

Hints on Writing an Essay in Economics*

Public Economics (ECO336)

October 24, 2012

This note is intended for students who would like a few pointers about writing an essay in Economics. It offers a brief description of the elements of a good paper and mentions things the grader will be looking out for when grading, and thus ingredients you should try to incorporate.

At the Outset...

First, make sure you have read the question and know what the expectations for the assignment are (what the question is, intended audience, length etc.). If unclear, speak to the instructor.

Then, to provide content for the paper, it helps to do the required reading carefully (and perhaps look up other sources, appropriately referenced), keeping the question for the assignment in mind. If you are already clear on the nature of the assignment, you will be able to do the reading in a more efficient, directed way.

It cannot be emphasized too much: in order to write an excellent essay, you will need to have an excellent understanding of the relevant issues. This means, in an economics context, that you will need to have an excellent understanding of the underlying economics. If you do not have a clear understanding of the relevant issues, it is advisable not to write a load of garbage anyway: the grader will be able to spot garbage and you will be penalized accordingly. Instead, seek out the assistance of people who can help you improve your understanding before you begin to write.

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The Elements of a Good Paper

Your paper will usually be graded on the basis of three (interrelated) aspects:

- the way the argument is structured
- the quality of the argument you put forward (including the quality of the economics), and
- the quality of the writing.

A paper with the following features will tend to score highly: The introduction defines the issue and provides an indication of the position the author will adopt. (Note: the position does not have to be an extreme one – it may involve shades of gray, often appropriate given the uncertainty in the world. But your position should be a sensible, thoughtful one – one that you can defend in a convincing way.) Each paragraph develops the argument in an ordered, clear manner so that by the conclusion, the reader will know exactly what the assessment of the author is; the reader will also find that assessment compelling. In order to make the argument robust, the author (i.e. you) will have considered possible counter-arguments and judged their merits fairly, saying why they do not undermine the chosen position. And, of course, the paper will be a pleasure to read, which means the author will have taken great pains to write it well.

Structure: Do an Outline

In order to write a compelling paper, it is essential that you work out the structure of your argument *before* you begin writing. This is an iterative process. You may start out, after having done the relevant reading, with a notion of what your preferred position on the issue is. You then amass the relevant arguments for and against that case and reassess how they balance out. At this stage, you may want to modify the position you would be prepared to defend - this often happens as more considerations get weighed in. (Going to see the professor in office hours can be useful here, as you can see if you have overlooked obvious points and find out where your case might need strengthening.)

Next, write down the structure of the argument that leads to your conclusion and form an outline. The outline should not be a vague list of headings, but rather a series of paragraph topic sentences which convey the flow of the argument. It should be a condensed version of the paper which brings out precisely what the argument depends on - show this to a friend (or the professor) if you can for further comments.

A short paper might have the following structure: It opens in a way that grabs the reader's attention, before setting out in the introduction the issues to be addressed in the paper. It is useful if the author also indicates the position she will take on

these issues. Subsequent paragraphs advance the argument. At the beginning of each paragraph, the reader should be able to see where the argument is going, and how the paragraph fits into the overall scheme of things: it shouldn't seem out of place. The smoothly-flowing discussion should take in counter-arguments as it proceeds. By the conclusion, the reader should be (fairly) convinced, with the conclusion saying what has been accomplished, packaging what the reader can take away.

(In a longer essay, it is useful to write an abstract / executive summary that contains the essence of your argument.)

Quality of the Argument

A high-quality argument should be impressive in several ways.

- **Clarity**

The logic of your argument should be clear to the reader (rehearsed above). Economic reasoning usually rests on assumptions, and you should make the key assumptions in your argument explicit.

- **Identifying Tradeoffs**

Identifying important tradeoffs is something dear to the heart of economists. Good economists do this well, so you should aim to do the same in your analysis.

- **Using Evidence Convincingly**

Resolving the tradeoffs you have identified is more challenging, often involving uncertainty about the true size of different effects, as well as normative considerations. But reaching some kind of resolution is what you will usually be expected to do when writing a policy memo. And usually, you will need more than just logic to get you there.

Using the available evidence well is a vital part of any compelling policy paper. Rarely is one able to report a statistic and treat it as the absolute truth; instead, any numbers should be used with caution, and you should think carefully about possible biases in the numbers you use. If there is conflicting evidence (which there often is regarding contentious issues), then try to say where the weight of evidence lies. This is *hard* to do.

- **Thinking of Counter-Arguments**

Committing to a clear thesis early on can help to engage the reader. But if everything is too smooth and simple, the reader will start to think up reasonable counter-objections and begin to lose faith in your judgement. Hence, it is good to anticipate such objections when coming up with a design for the paper (as discussed above). Remember: what you want to strive for is a balanced assessment of the issue, not something which is one-sided

and simplistic.

As a starting point, you should scrutinize your assumptions. Which are the most suspect? Can they nevertheless be defended? If key assumptions are highly dubious, this is unlikely to put your argument on a solid footing. Thinking hard about this is usually worthwhile. More broadly, what are the weakest parts of your argument? How might they be strengthened?

Quality of the Writing...

It is impossible to provide an exhaustive list of rules about how to write well. But learning how to write is a skill worth cultivating, for reasons which should be obvious.¹

Given people do not have infinite time to read a one thousand-page essay, you should aim to be as concise as possible, subject to answering the question well.

Beyond that, if you submit a paper riddled with grammatical errors and confusing sentences, no high grade will be coming your way. So always make sure you proof-read carefully.

At the level of sentences, things to watch out for:

- Sentences which all have the same (short) length. Choppy sentences are not enjoyable to read.
- Sentences which all open with the same word, usually “the.” Variety is the spice of life...
- Sentences which are utterly unfathomable. If you are really clear about the point you want to make, there is less chance of deeply problematic sentences arising.

Within sentences:

- Singular and plural not matching up.
- Tense changes mid-sentence (and indeed throughout the paper).
- Unnecessarily ornate phrases.
- Inappropriate personification eg. economic models which struggle to understand... (Models don’t struggle to understand anything: people do.)

¹To communicate persuasively is an integral part of winning friends and/or influencing people, plus you will earn more money!

References

To get a feel for clear prose style, *The Economist* magazine is a good bet, plus it contains plenty of up-to-date commentary. It may also be worth buying (or at least reading) a style manual - *A Writer's Reference* by Diane Hacker (Third Edition, 1995, Bedford Books of St Martin's Press: Boston) is a particularly accessible one. More substantial, but full of wisdom, is *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* by Joseph M. Williams (Fifth Edition, 1997, Longman). If you are interested, as an economist, in figuring out how to write, you might also look at Dierdre N. McCloskey's excellent and concise book, *Economical Writing* (Second Edition, 2000, Waveland Press).

One excellent (and even enjoyable) way to get a feel for how to write well is to read the work of a great writer – Stephen Jay Gould, Ernest Hemingway, George Bernard Shaw, George Elliott (aka Mary Ann Evans), the list goes on ...

(Question: has anyone read a book recently?)