

Economics 1960 – Analytical Writing

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The duality of academic writing

- The fundamental core of your research are your ideas, proofs, analyses
 - The best writing can't paper over poor ideas
- However, regardless of the underlying quality of your ideas, they won't have impact if they aren't communicated well
- The “journal article” is the primary way of communicating and disseminating academic research
- Being good at academic writing can be a big asset. People won't share your paper and its ideas if they:
 - have trouble understanding what it's saying
 - have to wade through tons of minutiae to get the main takeaway
 - think you're overstating or obscuring your findings
- Practically for this class: Harder to get good grade if advisor can't understand you

Writing/communication varies across setting

- Every medium has its own style/structure
 - Books versus journal articles
 - Blockbuster film versus arthouse film
 - YouTube versus TikTok

Differences even within a setting: Newspapers

*U.S. Imports Slid in June on
Higher Tariffs*

*Europe Is Spending Big on Defense.
Will That Help Its Ailing Economy?*

Differences even within a setting: Newspapers

U.S. Imports Slid in June on Higher Tariffs

U.S. imports of goods fell in June, the [Commerce Department](#) said on Tuesday, as President Trump's tariffs continued to weigh on trade.

Europe Is Spending Big on Defense. Will That Help Its Ailing Economy?

At MBDA's missile launcher plant in Bolton, England, Britain's minister for the armed forces, Luke Pollard, stood with his hand outstretched as a test engineer sprinkled tiny microelectronic specks onto his palm as if they were fairy dust.

Writing/communication varies across setting

- Every medium has its own style/structure
 - Books versus journal articles
 - Blockbuster film versus arthouse film
 - YouTube versus TikTok
- Depends on the audience
- An economics paper audience
 - Is smart
 - Is busy
 - Has read many other economics papers
 - Likely is in your field

Principles

- Barbara Minto's pyramid principle: a logical dialog between reader & writer, descending from high level to details (Minto, 2009)
- Dealing with complex arguments: group ideas in hierarchies

The “RAP”¹

- **R**esearch question
 - Links your argument to readers’ concerns
 - Answer to which lies in your paper
- **A**nswer
 - Think about your main findings and summarize them
 - High level idea that takes readers to detailed findings
 - What is your main message?
- **P**ositioning statement
 - Allow readers to see a space in the literature that **R** and **A** occupy
 - Consider the expectations formed when readers see **R** and the scope of your **A**
- ***P** makes space for **R**, while **R** is answered by **A***

¹Adapted from the writing course and *The Little Book on Research Writing* by Chaubey (2018)

Introduction: First part

- Remember: most important section of the paper
- Provoke curiosity in reader and let them know what the main thrust of paper is
- Start with P, incorporating reader's most logical questions about paper
 - Why is the topic worth knowing?
 - What don't we yet know about this topic?
- Naturally leads to first two paragraphs of introduction
 - P+: Description of important topic **worth knowing** that readers should get excited about
 - P-: Carve out a **yet unknown** space for you to contribute to

Introduction: Second part

- Get readers ready for the main business of the paper
- Third paragraph
 - Usually starts with “this paper...” does X
 - It should be some statement that summarizes what you did to answer R , which = your paper!
- Rest of intro forms storyline that readers can recognize and prepares them for body of paper

An aside on paragraphs

- Paragraphs are units of argument, designed to help readers see how argument is advanced by chunk of details
- First sentence of each paragraph (in intro)
 - should form an argument to convey your logic
 - should convey an idea not a detail
 - should provoke mini-question to be answered in paragraph's body
- Often: First sentence should carry forward at least one phrase from first sentence of previous sentence
- You should be able to get the gist of each section of paper just reading the first sentence of each paragraph
- For the intro, first sentences should offer paragraph's RAP-relevant main message

Exercise

- Write your RAP in our google doc for next 15 minutes. You might be tempted to write several versions of a RAP.

Exercise cont.

Exchange RAP with your classmate. Read and comment

- Read **P**
 - Does it describe something worth knowing and something yet unknown?
 - Comment: what **R** do you expect?
- Read **R**
 - Comment: Does the **R** match what you expected?
 - Does it share key terms with **P**?
 - Is it concise?
- Read **A**
 - Length: up to 25 words?
 - Comment: Does **A** match up with **R**?
 - Any idle questions provoked by **P** answered here?

Checklist for Introduction

- First part
 - ✓ Two paragraphs of <100 words?
 - ✓ Does each paragraph make a single point?
 - ✓ Do the points match P
 - ✓ Is R provoked by the end?
 - ✓ Any unnecessary details?
- Second part
 - ✓ Skim 1st sentences—what is the story?
 - ✓ Do paragraphs follow principles of good paragraphs?
 - ✓ 5–6 sentences per paragraph?

Writing the body

- Principles are not that different
- Each section has a clear purpose
- (Optional) Intro paragraph in section describes the RAP-relevant takeaway/main message of section
- Regular paragraphs
 - All support the section's purpose/takeaway
 - Follow principles of good paragraphs

Writing the body (cont.)

“Write the body of your paper as if you were writing it for a robot” - Jesse Shapiro (2022)

- **Be linear:** If the robot encounters concepts that have not yet been defined, it breaks
 - Readers should not have to jump forward in the paper to understand any section
- **Be clear:** If the robot encounters concepts that do not make sense, it breaks.
 - If concepts are not widely known within your field and adjacent fields, define exactly what you mean
- **Be plain:** The robot does not understand fancy talk and is not impressed by it
 - Rhetorical flourishes will do nothing for you; let your actual analyses/theories speak for themselves
- **Be formal:** The robot has no problem with mathematics as long as it is correct.
 - Shorthand can lead to confusion, mathematical notation makes things precise

Common pitfalls in analytical writing

- Not being precise and relying on vague terms (e.g. “somewhat”, “a lot”)
 - Readers can't tell what you're showing
- Stream of consciousness writing with no clear organization into sections or paragraphs
 - Readers can't follow your argument
- Overclaiming hoping it can paper over holes in analysis
 - Readers don't believe what you write
- Not linking paper content with research question
 - Readers feel aimless
- Burying the lede deep in the paper
 - Readers have already moved on to a different paper with the answer they're looking for

Miscellaneous tips — take it or leave it

- Don't put off writing until the end
 - Writing can help crystallize concepts/ideas floating in your head
 - Think of the robot! If the robot “breaks” the night before the deadline, you're out of luck!
- Write an aspirational introduction with hypothetical results
 - Take a hard look at it
 - Is it possible to deliver a version of this introduction?
 - If no, maybe tweak research question. Maybe look for more data.
 - If yes, you have a guiding star for the core of your research efforts
- Have your friends and family read your introduction
- Take breaks between writing sessions to go back to earlier written sections
 - Writing that reads amazing while drafting, can read differently with some distance