

Writing Tips for PhD Theses

Karl Whelan

School of Economics, UCD

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Writing Skills: More Important Than You Think

- What makes a good thesis? Forget about objectivity—beauty is in the eye of the beholder. A good thesis is one that readers think is good.
- So, you need to explain well what you are doing to somebody else
- Your ideas and results won't sell themselves. How you communicate your work is of *crucial* importance.
- There is no point in having an interesting piece of research that nobody understands or sees the point of.
- The “white coat” mentality—that we are mainly scientists who then do a write-up of our results—is misguided.
- Writing is an essential part of the research process, not a last-minute thing to be rushed.
- This is particularly true of PhD theses which are read very carefully by externs, who are hoping that you have explained what you have done in a clear fashion.

Start by Avoiding Very Bad Writing

- People can be quite sensitive about their writing. If you are a native English speaker and you have a degree, you probably think you know how to write and communicate well.
- Chances are, you might be wrong. Most MA graduates and even many professional PhD-qualified economists write very poorly.
- Good writing is hard to define. Bad writing is easy to spot.
- A badly-written thesis will have:
 - ① Mis-spelled words.
 - ② Missing words.
 - ③ Sentences that don't make sense or aren't proper sentences.
 - ④ Poor use of punctuation – full stops, commas etc.
- This annoys the reader because it makes things harder to read (and understand) but also because it's so easy to prevent. It suggests you didn't take the time to be careful.

What To Do About It?

- Read, re-read, edit, and re-edit. And do this as you go along. Read and edit after you've written a page or so.
- This can correct most of the common errors of style, grammar, and spelling that occur in the writing process. Most of you actually do know what a sentence is.
- In addition to catching typos, a quick re-read and edit allows you to check that what you've written gets across what you've been trying to say. Sometimes you can think you've made a point clearly but then you read what you've written and it's not so good.
- Read your stuff aloud or slowly to yourself. Does it sound right? Are you writing proper sentences? Are you over-using jargon or certain particular phrases?
- Use spell checks but don't rely on them.
- Grammar. There are rules about how to use commas, colons, semi-colons, full stops, about what defines a sentence. Try to learn them.

Writing Style

- 1 Write like a human. Some people think they are impressing if they use lots of fancy phrases or terminology. Generally, they are not. It comes across as you guessing how it is that academics write—and then getting it wrong.
- 2 Don't use more words than necessary. Try not to waffle: Better to explain something in one sentence rather than three. This is particularly true when submitting to academic journals which have serious space constraints.
- 3 Give us the sense that you found this interesting. You don't have to describe every number in a table. But you really should tell us “Here's what I think is the interesting result in this table”.
- 4 Don't be repetitive. Avoid making the same point in multiple different parts of a paper. Try not to use the same word or phrase two or three times in a sentence or paragraph.
- 5 Avoid acronyms if possible. “The TSLS compared with OLS show smaller SEs and but the SUR SEs are higher” That kind of thing.
- 6 Use footnotes sparingly. If it's interesting, put it in the paper. If it's boring, maybe you don't need it. And don't place a footnote in the middle of a sentence!

Academic Paper Writing Is Different

- For most of you, this is the first time that you have written anything that is intended to result in a publishable academic paper, so part of the problem is getting used to a new form of communication.
- Structure: Set out a clear structure so that people who give the paper a quick look-over can get a good idea of what you're doing in each section.
- Don't assume everyone knows as much as you do about the topic. Always ask yourself "Would someone who'd didn't know quite as much as I do about the topic (but had read this far) have understood the last page?"
- Keep the effort up. Some papers read like the person was enjoying writing it but then got tired and it peters out.
- Organization. Are all the self-references correct? ("Recall that in Section 3, we showed that ...")
- References: Check that they are all there. Write them into the bibliography as soon as you've added them to the paper.

Introductions Are Crucial

- Introductions are crucial because they set up the reader to understand what your topic is and what you are going to do in your paper.
- Quickly explain two things:
 - ① Why is the topic of your paper interesting?
 - ② What did YOU do? What is YOUR contribution? A new question? An existing question but new methodology? Existing question, existing methodology, new data (e.g. no previous Irish application)?
- Be willing to give an outline of what your results are but don't get into too many details.
- Because of its importance, spend a lot of time on the introduction.
- But don't make it too long. Three pages is a limit. Two is better.
- I often start writing the introduction as soon I have some results and then keep adjusting it as the paper evolves.
- Conclusions, on the other hand, should be kept short and to the point. Don't repeat lots of stuff from the intro.

Literature Reviews

- You need to explain your contribution.
- So it needs to be put in context.
- This will require discussion of previous studies in this area.
- Remember, though, the purpose is to set up *your* contribution, and distinguish it from previous work.
- Don't simply provide a long list of separate descriptions of weakly related studies. (X (2007) did this. Y(2009) did that ...)
- Grouping studies together by type may be a better way of explaining it than listing lots of separate individual studies.
- A well-focused literature review is usually a useful component of a PhD thesis. It shows externs and your supervisor that you have read the literature.
- However, it is not essential that articles submitted for publication have a literature review. You may be able to summarise the existing literature in your introduction or work it into your opening section that sets up what you are doing.

Describing Your Results

- People tend to skim papers, so it's good if charts and tables can essentially speak for themselves.
- The “write-up” of the results isn't quite as important as you might think. People don't necessarily want to read this section very closely. From the set-up of your paper and from looking at the charts and tables, they will hope to be able to get the main points from looking over the tables.
- Beyond tables with lots of numbers, is there a simple way to summarise or explain your results? A graph that gets across the basic idea or a single number that summarises your basic finding. If so, focus on that first and then describe the detailed tables of results.
- People usually won't be interested in reading about the 100 variations on the base regression. Often, a good approach is to describe the jist of the robustness checks and then report the details in an appendix.
- Don't put too many numbers in tables and don't have too many tables or charts.
- If the results aren't standard regression coefficients, perhaps explain exactly what one of the numbers means for illustration.

Presentation: Be Professional!

- A well-written good-looking paper helps convince serious readers that you too are serious, and that your paper is worth the time.
- Space out your paper. Short paragraphs, regular section demarcations. Bite-size bits that people can absorb.
- Whole pages taken up by one paragraph are a real no-no. Even if you think this is all one point (and it's probably not) break it up into three separate paragraphs anyway.
- Use LaTeX—it's free and it looks much better. Used in 95% of leading research papers—not a coincidence.
- Get your references right and use a consistent style. It's not so hard: Just pick a well-known journal and use their style for all references.
- Talk a long hard look at every single page before handing it in for serious consideration: Do some sections start at the bottom of a page? Is everything placed where it should be?

Other Pieces of Advice

- There is lots of good advice on writing out there.
- My favourites are
 - ① John Cochrane (*Writing Tips for PhD Students*): A master technician and one of the smartest guys in the profession gives his (admittedly idiosyncratic) tips on how to write.
 - ② Donald McCloskey, *The Writing of Economics*. I read this years ago and recognised lots of my own bad techniques in the examples.
 - ③ Dan Hamermesh (Texas) has an advice page with tips on writing and other matters.
 - ④ Kwan Choi (*How to Publish in Top Journals*): From a guy who edits a journal, so knows the deal. Some tough advice but very useful.
- I have provided links to these on the class website.