

How to write Economics

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Abstract

This is a list of the rules of thumb about how to write well. The main part, the 27 rules, comes from D.McCloskey (with minor adjustments). At the end you will find those of M.Twain and G.Orwell. I thought it would be useful (first of all for myself, when I was a PhD student) to have a pocketbook of such recommendations. Use your own judgement, however, on which of these you want to follow. I do not necessarily agree with all of them.

1 Writing is the Economist's trade

Be prepared to be doing homework for the rest of your life, and much of it is writing. The name of the game is "publish or perish". Good writing pays well and bad writing pays badly (many papers are rejected because they are badly written, not because they contain bad research).

2 Writing is thinking

Express your content well - bad writing does not get read. Keep in mind your audience can at any moment get up and leave. Good economists say what they mean when they write. Just like mathematics is a language so is language an instrument of thought.

3 Rules can help but bad rules hurt

Just like mathematics writing can be learned. Just like in mathematics, follow the rules.

4 Be thou clear

The golden rule: be clear! If the reader thinks something you write is unclear then it is, by definition. Clarity is a matter of speed directed

at the point. Bad writing stops the reader with a puzzle in every other sentence. Bad writing makes slow reading. If the reader has too much trouble he gives up.

Reading your own writing cold, a week after drafting it is a good idea.

5 The rules are factual rather than logical.

The rules come from observations. Rules are objective, i.e. not "just one man's opinion". The violation of the rules of clarity and grace send a signal of incompetence. The quality of your writing is measured by its readability.

6 Classical rhetoric guides even the economical writer

Brevity is the soul of clarity. You need an economic rhetoric which has three parts: *invention* (framing of arguments worth listening to), *arrangement* (arranging ideas) and *style*. The standard way to arrange ideas seems to be:

- Introduction
- Outline of the Rest of the Paper
- The Theory
- The Model
- The Results
- Suggestions for Future Research
- Summary

But it is much better (although may be risky) to make your own outline, one that fits your argument.

7 Fluency can be achieved by grit

Style begins with fluency (getting stuff down on paper) and ends with revising (until you've taken out every snare and ugliness). Once planted at the desk resist the temptations to stop. At some point you may have doubts about your product, convictions that what you've done so far is rubbish. The only help is cheerful faith.

8 Write too early rather than too late

Don't wait until the research is done to begin writing. Research *is* writing. As a real student you will have notes, bits of prose to be placed in mosaic. The first outline will be broad. Set it aside but keep it in mind to give the writing direction. You can change it as the essay takes shape. The paper should be a story because readers normally read it from beginning to end.

Make yourself care. Writing cannot be done as a routine, like peeling potatoes. When you get an inspiration use the moment to write, don't let the moment pass. Inspiration cannot be stored in memory.

9 You will need tools

Do not save paper - it is working capital. It is okay to have a lot of papers (if they are properly arranged, of course) on your desk. Don't worry about being neat: clean up in a dull moment.

Every place you read or write should have its own dictionary. Dictionary is more than a spelling list. Pause to read the definitions and the word origins. Part of the purpose is to avoid embarrassing mistakes in usage as well as spelling. For example, "disinterested" and "uninterested" mean two different things.

10 Keep your spirits up, forge ahead, and the like

Creativity is scarce. If you can't think of anything to say do more research (read, calculate, etc.). The guiding question in research is "So What?". Answer that question in each sentence and you will become a great scholar; answer it once a page in a ten-page paper and you will write a good one.

Educate yourself, i.e. live a life of wide experience, and spend big chunks of it reading the best our civilization has to offer.

Saying it out loud helps writing. There is a saying: to write well you need only to become good, and then write naturally. Voice expresses personality. Saying it before writing and reading it out loud after writing it helps you not to write anything you would be embarrassed to speak out to the intended audience.

Regard the outline as an aid, not a master. If you get stuck revise it to fill the idea.

Keep the finished manuscript in some form handy for rereading and revising. At the end of a session, or at any substantial break, always write down your thoughts, however vague, on what will come next. Don't get up without doing this, even to answer nature's call. The ideal storage medium for unused ideas is the piece of paper.

11 Speak to an audience of human beings

Choose someone to write for. Be honest with what your audience is. Aim your draft toward them and keep hauling yourself back to facing them in revisions. The successful piece will have a reader you can be and an author you can tolerate.

12 Avoid boilerplate

Writing must be interesting. Avoid boilerplate. Excessive introduction and summarizing is boilerplate.

Impenetrable theoretical remarks have great prestige in economics. A young writer of economics will sacrifice any amount of relevance and clarity to show that he can speak this way, too. The result is filigreed boilerplate.

The beginning often has boilerplate. Don't start with "This paper...". Don't be tempted to give extensive "background" even if you have read a lot and collected a lot of material. The table-of-contents paragraph in the introduction ("The outline of the paper is as follows...") is a waste of time and space (editors may require this paragraph however). Avoid overtures, and do not give elaborate summaries of what you have said. Never repeat without apologizing for it ("as I said earlier"; or merely "again"). Your prose should read well and clearly even without the headings.

