

Prof. Chin Fall 2015 ECON 7335
Writing a research paper

1. What topics interest you the most? Take the topics and read more papers on it.
 - a. Browse recent issues of journals
 - b. Check out working papers at NBER, websites of professors doing work in that area of study, conferences in that area of study, institutions doing research that area of study
 - c. Read the news
 - d. Narrow down topic based on your interest and your likely ability to contribute to the relevant literature
2. Take the narrower topic and do a more thorough literature review:
 - a. Look at references section of paper you are interested in, and read some of those entries
 - b. Look for related published papers from ECONLIT
 - c. Google appropriately to get more recent working papers on topic
 - d. Can you make a contribution here? If not, go back to step 1.
3. Take your idea
 - a. Express your idea in a simple question.
 - b. Have people asked nearly the same question before?
 - i. What do they find?
 - ii. What are the strengths and weaknesses of these papers?
 - iii. Can you do any better? How?
 - c. What is the underlying economic theory?
 - d. What is your empirical strategy?
 - i. If your paper's main contribution is on the empirical side, you will have to pay LOTS of attention to identification issues.
 - ii. If not, you still have to worry about identification—otherwise, how could you separate your theoretical channel from others in explaining the same observed phenomenon?
 - e. What data will you use?
 - i. Are there enough observations?
 - ii. Do you understand how the data were collected?
4. Pretend you are giving a 20 minute presentation to convince your advisors and peers that you have a promising research topic. Write a short (2-3 page) *outline* that conveys the essence of your proposed paper, with the following section headings.
 - a. Question
 - b. Motivation
 - c. Theoretical Framework
 - d. Empirical Framework
 - e. Data

5. If you manage to convince yourself and others that you've got a reasonable idea, then proceed with the work. As you work on it, talk to your advisors and peers. Preliminary results may cause you to pursue a different route than initially proposed. Thus, your research plan may be revised again and again.
6. Write up the paper, with the following sections (roughly). Pay attention to your writing (spelling, grammar, style). Mimic the style of a good journal article. Including figures and tables, the paper will probably be 30-50 pages.
 - a. Introduction (Include your research question and motivation here. Some people discuss related literature here, others do it in a separate subsection in the Background section)
 - b. Theoretical Framework/Background (Sometimes there may not be a full-blown model and the main contribution is empirical. In this case, it may be appropriate to have a "Background" section which provides a conceptual framework (without a detailed model) and institutional details.)
 - c. Empirical Framework
 - d. Data
 - e. Results (Often people perform robustness checks too, to provide more evidence that their interpretation is more preferred than alternative explanations for same results.)
 - f. Conclusions (sometimes people say Discussion instead)
 - g. References
 - h. Figures
 - i. Tables
7. Give the paper to your advisors and peers. They will give you comments. Their comments will at the very least cause you to think hard about what you have already done, and will likely involve you revising your work. There will be multiple iterations of this.
 - a. At the very least, you need to satisfy your advisors because you need their signatures to complete your Ph.D.
 - b. Your advisors will also be the writing letters of recommendation to submit with job applications.
 - c. Note that doing the minimum necessary to satisfy your advisors may only waste your time in the long run; the minimum necessary may not lead to a paper that is close to submission-ready, which means you will spend lots of time later to get it submission-ready. Do things right the first time around!
8. Sign up for conferences to present this paper. (You will receive comments, possibly causing you to revise.)
9. Submit this paper to a journal. (You will receive comments, possibly causing you to revise.)
10. Paper is accepted for publication, resubmitted to a different journal, or put in a dark corner of your office. To prevent the latter from happening (and wasting lots of time), do the first couple of steps correctly.