

Writing in Economics: Tips from a Former Math Major

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Tip 1: Remember the Goal

Purpose of research paper is to show/demonstrate/“prove” something to the reader

→ Think of your paper as a long “proof.”

Structure of a proof

- State what is to be proven and maintained assumptions → introduction
- Give statements and reasons → body of text
- Q.E.D → conclusion

Tip 2: Think like a reader

- Try to view everything you write through the eyes of a reader.
- Remember that the reader doesn't know everything, and can't read your mind.
- Don't waste the reader's time (more on this later) with unnecessary details, but show him/her the major connections – don't expect him/her to construct them

Tip 3: Keep Focused

- Know what you want to show or the question you seek to answer
- Begin by telling the reader what you are going to show/prove (equivalent to stating the theorem or hypothesis for a proof) – identify the “scope” of the paper
- Be sure to tell the reader why this is an important question/issue/“theorem”, i.e., why s/he should spend time reading and understanding it
- Make sure everything relates to the focus

Tip 4: Be Logical

- All statements must be supported (by references or previously supported statements) or identified as assumptions (keep in mind the “statement-reason” format of a proof) – avoid opinions or unsubstantiated statements of “fact”
- Each sentence should follow and be logically connected to the previous sentences **in a way that is clear to the reader!**

Tip 5: Don't surprise the reader

- The reader should always know where you're going and see where you've come from
- The reader should never ask
 - “where did this come from?”
 - “what does this have to do with...?”
 - “how is this related to....?”

Tip 6: Be Precise

- Choose your words carefully – be precise, not vague (e.g. NOT “an increase in production will most likely lead to....”)
- Say EXACTLY what you intend – the reader doesn’t know what you MEANT to say, but only what you actually said (e.g., NOT “social marginal cost is the private marginal cost plus any other costs borne by society”)
- Be careful about directions of inference (e.g., if vs. only if vs. if and only if)
- Watch/check for parallels

Tip 7: Be Efficient/Concise

- Don't waste the reader's time with:
 - Unnecessary/irrelevant information
 - Unnecessary repetition
 - Unnecessary detail
- Delete unnecessary words, i.e., say what you want to say in as few words as possible (e.g., “Human disruptions cause...” rather than “Human disruptions are a big cause towards affecting...”)

Tip 8: Be Clear

- Always strive to convey an idea or result in the clearest possible way (e.g., NOT: “it is not going to be wrong anticipating some similarities in economic performance across countries”)
- Avoid long, convoluted sentences

Tip 9: Pay Attention to Details

- Be consistent – if you did it one way in one place, do it that way throughout
 - Notation
 - Terminology
 - Formatting (e.g., spacing, headings, etc.)
 - References (in text and reference list)
- Proofread, Proofread, Proofread !!!

Tip 10: Create a Narrative

Ultimately, you are creating a narrative, so

- Write in complete sentences (including footnotes and equations)
- Follow ALL rules of grammar/syntax, etc.

REVISE, REVISE, REVISE !!!