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General Guidelines
for Writing Research Papers

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1. Choose the question you are trying to answer. Don't just provide information for its own sake; it should be in response to some real concern. Use this device to limit your topic: find a more specific question.

2. Tell why you think it is an interesting question. For whom is it important? Why do they care? What are the possible ramifications of different answers?

3. Explain the general approach you will take to find the answer. What kind of model (theoretical/econometric/simulation/other)? What simplifying assumptions? Why are those assumptions appropriate? Why is that approach appropriate? What data are needed?

4. Carry out that plan: build the model, collect the data, answer the question.

5. Indicate why and how the final approach differs from the original one envisaged. What data were unavailable? Why was the model too difficult, too complicated, or too expensive? Why were your fallback positions appropriate?

6. Report the results.

7. Discuss their implications.

These seven basic steps apply both to the thought processes and actions in your research, and to the logic of the presentation in the paper. In other words: 1.) Tell 'em what you're gonna tell em (Introduction), 2.) Tell em, and then 3.) Tell 'em what you told em (Conclusion).

Acceptable Kinds of Paper Topics

1. *Theory*. State assumptions, equations, mathematics, and results in the form of propositions that follow logically from the assumptions.
2. *Theory testing*. Design a statistical experiment that might allow you to reject one theory in favor of another.
3. *Hypothesis testing*. State a (set of) simple logical statement(s) that might be accepted or rejected by the use of appropriate data.
4. *Measurement*. Even if a confirmed theory predicts a particular effect, nobody knows the size and importance of this effect until it is measured.

Starter ideas for paper topics

Read the newspaper; see what's hot.
When you read a theory paper, think about what assumptions are driving the results, and how to make alternative assumptions that might generate different results.
When you read a theory paper, think about how to test it.

For an empirical paper, think about "mistakes", or even just alternative procedures to test or measure the same effect (e. g. using two-stage least squares, 2SLS).
Think about other propositions that can be tested with the same data.
Think about other data that can be used to test the same proposition.
Update the data to a new year, to a new country, or to add observations for more years or more individuals. However, always start with replication.

The "Introduction" is key; write it first, to get thinking, and rewrite it again at the end

Use only the first paragraph to state the question and describe its importance. Don't weave around, be overly broad, or use prior literature to motivate it (the question is not important *because* so many papers looked at this issue before!).
Then use the second paragraph for a summary of the most relevant literature (not a full section!). Hint: use present tense, to be consistent. "Smith (1986) presents a similar model, …".
Next, while still on page one, the third paragraph must begin: "The purpose of this paper is …", and summarize what you actually do. (Paragraphs 2 and 3 could be reversed.)
That sets you up for the fourth paragraph, which lists "The contributions of this work" – relative to that prior literature. Clarify what you do that's different.
The fifth paragraph then summarizes your results. Tell the *answer*, so they know what to expect, and how to think about each step along the way, what's driving your results.
In the sixth and final paragraph, as an aid to the reader, plot the course for the rest of the paper. "The first section below presents a theoretical model that can be used to generate specific hypotheses. Then section 2 presents the econometric model, …".
This is "formula" writing, but it *works*! This is the formula in good published papers. Follow it.

Use Rules of Outlining:

The intro needs no heading (it's obvious!). After those six paragraphs (3 pages), use subsection headings to organize the paper. Here is a typical example, using two acceptable outline styles:

I. The Theoretical Model II. Statistical Model A. Equation structure B. Data availability 1. Time-Series 2. Cross-Section III. Results A. Ordinary Least Squares B. Two Stage Least Squares IV. Limitations of the Research V. Conclusion	1. The Theoretical Model 2. Statistical Model 2.1. Equation structure 2.2. Data availability 2.2.1. Time-Series 2.2.2. Cross-Section 3. Results 3.1. Ordinary Least Squares 3.2. Two Stage Least Squares 4. Limitations of the Research 5. Conclusion

Explain everything as thoroughly and clearly as you can. Don't try to be dramatic; unjustified claims reduce your credibility. Thus the paper may seem long and dry, but that's what you need to cover all necessary possibilities and substantiate your results. Get comments, and rewrite. I will read and comment on as many drafts as you want to write, so long as you provide adequate time. Allow a week for me to read and return it, but you can bring a single section at a time.