13 Control your tone

Writing, like teaching or social life, is a performance of acting. Choose and keep the character you want to be while writing. C. Wright Mills writes:

...clarify your answer to these important questions: (i) How difficult and complex after all is my subject? (ii) When I write, what status am I claiming for myself? (iii) For whom am I trying to write? (1959, p.218f)

Don't hide behind the status of *The Scientist* with a pose of *This-Stuff-Is-So-Complex-That-I-Can't-Be-Clear*. The first thing you want is to be understood, not admired.

Avoid invective. Minimize usage of "very", "absolutely", "pure", and the like. Allow humor in your writing, you want to entertain your reader.

Robert Solow wrote in 1984:

Writing would be better if more of us saw economics as a way of organizing thoughts and perceptions about economic life rather than as a poor imitation of physics.

14 Paragraphs should have points

The paragraph should be a more or less complete discussion of one topic. It cannot be too long and cannot be too short. The same is true for

sentences. Big quotations (more than 8 typed lines) are usually bad. They can be good if it is something said by an authority in the field and with which you entirely agree. Remember to avoid "plagiarism" (using other people's sentences with the intent of claiming them as your own). It is a serious offense.

15 Make tables, graphs, and displayed equations readable

Tables and graphs are writing, and the usual rules apply: bear your audience in mind, be clear+brief, ask "is this entry necessary?". Titles and heading in tables should be as close to self-explanatory as possible. Labels should use words, not symbols or abbreviations. Tables, graphs, diagrams and displayed equations should elucidate the argument, not obscure it.

16 Footnotes are nests for pedants

A footnote should be subordinate. Avoid putting important work in the footnote. Footnote should only guide the reader to the sources.

17 Make your writing cohere

Make writing hang together, so that the reader can understand it. Sentences must be linked. A possible [pretty-looking] structure is (AB)(BC)(CD).

18 Watch how each word connects with others

Ask yourself the following questions to check the writing:

- Do nouns and verbs link successive sentences?
- Have I used one word to mean one thing?
- Have I used parallel forms to emphasize parallel ideas?
- Can I drop any word?

19 Watch punctuation, weeding out excess commas

Never use the exclamation point! A lot of people are confused about the colon (:) and the semicolon (;). The colon indicates illustrations to follow while the semicolon indicates a parallel remark. The semicolon is also used to mark off items in series when the items are long (it is like a so-called supercomma).

The best general rule is to punctuate by ear rather than by rule.

20 Switch around the order until it sounds good

You can do much with the order of an English sentence. It's mainly a matter of ear: proper words in proper places. Tinker with the sentence until it works.

Try out the words in various places until they work. If you can't get them to work, give up the sentence as a bad idea .

Put the remark if it is important and at the beginning if it is not. The most important rule of rearrangement is that the end is the place for emphasis.

Read, out loud

Do not write anything that you would be embarrassed to speak out loud to the intended audience. The ear is trained by exercise, so read the best literature: Shakespear or Ring Lardner, not *Time* or *Wall Street Journal*.

21 Use verbs, active ones

Write with nouns and, especially, verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs. Delete as many adjectives and adverbs as you can in revision. Use active verbs.

22 Avoid words that bad writers love

Some bad words and what to use instead:

Bad Word	Better Options
concept	idea, notion, thought
situation	position, condition
individuals	people
the existence of	<i>just name the thing</i>
comprise	include, consist of
hypothesize	suppose, expect
(to) state	(to) say
try and do smth	try to do smth
intra-/inter-	within/between
via	by

23 Be concrete

Don't use abstractions to get general. Definiteness is concrete. Don't force your reader to be a code breaker to understand what you mean.

24 Be plain

A lot of economic jargon hides a five-cent thought in a five-dollar word ("current period responses" means "what people know"). Do not get

carried away with jargon.

It *is* the genius of English to let verbs become nouns and nouns adjectives. Do not pile up Nounverbadjectives teutonically.

25 Avoid cheap typographical tricks

Resists acronyms. It is okay to use "M&M" as "Modigliani and Miller", or "PPP" as "purchasing power parity". Use acronyms sparingly, remember to add "air" (for example: *henceforth* "AAO").

If you use *italics*, underlining or "quotation marks" to make a point then your sentence is probably badly set up to give emphasis naturally. Fix it.

26 Avoid this, that, these, those

Take most of this-isms out during revision. Try to use "the" if cannot come up with a better idea. Consider also repeating the word represented by "this".

27 Above all, look at your words

Prepositions cause trouble because they are substitutes for the grammatical cases that inflected languages have. Verbs often come with prepositions (write up, write down, etc.), pare the prepositions away if they are not essential. Think what a word literally means and what it connotes.

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Good style is a matter of taste!

The writer must (according to Mark Twain):

- 1) *Say* what he is proposing to say, not merely come near it.
- 2) Use the right word, not its second cousin.
- 3) Eschew surplusage.
- 4) Not omit necessary details
- 5) Avoid slovenliness of form.
- 6) Use good grammar.
- 7) Employ a simple and straightforward style.

and/or (according to George Orwell):

- 1) Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- 2) Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- 3) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.

- 4) Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- 5) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- 6) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

Good writing is difficult.