

Guidelines for Technical Writing in Economics

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Make Clarity Your Primary Goal

Good technical writing is accurate and clear. Good technical writers organize ideas carefully. They use a simple style and focus on key points. They pay attention to word usage, grammar, and syntax. Good writers keep editing their writing until the reader cannot misinterpret what they have written.

Develop an Outline that Expresses the Main Ideas

- A. Begin by outlining your paper. If some parts of the outline are more developed than others, you can fill in the gaps later.
- B. Focus the outline on the main ideas of your paper. Express these ideas in clear statements suitable as first sentences of sections or paragraphs of the paper.
- C. As your ideas develop, revise the outline.
- D. Develop the ideas in each section clearly so you do not have to repeat them later. If you are tempted to repeat, instead go back and strengthen the earlier section.

Begin Each Paragraph with a Theme Sentence

- A. Each paragraph should address one idea. As you draft your document, you may find that a paragraph contains more than one idea, and that each idea can be conveyed more clearly by breaking the initial paragraph into two or more paragraphs.
- B. Each paragraph should begin with a theme sentence that expresses the main point of the paragraph. The remaining sentences of the paragraph should develop the theme expressed in the first sentence. For examples of good theme-sentence paragraph construction, read the *Economist*, an international magazine of economic and political affairs (www.economist.com).
- C. For additional suggestions on composition, see the section on “Elementary Principles of Composition” in Strunk and White.

Create Strong Transitions

- A. Create transitions with the logical flow of ideas rather than by using transitional words or expressions such as “in addition to” or “on the other hand.”
- B. Do not link one section of the paper to another by saying, “as I stated earlier.” If you have to remind the writer what you said earlier, you did not say it clearly enough the first time!
- C. Within a given paragraph, when linking one part to another, avoid using an impersonal pronoun (for example, “this” or “that”) as the subject of a sentence that refers back to an earlier sentence. “This” and “that” are vague words and leave room for multiple interpretations. Instead, use a noun that links clearly back to the previous sentence. For example, “The decline in GDP was caused by...” is much clearer than “This was caused by...”

Follow Standard Rules of Grammar and Punctuation

- A. Review basic rules of grammar if you do not know them. For example, see the section on “Elementary Rules of Usage” in Strunk and White. By following standard forms, you increase the likelihood that the reader will interpret your writing as you intend.
- B. The rules of grammar evolve over time, yet at any given time, it is generally possible to identify standard practices.
- C. Depart from standard rules of grammar and punctuation only if, in particular cases, you are convinced that following the rule reduces clarity.
- D. When experts have differing opinions regarding a particular rule of grammar, choose one version of the rule and use it consistently throughout your document.
- E. Within sentences, place antecedents adjacent to the word or words they modify.
Wrong: “The temporal reward function is given by the utility function in period t , whose choice variables are x_t and y_t .” The author intended for “whose” to refer to “utility function” but, given the way the sentence is constructed, it appears that “whose” refers to “period t .” Right: “The temporal reward function is given by the period- t utility function, whose choice variables are x_t and y_t .”

Adopt Consistent Form and Style

- A. Adopt a standard citation style or a style used by a major journal in the discipline. Use this style throughout your document. Two widely adopted styles are the Chicago style (Turabian) and the Modern Language Association (MLA) style (Gibaldi).
- B. Begin sentences with words, not symbols, abbreviations, or numerals. If the logical first word of a sentence is a symbol (for example, K), write, “The symbol, K ,...” Do not put an abbreviation at the beginning of a sentence. Instead, spell the word or expression out in full or rearrange the order of words so the abbreviation is not at the beginning. Numbers spelled out in letters (for example, ten) can be put in first place in a sentence, but not numerals (for example, 10).
- C. Numbers with only one digit should be written out in letters (for example, eight), while numbers with more than one digit (for example, 10) can be written in digit form.
- D. Parenthetical statements and explanatory footnotes tend to distract the reader and are used relatively little in most economics journals. Generally, ideas that are important enough to be included in a document should be integrated into the text.
- E. Attribute preferences to people and groups of people but not to things. Wrong: “Policies might want to target factors that...” Right: “Policymakers might want to target...”
- F. See sections on “A Few Matters of Form” and “An Approach to Style” in Strunk and White for additional guidelines on form and style.

Edit for Focus and Clarity

- A. Editing is a fundamental part of writing. It is not a separate process that takes place after the important part of writing is over.
- B. Aim for clarity not for uniqueness of expression.
- C. Allow adequate time for editing. Experienced writers often devote at least as much time to editing as to writing the original draft.

- D. Do not expect others to do your editing. If you do not edit your own writing, you place an unreasonable burden on your advisor or your friends. If your final document remains unedited or poorly edited, you are wasting the time of your readers, who must attempt to figure out your meaning.
- E. Re-write your document to eliminate unnecessary chains of logic if there is a shorter and more direct way to convey the same ideas.
- F. In technical writing, "short is beautiful." Eliminate unnecessary words and expressions. For each sentence, ask yourself if the idea can be expressed with fewer words.
- G. After reading the entire document, ask yourself whether you have conveyed the big ideas clearly. Or, have you lost the big ideas along the way? Clarity of the big ideas can often be improved by re-ordering of sections or paragraphs, by rewriting the lead sentence of paragraphs, and by rewriting the introduction and conclusion of the paper.

Seek Feedback from Others

- A. Consider the comments and suggestions of others as opportunities to increase the clarity of your document. You may not agree with some of the remedies they suggest, but the fact that they have flagged a particular part of the document may mean there is room for improvement.
- B. Put your name and the date on the front page of any document you expect others to read. Without your name, they may confuse your document with that of others. Without the date, they may confuse your latest draft with an earlier draft.
- C. Print page numbers if others are reading your document. If they are sending you comments by email or letter, they may need to refer to particular pages.

Reference

Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing (2nd edition)*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1998. (For more information, see <http://www.mla.org/style>).

Strunk, William and W.B. White. *The Elements of Style*. 4th Edition. New York: Longman, 2000. (Full-text version available at <http://www.bartleby.com/141/index.html>).

Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations (6th Edition)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.