

Writing in Economics

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Introduction to the Writing Guide Series For Faculty

The materials in this writing guide were designed as a resource for Writing Intensive (WI) instructors and other faculty integrating writing in the classroom. The materials can be used to support thinking and teaching about discipline-specific writing conventions, and to position writing in your discipline relative to what students learn in the University Writing Seminar (UWS). Many of these materials can be shared with or modified for sharing with students.

There are additional materials to support WI instructors more generally on the University Writing Program (UWP) website -

<https://www.brandeis.edu/writing-program/resources/faculty/wi-instructor-resources/index.html>

If there are other materials that would be useful to you in your incorporation of writing in the classroom, please reach out to the UWP. We are available for consultation and to provide support for writing across the curriculum (WAC). We also welcome comments and suggestions that might improve the next iteration of the guide, and would appreciate feedback.

uwp@brandeis.edu * <https://www.brandeis.edu/writing-program/index.html>

Introduction to the Writing Guide Series For Brandeis Students

The materials in this writing guide were designed to provide an introduction to discipline-specific writing for students and as a resource for faculty integrating writing in the classroom.

The materials can be used to help you think about writing in your discipline relative to what you learned in UWS. Just like you discussed in the Comparative Genre Analysis, writing across genres contains the same elements but may sometimes look different. The table below will help you think about how elements of writing (e.g., thesis, evidence) might look in the sciences and social sciences.

The materials below also provide a brief (but not exhaustive) overview of writing in the disciplines, answers to frequently asked questions or common student mistakes, additional resources, and sample writing in the field.

If you have questions about any of these materials, don't hesitate to ask for help from your professor, a librarian, the writing center, or any of the resources on campus.

Introduction to Writing in Economics

Writing in economics includes the same elements as all academic writing, with an emphasis on clear communication. However, as a social science, writers use certain writing conventions to communicate in a disciplinary specific way.

Economics writing should be accessible to a broader audience. Writers should avoid unnecessary jargon and emphasize concision and clarity of language. While individual styles can vary, writers generally avoid more flowery prose or rhetorical devices (e.g., metaphors). When jargon is used, writers should clearly define any terms and be mindful of how economists use terminology. Quotes are used sparingly, and writers should paraphrase evidence when possible.

Much of the writing in economics is quantitative and technical. Writers use frequent visuals to represent their claims, including formulas and graphics (i.e., tables, figures). Graphics should have clearly labeled axes and headings, and should be referenced by number (e.g., Figure 1, Table II) and fully explained in the text.

Economics writing should be clearly organized, using subheadings to guide the reader (e.g., introduction, literature review, etc.).

There are many different types of economics writing, but the most common include (see examples [below](#)):

1. Data Releases: economic statistics
2. Economic Analyst Reports: reports from bank research groups, the World Bank, economics groups, government groups, etc.
3. Review Articles / Literature Reviews: summaries and evaluation of economics literature
4. Policy Briefs: brief summaries for a more general audience that present practical implications and can be used to inform political decisions
5. Academic Articles: empirical and theoretical papers that present original research

Economists also write often for broader, more general audiences:

6. News Articles
7. Blog Posts and popular books
8. Podcasts

Building Off of the UWS

In UWS, students learn and practice common elements of writing. During the Comparative Genre Analysis (CGA) unit, they discuss how these elements are present in writing across the disciplines, but may sometimes look different.

When teaching writing in economics, it is useful to think about how elements of writing look both similar and different to what students have already learned.

Element of Academic Writing as Learned in UWS	How this element may be different / similar in economics
Thesis: UWS essays are thesis-driven essays with a clearly stated claim / argument.	Economics papers often include a thesis statement towards the end of the introduction. The thesis is typically followed by a concise outline of the structure of the paper / argument.
Motive or What's at Stake: In UWS, students learn to motivate their writing by showing the reader why their topic / argument matters.	Writing in economics is motivated by a larger problem or question. Even when the topic of the paper seems narrow, writers should develop the broader implications of the results, including real world impacts.
Evidence: In UWS, students learn to support their arguments with evidence (i.e., data, examples, quotes, etc.).	Evidence is often in the form of data. Unlike traditional humanities writing, quotes are used sparingly. Figures/tables are typically used to summarize evidence.
Analysis / Argument: Students in UWS practice analysis, looking closely at evidence and forming meaningful arguments that are nuanced and incorporate counterarguments and complexity.	Analysis in economics may include descriptive statistics and statistical tests of economic models. Economists often limit the scope of their analysis to make it more tractable, but will elaborate on the broader implications of the results.

<p>Sources / Citations: In UWS, students practice using primary and secondary sources as evidence. Students typically learn MLA, APA, or Chicago-style citations.</p>	<p>Economics most often uses APA (name, date) style citations, though Chicago is sometimes used as well (name/date version, not footnotes). Footnotes are used sparingly in economics.</p>
<p>Structure: In UWS, students work on being intentional with the organization of their essay, thinking carefully about where parts of the argument go.</p>	<p>Effective economics writing relies on a clear organization and a flexible structure, depending on the needs of the writing.</p> <p>Sections vary depending on the type of writing, the journal of publication, and the needs of the research. However, research papers are often organized around an IMRD (introduction and literature review, methods, results, discussion / conclusions) template.</p>
<p>Transitions: Students learn in UWS to move between ideas, paying careful attention to transition language and flow.</p>	<p>Flow is supported by clearly worded subheadings. Within paragraphs, transitions remain as important as in any writing.</p>
<p>Style: In UWS, students work on their writing style, making choices about formality, use of jargon, clarity, and understanding the needs of their audience.</p>	<p>In economics, <u>clarity</u> is very important. Writing should be concise and precise, and is often technical / mathematical. Fancy imagery or ornate language usually distracts from key points. Analogies, metaphors, etc. are rarely used. Use an active voice when possible.</p>
<p>Title: UWS papers include titles that inform the reader of the argument.</p>	<p>Economics titles should catch attention, like a news article, but also be informative and clear.</p>

FAQ / Common Mistakes in Student Writing in Economics

Using the wrong citation style. Economics writing most often uses [APA](#) or sometimes [Chicago](#) style (name/date version) citations (NOT name/page number citations, like [MLA](#)).

