
Academic Writing Skills (12h)

Syllabus

Christian SCHLUTER (AMSE)

Context and Objectives :

Papers and seminar presentations are exercises in persuasion that need to capture the interest and imagination of the audience from the first minutes (of your talk or the first sentences of your paper). Since most people are not born writers and orators, all this needs hard and prolonged practice (and lots of re-drafting). It is not uncommon that top economists spend more than 80% of their time on the actual writing of the paper.

Your success will depend foremost on how professional your presentations are. Even if your paper(s) contain(s) brilliant ideas – if these are not presented to the highest professional standard, they will usually go unnoticed. “The insights of your paper will first be judged by how you present them. If your paper is written in an unprofessional manner, [everything] will be viewed with [...] skepticism” (Goldin and Katz)

The objective of this module is to train you to achieve this standard.

However, before we turn to discussions of how things should be presented, a discussion is needed about what should actually be reported. Factors that contribute to what has been termed the Credibility Crisis in economics (and in scientific publishing more generally, be it social or natural science) include the frequently encountered problem of a third party not being able to replicate what has been reported in a paper (pure replication) or the problem of reproducing the reported result in a wider or slightly different setting (reproducibility and robustness).

Another issue that requires discussion is the following: if a paper is an exercise in persuasion, who are the members of your audience that you seek to persuade? Knowing your audience, and hence understanding their expectations, is key in writing a well received paper. We will examine a variety of (sometimes conflicting) viewpoints.

Session plan :

We will start with four 2-hour scheduled sessions, in which we discuss the main issues raised above. In later sessions we will turn to your own writing. Key resources will be posted in Ametice.

Session 1 : What is and what ought to be reported in a research paper ?

On transparency, reproducibility, and the credibility of economics research. A discussion of Christensen and Miguel (JEL, 2018), and the merit of notebooks.

Session 2 : Knowing and understanding your audience. Who do you write for ?

A discussion on how to do economics, and the multitude of often opposing viewpoints. A discussion of a series of interviews printed in *Investigaciones Económicas* (vol. XXX (2), 2006, edited by F. Kramarz)

Session 3 : Assessing the clarity of presentation.

We will look at several research papers in their pre-publication state (i.e. the working paper or earlier versions) and evaluate how clearly the key objectives are being communicated (and in case they have been published, what has changed).

Session 4 : The Art of Academic Writing.

We will look at writing advice given by leading economists, and look at some good examples taken from the established literature.

Session 5 : The importance of the Abstract of a paper.

From this session onwards, we will put all our insights gained in the preceding sessions into practice, and assess your own writing.

We will look at your Abstracts, and evaluate whether the key contribution is clearly communicated.

Session 6 : The importance of the Introduction of a paper.

We will look at your Introduction, and evaluate whether the key contribution is clearly communicated in a manner accessible to non-specialists (e.g. the hiring committees when the paper is your job market paper), and whether the value-added is clearly and convincingly explained in the context of the established literature.