Writing Economics
How to Avoid the Worst in Academic Writing

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What We Must Have

1. Passion
2. Structure
3. Language
4. Form
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The Importance of Passion

- You cannot write a good thesis if you are not passionate about your research.
- Writing a good thesis involves a lot of work. If you hate your topic, you will suffer.
- Keep in mind that different people have passion for different things.
- Make your supervisor and opponent passionate about your topic, otherwise they will suffer as well.
How to Find Passion?

- Shake the world—important questions are lying around unanswered. Read the Journal of Economic Perspectives.
- Really good papers build on simple questions from real life, not on adding one variable to one particular regression.
- It does not exactly have to be an is-there-global-warming type of question. For instance:
  - By how much is the hosting team more likely to win a soccer match?
  - What is the influence of beer consumption on your salary?
Important questions generate tons of papers.

But if you have 100 papers contradicting each other, what can you say?

I collect all papers ever done for one question and extract their results.

Econometrics tells me what the literature says.

This is called meta-analysis.
Share Your Passion. . .

- With your supervisor. Consult your progress regularly, but remember the supervisor is not your slave.
- With your fellow students. Mutual feedback will lead to a Pareto-effective improvement.
- With other institutions. Before you start try grant agencies. When you are done try competitions for best papers (Bolzano Prize, Englis Prize, Young Economist, Olga Radzyner Award, GDN Medal, etc.).
- More information about competitions available on the IES web.
Common Mistakes

1. We often choose topic almost randomly by browsing the website with offered topics.
2. We cannot credibly explain the topic’s importance to other people.
3. We select too broad topics.
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You must have a clear structure before you start writing. After you begin, however, adjustments are often necessary; no hard rule exists how to structure your thesis. Suitable for most:

1. Abstract
2. Introduction
3. Literature review
4. Methodology
5. Results
6. Discussion
7. Conclusion
8. References

You can also structure your thesis as two related but separate papers.
Abstract

- Abstract should be shorter than 200 words.
- Avoid citing in the abstract, avoid using acronyms.
- Keep the abstract as simple as possible.
- Explain your topic, approach, and results.
- Write your abstract so as every educated person can understand it.
Introduction should take less than 10% of your thesis.
Introduction should be written after your research is complete.
It should not have sections and subsections.
It may consist of three paragraphs:

1. The first part deals with the general problem statement and relevance.
2. The second part describes the methodology and stresses the value added compared with previous research.
3. The last part describes the structure of the thesis, typically starting with “The thesis is structured as follows.”
Literature review should take less than 25% of the thesis not counting references and appendices (unless, of course, literature survey is your focus).


Avoid long passages of text summarizing studies one by one; rather take several studies and compare them.
Methodology

- Formulate precisely your hypotheses and, based on the literature review, state which methods you are going to use.
- If you are writing an empirical thesis, describe your data and econometric techniques (the recommended econometric software is Stata).
- Stress the novelty of your approach compared with the previous literature.
Results

- Apply the methods described in the methodology chapter to your problem.
- If you are writing an empirical thesis, present regression results and comment on statistical properties (each regression method has assumptions violation of which makes your results unreliable).
- There is nothing wrong with insignificant results. Do not hunt for statistical significance!
- Follow carefully the way results are presented in top journals.
Discussion

- Discussion of the results is the crucial part of your work.
- Find the economics behind your theorems or regression coefficients.
- Compare your results (and interpretation) with the previous literature.
- When you find some policy implications, discuss them (but be careful with recommendations).
Conclusion

- Conclusion should take less than 10% of the thesis.
- Conclusion should briefly summarize the problem statement and emphasize the main contribution of the thesis.
- Readers should be able to understand your conclusion without having to read the whole thesis.
- Conclusion typically ends with an outlook that describes possible extensions of the presented methodology.
- Keep in mind that many people read only abstract, introduction, and conclusion.
Use a bibliographic manager (JabRef, Zotero).

List exactly all sources you actually cite in the thesis; nothing more, nothing less.

Never cite Wikipedia (or, e.g., Britské listy) in any professional work. Please!

Use preferentially articles from top journals, then articles from peer-reviewed academic journals, then working papers from respectable institutions (universities, central banks, international organizations).

Avoid other material if possible.
Common Mistakes

1. We write 30 pages of introduction because we are afraid of failing to make it above the page limit.
2. We do not sort the list of references alphabetically (perhaps because we are lazy to use a bibliographic manager).
3. We review the literature separately so that each page is a summary of one paper.
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Czech or English?

The advantages of writing in English
- You can share your passion with more people (grants, awards).
- You will use English in your everyday life anyway.
- You do not have to translate technical terms.

