussions" tab on the course website and choose your assigned group. Click "Create Thread" and post the following information (see example post):
 - a. Subject: topic and article title.
 - b. Message: citation (including doi) and abstract.

Phase 2 – Oral presentation (6% of grade)

By this point you would have chosen an article on one of the course topics. This article will be the focus of both the oral presentation and written project. The idea behind the presentation is to give you a chance to practice giving a short verbal summary with limited time and without reliance on aids like presentation slides. A rubric for presentation evaluation will be provided to aid in your preparation.

Your presentation will comprise a discussion of:

1. Motivation: introduce the topic, identify shortcomings in previous literature in the area, and discuss how the article addresses these shortcomings.
2. Empirical analysis: state the population of interest, the treatment variable of interest, the outcomes considered, describe the nature of the variation in treatment variable, and the empirical method used.
3. Conclusions: what is the bottom line message of the article?
4. Future work: identify one constructive criticism regarding the article and phrase this criticism as a question.

Logistics

The allotted time of each presentation is 3 minutes. There is no need to prepare slides nor will they be permitted. Your delivery will take place in the tutorial period of your assigned group (groups 1, 2, and 3 are assigned to March 1, 8, and 15, respectively), and you need only attend the presentation day assigned to you. If you are unable to present for valid reasons (see syllabus), you will be given the option to present in the next scheduled lecture period (e.g., to the whole class if space in subsequent tutorial presentations does not permit). While preparing your presentation, you may wish to consult the list of common Phase 2 pitfalls given at the end of this document.

Phase 3 – Draft and peer review (14% of grade)

Your written project more completely fleshes out your presentation. It should follow the aim and structure described in the first section of this guideline, and, in terms of content, should be comprised of the following:

With reference to your chosen paper (i.e. past + present):

1. Motivation:

- Introduce the topic, discuss its importance, and describe previous evidence *relative* to the given paper.
 - Provide an explanation of the shortcomings of previous work and argue why these shortcomings are significant.
 - Discuss how the chosen paper addresses the shortcomings of previous work and describe the contributions of the paper.
2. Empirical model:
 - Provide a formal statement of the empirical problem and main estimation equation.
 - In doing so, state the population of interest, the treatment variable of interest, the outcomes considered, and describe the nature of the variation in the treatment variable.
 - You may want to briefly highlight potential difficulties in estimation/analysis of the relationship of interest.
 3. Results:
 - Describe the following: regression results, economic interpretation of results and comparison to previous results.
 - This may include discussion of results for different sub-groups, robustness checks, and evidence addressing the shortcomings of previous work.
 4. Conclusion
 - Conclude by reemphasizing what can be learned from the paper, what contributions have been delivered on, and the bottom line message of the paper.

With reference to subsequent work or extensions (i.e. future):

5. Future Work
 - Find *two* subsequent papers that address/follow from the current research paper. Provide a short description of each of your chosen papers delivering the main contributions and findings.
 - Identify *one* future direction for the research topic that you think is interesting.

Logistics

The written project should be no more than 6 pages (single-spaced, 12pt font, Times New Roman, 1 inch margins) and should be succinct and well written. References, tables and/or figures are not included in the page limit and should be included after your 6 pages of text in the order: reference, tables (if any), figures (if any). A title page with your title, name, student number, course number, and date should preface your project (the title page is not included in the 6 page limit). When referencing, please follow the Chicago Manual of Style's "Author-Date" format. Footnotes (at 10pt font) may be used for explanatory information but not references.

The project will be evaluated on components 1-5 listed in the section above. In case it is helpful, I have posted some reference information on writing in economics on the course website. You also have the writing centre available to you. Two versions of your complete project are due on March 22: an electronic copy posted through Turnitin by 10am and written copy due in class between 10:00-10:10am. Because of the way Phase 3 is graded you need to satisfy both deadlines to receive a full grade for the completeness of your draft and for your peer review work. Needless to say, both versions should be identical and both will be assessed through the review process. For your electronic file, please use the following naming convention: "Topic" + "Your name" + "Lead Author". Example: 06WardAlmond.pdf. Before you submit your first draft, you may wish to consult the list of common Phase 3 pitfalls given at the end of this document.

We will be going through peer review and self-editing tasks in the tutorial period on March 22. Attendance is necessary to the part of your grade that depends on completing a peer review assessment. If you cannot attend for valid reasons (see syllabus), you will be given the option of completing your review

in the next tutorial session. The deadline on submitting your draft, however, is strict, and delay will not be excused for *any* reason. I recommend you start working steadily on the project now to insure against any major/minor catastrophes that could bar completion near the deadline. If you are unable to attend the class on March 22, post your electronic copy and have a friend deliver the hard copy in your stead.

Phase 4 – Final project (74% of grade)

In the final project you have an opportunity to use the self-editing techniques and to address useful comments from your peer review. Again, please submit both an electronic and hard copy by the start of class on April 5. The details and logistics regarding the draft in Phase 3 apply the same to Phase 4. Before you submit your final draft, you may wish to consult the list of common Phase 4 pitfalls given below.

Common pitfalls

Common pitfalls at the paper selection stage:

- 1. The paper is primarily a theoretical or a review paper making it difficult to complete the empirical component of the project.**

Solution: if you want to select a theoretical or a review paper, please see me first so that we can discuss how you can meet the content requirements for the project. Alternatively, you may wish to choose an empirical paper referenced by your chosen paper, and then use the referenced paper as your selected article. In this case, you can discuss your originally chosen paper as one of the articles under “future work”.

- 2. The paper is too “new” meaning there is very little follow up research.**

Solution: similar to the second strategy above: you may wish to choose an empirical paper referenced by your chosen paper, and then use the referenced paper as your selected article. In this case, you can discuss your originally chosen paper as one of the articles under “future work”.

Common pitfalls at the presentation stage:

- 1. The presentation focuses too much on the details and not enough on conveying a higher order summary of the material.**

Solution: leading up to the presentation, you focused on understanding all the details of your chosen article. If you’re having trouble summarizing from here, try coming at it from the opposite direction: write down in one sentence what the paper is about. Then work by adding details to the sentence according to the content outline.

- 2. You are not able to identify the population of interest, the variable of interest, or the outcomes considered.**

Solution: The ability to quickly identify who the analysis is about and what's being related is very useful interpretive skill. This information is usually summarized in the abstract or even in the title. If you are still unsure, a quick conversation with me can usually resolve this.

- 3. Referring to notes or your computer while presenting.**

Solution: how do you get comfortable discussing your material without notes? Easy: practice running through it over and over (e.g. to yourself, to the mirror, to your friends, etc.). Usually by the fifth time you’ll notice you don’t need your notes anymore.

Common pitfalls at the first draft stage:

1. Elements of the content guide are not met.

Solution: Review the content guideline before printing out your draft for submission and double check that you've met each point. Remember, in this stage we are evaluating your paper for completeness, which is a lower bar than evaluation on content and exposition. Coming with an incomplete project (in any way) is an unfortunate loss of easy marks.

2. Style and page limit guidelines are not met.

Solution: Review the logistical guidelines before printing out your draft for submission and double check that you conform to style and page limit specifications. Not conforming to these at the second submission would be judged as a major flaw in your project.

Common pitfalls at the second draft stage:

1. All elements of the content guide are met, but the product lacks a central focus, e.g.,

- Each section is isolated and doesn't relate to a common thread.
- The "future work" section is an afterthought.
- The project focuses exclusively on the chosen paper and not on the evolution of knowledge over time.

2. The project is not well organized or lacks flow.

3. The writing is not clear or error-prone.