Created in collaboration with CTL Writing Fellows and HWS Faculty members, this resource is intended to assist you in understanding ways of reading and writing for HWS economics classes. It contains the following sections: Reading; Types of Essays; Formatting, Structure, and Organization; Guidelines and Strategies; and Citations. In each section, you will find some general guidelines followed by some tips and suggestions from HWS Faculty in the Economics Department.

**READING**

In order to begin to understand how to write in a discipline, it is important to understand how to read in a discipline. Below are some strategies for reading in economics classes.

**General Guidelines**

- Know what you want to get out of each reading. Textbooks should provide a good introduction to topics. When you read journal articles, you should strive to get the main idea and pull out major themes and statistics that support the main point.
- Graph, charts, and other visuals exemplify larger principles in the text. Use these not as a supplement for the text, but as a way to further your knowledge of the text with visual examples.

**Reading Textbooks**

- Highlight important ideas while you read. This will help when you are writing an essay because you will not need to weed through dense text to find the information that you need.
- Read the introduction and chapter summary.
- Pay attention to the words and bullet points that are designed to stand out in the text—they are there for a reason and probably signify words or concepts that are important for you to thoroughly understand.

**Reading Journal Articles**

- Here are eight simple steps to get the most out of a journal article:
  1. Be sure about what you want to learn by reading an article (i.e. evidence in support of a particular theory, an important theoretical result, understanding of a particular concept, etc.).
  2. Decide whether the article meets your objective.
  3. Read the abstract.
  4. Read the introduction and conclusion.
  5. Re-evaluate whether the journal meets your objective.
6. Writing down important points from the abstract, introduction, and conclusion.
7. Decide whether to continue reading.
8. If so, decide which sections to skip or skim. Often articles contain complex mathematical derivations which are not necessary to understand in order to comprehend the main point of the article (often there are simpler mathematical models in your textbooks or lecture notes).

- Note that these steps do not tell you to read the whole article from beginning to end, but to move through different sections so that you can decide if an article will further your understanding.

**HWS Faculty Respond to Ways of Reading in Economics**

- “When students haven’t done enough reading, it can be difficult to differentiate between the main argument and sub-argument in their papers. Students should begin by researching their topic, taking notes, and then creating a well-developed thesis.” — Felipe Rezende
- “An effective way to write a paper in economics is to model it after the reading students are using as evidence for their argument.” — Jo Beth Mertens
- “It is important to find sources that agree with your thesis and sources that support the opposing viewpoint (i.e. a strong counterpoint).” — Keoka Grayson
- “Your argument should be based on researching and reading in an objective manner.” — Christina Houseworth
- “Most economics journals follow the same structure: the abstract will outline the big argument in the journal while the middle will pull from data to support major claims. Usually the abstract is key because it tells the reader HOW the argument is set up.” — Jennifer Tessendorf
- “The theory in economics is that ‘things fall up.’ The data set explains why things fall up. Read to understand this key concept.” — Jennifer Tessendorf
- “The introduction will usually give a brief literature review which includes the different theorists or economists from which the journal pulls data and ideas.” — Jennifer Tessendorf

**TYPES OF WRITING**

Below is a list of some of the different types of writing you might be asked to write in your Economics classes.

**Theoretical**

- A theoretical is writing about an idea that explains how an economic idea or principle will work, without collected data.
- Your thesis should be supported with background information that you have researched.
Along with prose, it consists of a lot of mathematics. A theory is generally translated into the language of math so the theorist can prove its logic using a mathematical toolkit.

This sets up an empirical essay.

**Empirical**
- With empirical writing, you are testing a model with collected data to compare observed and expected values.
- Like a journal article, empirical writing often requires tables, graphs, and clearly labeled sections.

**Economic History**
- When writing these essays, use economic conditions, laws, and practices to explain an event in history.
- This is similar to an empirical essay because it uses data, but the data comes from historical statistics instead of data collected by the author.
- Economic historians as well as empiricists who use modern data collect similar datasets. In fact, historians generally go a bit further in their collection efforts because historical data is often sparse and “undigitized”.
- In these essays, the focus is on an event but there is still a question to be asked. Economics requires a question and thus an argument regardless of the sub-discipline.

**History of Thought**
- These essays ask you to analyze original concepts in economics.
- Typically assesses a single person’s ideas, like Smith’s laissez-faire or Marx’s socialism.
- Must reference original documents and/or primary sources.

