

Different models of how to write a paper (e.g. for master thesis)

What is a paper (within the Economics literature)?

- A description of a novel finding that adds insights to an educated researcher (empirically relevant or with a sound theoretical derivation).
- A treatise that is written to motivate reading and which does not require a patient reader to read it all before being able to understand or take sth home
- Consists of a single main result, of course possibly with other results that complement it.

A paper is not a survey nor a summary of the work that has gone into a research project.

General observations:

- a) You have to know where you want to go and what you want to achieve before you start getting into the details.
- b) Exploration (let's see what happens) without educated hypotheses is not a valid motivation.
- c) A summary of the literature is not valid as such. In fact, summaries are rarely needed. Instead it is good to identify the closest papers and why they are different. Explain the differences as opposed to explaining their content.
- d) Be aware of all the findings that are out there. If you have not found sth similar then you only have to search better.
- e) Your paper gets better if you discuss your ideas with others.
- f) At least 30% of the paper production involves the writing and selling of your finding.

How to start your search for a topic?

- i) Identify a subject in economics (eg data, theory, applied) that you like and where you have shown to have expertise (eg have gotten good grades).
- ii) Choose a topic that you are excited about, as soon your paper writing will get boring so that initial enthusiasm has to carry a long way.
- iii) Having a personal connection to the topic (eg family, earlier job) often helps getting that competitive advantage needed to produce sth novel.
- iv) Do not try to create a model or paper out of the blue. For most masters' thesis projects I strongly advise to write a paper that is very similar to another one.

Types of approaches to creating a paper

- 1) Find your own data and analyse (remember difference between correlation and causality, think about necessary size of data).
- 2) Take published paper and change something and reanalyse (be aware of added value and whether this has been done before). The underlying paper can be applied theory or theory (eg add some uncertainty, an alternative technology or a different form competition), it can be empirical (take the data from published paper and apply a different method or look at sth they did not consider).

- 3) Take story or circumstances and set up a model to better understand situation strategically (story can be from actual occurrence or vaguely related to observed behavior).
- 4) Identify an open empirical question and run a field or lab experiment.

Some specifics

Small helper on title

- Title is very important as it is the brand of your paper.
- Title should be short and a good mix of descriptive and catchy.
- Title should identify the audience and catch the audience.
- Decide on title once you have written down five alternatives.

Small helpers on literature

- Relating your paper to the literature is very important as it shows that you respect what others have done, that you understood what others have done, and that you can add to what they have done by doing something new.
- Keep in mind the outlet and number of citations of a paper you reference when thinking about its relevance and importance. In particular, working papers should not be used to motivate an approach (exception if very recent and easy to argue that very innovative). If the approach was so good then it should have been published. Beware of working papers do not exist as published versions as they contain approaches that are not acceptable.
- Key is to find the right key words, change approach as often as possible. Look for broadly similar ideas in other areas or fields. Same method but different question is as important as same question but different method.
- Be willing to scan several 100 papers, aim to briefly look at 30-40 papers, more in depth at 10 and in detail at 3. You can scan 20-40 in an hour, if you need longer you are doing sth wrong. When scanning a paper, think about what should be in the paper, jump constantly back and forth between the different sections, do not simply read the paper from the beginning to see what is in the paper.
- If you need to find a paper that is very close to yours then you did not search enough.
- Good idea to find seminal paper and then use google scholar to check all papers who cite it. If you have relevant paper go through all references. Then go back to see who cites these papers. Iterative process.

Structure of paper

- Sections are Introduction, Model, Discussion, Conclusion.
- Follow the example of some well published paper.
- Introduction should not summarize the paper but give an entry to what you will be doing and what kind of results to expect. Early on tell reader what is new (This is first paper that ...) and briefly refer to the closest literature. Later in the introduction or in a separate subsection you can go into more detail about literature. But do not summarize everything but explain how other papers are similar and yet different.

- Separate the presentation of assumptions from discussing them.
- Each paragraph has only one objective.
- Do not forget to put all assumptions close to each other, like assumptions on errors, information available when making decisions or solution concepts.
- No formal table of contents allowed. Insert at the end of the introduction one sentence for each chapter explaining what you do there.
- No paper should be longer than 40 pages including all appendices and tables and references. Masters' thesis should not be longer than 25 pages. Font size 11 or 12, spacing at least 1.2.
- Abstract should have at most 100 words. Paper should have no more than 7 footnotes.
- Make sentences as short as possible, none over more than two lines. Avoid using special fonts like italics or underline or bold. Do not use quotes.

Plagiarism

- Do not to copy any sentences from anywhere. Supply reference whenever the material comes from someone else. Zero tolerance. Ask first if it is not clear to you where plagiarism starts.

Software

- Ideally some form of tex, like scientific workplace. Word is only of limited value as the look is really bad and equations do not display well.

Role model

- to get a feeling for how a paper could look, check out top 5 publications (AER, Econometrica, JPE, QJE, ReStud)

Most importantly

- Write the paper as if you were talking to a friend. Use your own words. Feel the writing dynamics. One notices if sentences are moved around. So if a paragraph does not sound good, start over from scrap. In particular, do not assume that the listener knows what you are talking about but also do not treat the listener as being stupid. Your friend is not interested per se but becomes interested by the way you talk, so by the style of your writing, in particular this interest has to emerge by the end of the first page. The default is that the listener is bored and wants to step out of the room. Fight that!