The advantages of writing in Czech/Slovak
- Thesis in good Czech is always better than in lousy English.
- Writing in Czech is faster as we are native speakers.
- Writing in Czech reduces the danger of plagiarism.
As non-native speakers we need help when we decide to write in English. But the following books will be handy even for people writing in Czech:

1. Strunk and White (2000): “The Elements of Style.” Everybody should read it at least twice (also available as an audio book).

2. McCloskey (1999): “Economical Writing.” Recommended for all economists; you can read it in one afternoon.

Short theses are the best—it is the beauty of ideas what matters, not the number of pages.

Omit useless words.

After you finish each chapter, you will find that at least 25% of words are unnecessary. Delete them.

Your opponent will be pleased when your thesis is short.
Do not fool yourself or anybody else with fancy technical language.

Your opponent is not stupid. He will find out when you try to cover the lack of ideas by mathematical expressions copied from a textbook.

Everything can be written in a way accessible to an average educated economist.

But you are not writing prose or an introductory textbook. Get to the point quickly; explain it clearly.
Avoid elegant variation. Once you call something “a house”, do not call it “cottage” in the next sentence.

Your sentences and paragraphs should tie together logically.

Paragraphs may start with an introductory sentence summarizing the topic of the paragraph.

The most important (new) information should come last—at the end of the sentence, paragraph, section, chapter.
Punctuation (interpunkce) in English is different from Czech. Study it carefully! Separate non-restrictive clauses by commas.

We Czechs and Slovaks have no instinct for articles (a, the). We can improve irrespective of our knowledge of English.

Footnotes come after punctuations marks: . . . example.¹ Use as few footnotes as possible since they distract your reader’s attention. Important things belong to the body of your thesis, unnecessary things should be deleted.

Never start a sentence with “however,” unless you mean “to whatever extent.”

Avoid expression “the fact that;” keep in mind that “due to” means “attributable to,” not “because of.”
Common Mistakes

1. We choose to write in English only because we think the opponent will give us a few extra points for the effort.
2. We choose to write in English, but are lazy to read any book about style.
3. We use too many commas (for instance, before “that”) because we are lazy to learn English punctuation properly.
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Prof. Janda: “Good thesis is written in English and typeset in \LaTeX.”

- It seems quality is correlated with the use of English and \LaTeX. But I know excellent theses written in Czech and typeset in MS Word.
- Interesting research question: What drives the grades of diploma theses at the IES?
- Is it length, language, structure, form? How important is the advisor’s evaluation? Do the grades reflect subsequent awards?
Use $\LaTeX$, not MS Word

- $\LaTeX$ is a freeware typesetting system which separates the content from the form.
- It makes you concentrate on your structure.
- It uses a simple mark-up language, but editors similar to MS Word are available for $\LaTeX$ as well (LyX). I use MikTeX (distribution) and TeXnicCenter (editor).
- Documents typeset in $\LaTeX$ look much better and are easier to read.
- You can also make presentations in $\LaTeX$ (Beamer package).
Consistency

- Keep the same formatting of figures and tables throughout your thesis.
- When you are not sure about some aspects of grammar, select what you think is better and hold to it. In the worst case you will be consistently wrong.
- The use of \LaTeX helps a lot with consistency.
- We have developed a template for bachelor and master theses in \LaTeX which forces you to be consistent (available from the website of the master thesis seminar).
References

- Vancouver style is not recommended, and you must never mix the two citation styles (do not add footnotes with full citations).
- \LaTeX{} allows us to work work with references efficiently (the system is called BibTeX). Use it in combination with JabRef, the best freeware bibliographic manager.
Proofreading

Samuel Johnson: “What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure.”

- Once you think your thesis is complete, you have still a month of work to do.
- Go through it at least three times and delete at least 10% of words.
- Think about each sentence and each word: How could I write it better?
- When in doubt, google the expression. For instance, if it consists of three words and have been only used five times in this form, it is probably incorrect.
- Finally, exchange the thesis with friends for mutual proofreading.
Common Mistakes

1. We bury a good idea with inconsistency in formatting and grammatical errors.

2. We write (or paint?) in MS Word because we think \LaTeX{} is too difficult.

3. We allow less than one month for proofreading.
Ask Yourself

- Do you like your topic?
- Can you say in three sentences what are the most important things you want to discover?
- Can you convince your friends (non-economists) that your topic is important?
- When you are going through theses written in English, do you think your English is at least as good as theirs?
- Do you really have no time or are just lazy to read The Elements of Style?
- Why are you still using MS Word when it has no advantage over \texttt{\LaTeX}?
What We Should Read