**HWS Faculty Respond to Types of Writing in Economics**
- “Students need to pay attention to what the prompt is actually asking for.” — Jo Beth Mertens
- “It is rare that an economics paper would ever be about someone’s opinion; they are much more fact-based.” — Jo Beth Mertens
- “In upper level courses (300-400 level), student should demonstrate a solid understanding of economics theory in their essays, and not as much of their own opinion. In introductory courses (100-200 level), students often have more of their own point of view in the paper and this is okay as long as they can back their opinions up with the theories they are learning in class. If students at any level are writing reaction papers, they are allowed to include their opinion.” — Felipe Rezende
“The types of writing often depend on the class. Some classes require more reaction papers while others might depend on final papers, literature reviews, or synthesizing different schools of thought.”—Jo Beth Mertens

“Introductory and advanced courses might include writing assignments that necessitate a critical review of the research. Econ 202 (statistics) usually includes some component of student research, followed by a journal-style paper of the research they conducted.”—Christina Houseworth

**FORMATTING, STRUCTURE, AND ORGANIZATION**

Here are some guidelines to keep in mind when writing an essay for economics.

- An economics paper isn’t the place to impress your audience with analogies or metaphors, no matter how seemingly clever they are.
- Most readers are most concerned with the main argument you are trying to make. Your paper should have one central contribution that has its own paragraph and begins the paper. This is your introduction and will explain what your overall argument or the central results of your data.
- Choosing one clear focus may mean that a lot of your research needs to be disregarded. That’s okay: it will make it much easier for your audience to read because you have clearly identified one key contribution.
- As soon as you discuss the major contribution you are outlining in your essay or the major findings from your research, mention something unexpected about the result to captivate readers and challenge their intuition.
- Make sure charts are clear and easy to understand.

**HWS Faculty Respond to Ways of Formatting Essays in Economics**

- “When writing essays for Economics (and for other courses), it is important to write *formally*, not conversationally. Academic essays require a formal voice.”—Jo Beth Mertens
- “Students should focus on the main argument they have chosen, but acknowledge the sub-arguments as well.”—Felipe Rezende
- “It is important to make sure that each sentence has a purpose, especially the introductory sentence of your essay. You can’t have sentences that are too vague OR too obvious.”—Jo Beth Mertens
- “The style of an economics paper is more like a science article than anything else.”—Christina Houseworth
  - One potential way to organize an economics paper could include the following:
    - an abstract, an introduction, a methods section, a results section, a discussion section, and a conclusion. Please note that this format applies to some, but not necessarily all, economics essays.
GUIDELINES AND STRATEGIES

Below you will find a list of guidelines and strategies when writing for economics. Please note that this list is not exhaustive, but merely provides some examples of things to keep in mind while you are writing.

Do

- Plan ahead and outline what needs to be done each day. Use a CTL Big Picture calendar to help you with this process.
- Take the time to understand and define major concepts and ask for clarification if necessary.
- Make sure that you are answering every part of the prompt.
- Create an outline with all articles and figures that will be included in your paper.
- Define terms that will be used throughout your paper.
- Often you will clearly state your argument (i.e. your thesis) in the introduction and thesis of your paper.
- Revise your essay until it would be clear to someone who is unfamiliar with about the subject.
- Perform literature searches when looking for paper topics.
- Take careful notes about information from the articles you read.
- Be aware of the verb tense you use throughout your paper.
- Cite all sources properly throughout your essay and in your works cited page (See Citation section of this document for more information).

Don’t

- Use terms or uncommon jargon without defining them first.
- Include excessive amounts of details, verbs, or terms.
- Begin writing until you have compiled all of your research.
  - For some writers, however, it is important to just write something. It is important to know your process as a writer. Sometimes, those first pages should not be turned in, but just starting to write can help with your thinking.
- Write your paper for your professor—think about audience and write with clarity for that audience.

HWS Faculty Provide Some Strategies for Economics Writing

- “To organize papers for economics, students must start with an outline. Having an organized list of theories and the supporting research aides students in defining their thesis.”—Christina Houseworth
- “It is important to perform every stage of the writing process because this is how students can recognize and fix issues with organization and grammar.”—Jo Beth Mertens
- “It is very important to pay attention to the grading rubric.”—Keoka Grayson
“Students should write their introduction last.”—Christina Houseworth
  o A well thought out introduction cannot be written before the bulk of the paper has been laid out.
“When writing for economics, do not:
  o turn in a paper with grammar mistakes and misspellings
  o use flowery language
  o use unclear antecedents.”—Christina Houseworth
“Students should think of writing as mostly research-based. They should explain theory in their own words, grounded in evidence from articles [they have read to prepare to write for the assignment] and explain what is missing. Students are trying to help their audience understand why or why not a proxy may prove economics falls up.”—Jennifer Tessendorf
“To avoid plagiarizing, students should refer to major arguments and cite data. For example, ‘in graph 1.2…’”—Jennifer Tessendorf

CITATIONS

When writing Economics essays, you will either use either Chicago Style or APA style of citations. This will mostly depend on the preference of the professor. Please see the Reference page below for examples of APA style citations.

REFERENCES


This resource was created in conjunction with the following HWS Economics Faculty and Center for Teaching and Learning Writing Fellows:
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