

The 10 Rules of Great Paper Writing

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[Note: These rules were written for Economics Department job market students. Some will not be relevant to your current assignment. But most are and the others will be relevant to some other task you will be asked to do in life.]

Rule #1: *You will probably not have a great idea.* Theorem #1: It is always possible to transform a good idea into a great paper and a great presentation. Theorem #2: Even if you have a great idea, you can always make it into a poorly written paper and a lousy presentation. This theorem will probably never be needed. See Rule #1.

Rule #2: *The insights of your paper will first be judged by how you present them.* If your paper is written in an unprofessional manner, your empirical work, mathematical proof, or model will be viewed with initial skepticism.

Rule #3: *Your paper is an exercise in persuasion* (I mean in positive not normative economics). Your readers are your audience. They have better things to do than read your paper. Make them interested in your thesis and convinced of your argument.

Rule #4: *No great paper—no matter how well constructed, brilliant, and well written—first emerged from the author’s printer in that form.* It was rewritten at least 20 times. Rewriting is the true art of writing.

Rule #5: *No author—no matter how careful and humble—can see all (or even most) of his or her writing errors.* Trade papers with another student. Be tough; there will be some initial pain, but gratitude will follow.

Rule #6: *Most paragraphs have too many sentences and most sentences have too many words.* Repetition is boring. I repeat: repetition is boring.

Rule #7: *The “foot-in-the-door” parts of your written work are the abstract and introduction.* Write them clearly and concisely. The abstract is not simply the first paragraph of your paper (or the last paragraph for that matter).

Rule #8: *Verbalizing your argument is more difficult than writing it.* Giving a presentation on your paper will reveal to you where your argument falls flat and will show you how to redraft the paper. Give many presentations before you send out your paper. Give them to your workshop and your friends. Even giving them to your dog, cat, or the wall will force you to confront the possible inconsistencies in your argument.

Rule #9: *Be your own worst enemy. If you won’t, someone else will.*

Rule #10: *There are many other rules.* I cannot cover all of them. A few are:

- All tables and figures must have enough information to allow the reader to figure out how to replicate them, even if the “source” is “see Data Appendix.”

- Use Appendixes for descriptions of data sources, certain proofs, and other matters. For empirical work, make certain that your work can be replicated.
- No one wants to read a “literature review.” It is sophomoric. Integrate the literature with the rest of your paper.
- Do not tell your readers what you will be doing. Just do it.
- Do not use general headings such as: “Model,” “Data,” “Findings,” “Literature Review” (see above). You might as well use 1, 2, 3, and 4. Tell your readers what is in the section, e.g., A Model Demonstrating the Finiteness of the Universe.
- Use meaningful variable names. You may know *ps102*, *plop49*, and *oink34* like the back of your hand, but they don’t mean a thing to your reader.
- Do not present every result you have ever produced. Boring. Ask yourself what you need in the presentation and include that. Use an Appendix for other results.
- Check for typos, spelling errors, missing pages, incorrect table or figure numbers, missing references, and the like. These are the cockroaches of writing. Eradicate them.
- Use a style manual or a journal as a guide. Consistency is important.

If you want more (and I suspect you will), here are two books on economics writing:

Economical Writing (2nd edition, Waveland Press) by Deirdre McCloskey (Economics, Rhetoric, Philosophy, University of Illinois, Chicago)

A Guide for the Young Economist (M.I.T. Press, 2001) by William Thomson (Economics, University of Rochester). See also, William Thomson, “The Young Person’s Guide to Writing Economic Theory,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 37 (March 1999): 157-83.