Using too many quotations. Students should only use quotes when the specific wording of the quote is important and requires analysis. Otherwise, students should paraphrase ideas in their own words (note: citations are still needed, but not page numbers). When quotes are used, keep them as short as possible (and include page numbers with the citation).

Tables/Figures lack the necessarily details to stand alone. Any graphics must be able to be understood on their own. Label all figure axes and table columns, including units, and format graphics properly (often using APA formatting). All figures and tables should have titles/captions; figure legends are critical when there are multiple series being presented. Any data used in graphics should be identified and cited. All graphics must be supported with fully developed language in the text, and number in the order they appear in the article (i.e., the first figure to appear in the text is figure 1).

Failure to understand what is / is not common knowledge. Students often interpret more commonly known ideas as common knowledge (and therefore omit a citation). However, much of this information does in fact require a citation, and students should err on the conservative side when citing. Paying attention to published articles can help students figure out what counts as common knowledge.

Using too much jargon and/or jargon that is used incorrectly or not properly defined. Economics writers should favor layman's terms and accessible language over jargon and overly academic prose.

Lack of awareness of the audience. Student writers often lose track of who their audience is in a piece of writing. Much of economics writing is meant for a broad audience. As such, writers need to adjust their writing to reflect what the reader may or may not know, to define needed terms, and to explain arguments and findings in a way that is accessible to a diverse readership.

Other Sources for Learning About Writing in Economics

There are multiple guides written to support writers in economics. Many of these guides are written with a student audience in mind.

[A Guide to Writing in Economics](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58991b1546c3c4da5df402e4/t/589c5b0f37c58162f7acb007/1486641936481/A+Guide+to+Writing+in+Economics.pdf) (an extensive guide written for undergraduate students in economics); see also Dudenhefer's brief guide to [Writing in Economics](https://twp.duke.edu/sites/twp.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/econ.original.pdf)

Paul Dudenhefer, 2014, Duke University

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58991b1546c3c4da5df402e4/t/589c5b0f37c58162f7acb007/1486641936481/A+Guide+to+Writing+in+Economics.pdf>

<https://twp.duke.edu/sites/twp.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/econ.original.pdf>

[Writing Economics](https://writingproject.fas.harvard.edu/files/hwp/files/writingeconomics.pdf) (an extensive guide written for undergraduate students in economics)

Robert Neugeboren & Mireille Jacobson, 2001, updated 2005, Harvard University

<https://writingproject.fas.harvard.edu/files/hwp/files/writingeconomics.pdf>

[Writing Tips for Economics Research Papers - 2021-2022 Edition](https://docs.iza.org/dp15057.pdf) (a guide for writers of economics)

Plamen Nikolov, 2002, IZA Institute of Labor Economics

<https://docs.iza.org/dp15057.pdf>

[Tips for Writing an Economics Paper](https://www.brandeis.edu/writing-program/resources/faculty/wi-instructor-resources/econ-tips.html) (a brief guide with tips for writing student papers in economics)

Brandeis Writing Program

<https://www.brandeis.edu/writing-program/resources/faculty/wi-instructor-resources/econ-tips.html>

[Writing in Economics: Components of a Research Paper](https://www.csus.edu/indiv/v/vangaasbeckk/resources/writing/comp.htm) (a brief guide to writing a research paper in economics)

Kristin A. Van Gaasbeck, California State University, Sacramento

<https://www.csus.edu/indiv/v/vangaasbeckk/resources/writing/comp.htm>

[The Young Economist's Short Guide to Writing Economics Research](https://www.pomona.edu/administration/writing-center/student-resources/writing-humanities-and-social-sciences/young-economists-short-guide-writing-economic-research) (a brief online guide for students)

Pomona College

<https://www.pomona.edu/administration/writing-center/student-resources/writing-humanities-and-social-sciences/young-economists-short-guide-writing-economic-research>

Sample Writing in Economics

Scholarly Writing:

- [Government data release](#): “Employment Situation” (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023)
- [Economic Analyst Report](#): “Is a Global Recession Imminent?” (World Bank, 2022)
- [Review Article / Literature Review](#): “A Literature Review of the Economics of COVID-19” by Brodeur et al., 2021
- [Policy brief](#): “Minimum Wage Response to COVID-19 and Inflation Crises: An Asia-Pacific Region Overview” (International Labor Organization)
- [Academic article](#): “Think Globally, Act Globally: Opportunities to Mitigate Greenhouse Gas Emissions in Low- and Middle-Income Countries” by Gennerster and Jayachandran, 2023

Economics Writing for a More General Audience:

- [News Article](#): “US Inflation Report to Keep Fed Leaning Towards More Rate Hikes” (Bloomberg, November 2023)
- Blog Posts or Popular Books
 - [Freakonomics](#) books
 - [Secrets of Economics Indicators](#) book
 - The [Conversable Economist](#) blog
- Podcasts
 - The [Indicator from Planet Money](#) podcast
 - [Freakonomics](#) podcast
 - [Oddlots](#) podcast from Bloomberg
 - [AEA Research Highlights](#) podcast
 - [Trade Talks](#) podcast