

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?

My Passion



- 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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Structure Is Key

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

- 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

- Literature review should take less than 25% of the thesis not counting references and appendices (unless, of course, literature survey is your focus).
- Describe in detail all relevant studies, especially those published in top academic journals (American Economic Review, Quarterly Journal of Economics, Journal of Political Economy, Econometrica).
- 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.

References

- 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.

Develop Your Style

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.
- 3 Williams (2010): “Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace.” For those of you who want the Dean’s distinction.

Brevity

- Short theses are the best—it is the beauty of ideas that 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.

Clarity

- 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.

Coherence

- 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.

The Devil Is in the Details

- 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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What Makes a Good Thesis?

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

- Stick to the Harvard style of citations: McCloskey (1999).
- 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 L^AT_EX is too difficult.
- 3 We allow less than one month for proofreading.

Checklist

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 \LaTeX ?

What We Should Read

-  McCloskey, D. (1999). *Economical Writing*. Waveland; 2nd edition.
-  Strunk, W. & E. B. White (2000). *The Elements of Style*. Longman; 4th edition.
-  Williams, J. M. (2010). *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. Longman; 10th edition.