

Economics 1960 – Introduction and thesis structure

Steven Lee
Brown University

September 19 & 23, 2025

Welcome to Economics 1960

- Congratulations, you're writing a thesis!
- The goal of the course is to help *you* in this process

Key dates

- **Work in progress**
 - 12–15 pages, double spaced, 1-inch margins, 12-point font
 - Submit by **12/15** to your advisor and Ashley Timons
- **Honors Thesis**
 - 24–30 pages of text, 40–50 pages total
 - Submit by **date agreed with advisor**, to your advisor and Ashley Timons
 - Approval no later than **4/17**

Course overview

Course goals

- The only goal of this course is to help facilitate the writing of your thesis
- By the end of the course, you should:
 - Know what an economics paper looks like
 - Understand best practices in writing an economics paper
 - Have a sense of how to take your great ideas and convert it into a polished economics paper
- This course is *not* necessarily designed to help you come up with ideas

What topics will we cover?

In lectures/group presentations

- How to structure a paper (today)
- How to develop an empirical strategy
- Where to find data
- Tips on doing literature review

In office hours/group meetings

- How do I manage my time
- How do I interact with my advisor
- Anything else you'd like to chat about!

Course expectations

- Cliché: You get what you put into this course
- You volunteered to write a thesis — make the most of it!
- You alone know your true motivations, align your behavior with those motivations
- Don't let your future self regret your current self's behavior

One last thing

- If your advisor tells you something that contradicts this course, ***listen to your advisor***

Structuring an economics paper

80% of economics papers look like

- Title page, Acknowledgements, Abstract
- Introduction
- Background
- Main body of the paper (*dependent on your subfield*)
- Extensions/Implications
- Conclusion
- References, Appendices, Tables and Figures

Can I deviate from this structure?

Can I deviate from this structure?

- Very rarely

Can I deviate from this structure?

- Very rarely
- Every medium has its own style/structure
 - Books versus academic papers
 - TV versus film
 - YouTube versus TikTok

Going from a consumer to a producer of research

- What do consumers of research want? What is their mindset?
- What do producers want?

Going from a consumer to a producer of research

- What do consumers of research want? What is their mindset?
 - Looking for an answer to a particular question
 - Looking for specific information
 - Limited time and attention
- What do producers want?

Going from a consumer to a producer of research

- What do consumers of research want? What is their mindset?
 - Looking for an answer to a particular question
 - Looking for specific information
 - Limited time and attention
- What do producers want?
 - Their paper to be widely read
 - Their paper to be read by scholars/policymakers in their field

General principles on structure

- Be upfront about your findings and what you do in the paper
 - Readers should recognize quickly what the paper is about
 - An academic paper is not a mystery novel
- Make it easy to read for the reader
 - Readers expect a certain structure → give it to them!
 - An academic paper is not a contemporary painting

Introduction

- Most important section of the paper
 - Treat is like the only section reader will read (often true!)
- What your reader should know by the end of the introduction:
 - Research question
 - Motivation — *why is the research question interesting?*
 - Summary of methodology and results — *what does the paper do to answer that research question? what does it find?*
 - Value-add to literature — *how do the findings relate to prior work in this area?*
- Think of the introduction as a contract between you and the reader:
 - You promise them: My paper will deliver what the introduction says
 - They promise you: Their time, attention, and excitement about your paper

Background

- Provide the reader with background details on your setting
- Will look slightly different based on paper you're writing:
 - Theory paper: *Here's the description of the original model I'm extending*
 - Applied micro paper: *Here are the details on how the policy I'm studying works*
 - Experimental paper: *I ran this experiment in X city/country here's some institutional background*
- Not always necessary (don't err on the side of including just to take up space)

Main body of the paper

- Most deviation from the “standard” format
- However, each subfield has its own unique way
- Structure is going to be *linear*

Main body: Applied micro

- What is the goal of an applied micro paper?

Main body: Applied micro

- What is the goal of an applied micro paper?
- Structure:
 - **Data** — *What is the raw data I use? Where did the data come from? How have I changed the data from its original form?*
 - **Empirical/econometric methods** — *What statistical/econometric methods am I employing on the data? How will this method result in a causal interpretation? Under what assumptions?*
 - **Results/Findings** — *What do I find? Are they robust to changing assumptions or methods?*

Main body: Macro

- What is the goal of a macroeconomics paper?

Main body: Macro

- What is the goal of a macroeconomics paper?
- Structure:
 - **Model** — *What model am I testing/developing? What are the underlying assumptions in the model?*
 - **Results/Findings** — *What do I find? Are they robust to changing assumptions?*

Main body: Theory

- What is the goal of a theory paper?

Main body: Theory

- What is the goal of a theory paper?
- Structure:
 - **Theorems and Proposition** — *What is the new theory I'm proposing? Under what conditions does this theory hold? If this theory holds, what additional things does it imply?*
 - **Empirical application** — *Does my theory hold using “real-world” data?*

Main body: Experimental

- What is the goal of an experimental paper?

Main body: Experimental

- What is the goal of an experimental paper?
- Structure:
 - **Experiment design** — *How are participants randomized? What is their choice set? What external conditions am I controlling for? Which am I not?*
 - **Results** — *What are the findings?*

Main body: Econometrics

- What is the goal of an econometrics paper?

Main body: Econometrics

- What is the goal of an econometrics paper?
- Structure:
 - **Theorems and Proposition** — *What is the new theory I'm proposing? Under what conditions does this theory hold? If this theory holds, what additional things does it imply?*
 - **Simulation/Empirical application** — *Does my theory hold with simulated data? What about with “real-world” data?*

Extensions/Implications

- Some papers have an additional section with more analysis/proofs
 - Your thesis doesn't have to!
- What might be in this section?
 - You test the “mechanism” of your findings (e.g. X causes Y , because of factor A and not factor B)
 - There's a natural subquestion which follows your main research question but it's separable
 - You want to quantify the policy implications of your findings (e.g. since X causes Y , if the government could move everyone from X_1 to X_2 , society would see B benefit)

Conclusion

- Reiterate introduction
- Provide areas for further research given your own research's limitations
- Include general implications of your research