

## Specific Guidelines for Writing Research Papers

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Instead of repeatedly writing the same comments on each paper, I may now just write one of the following numbers. You can find the corresponding comment here. First, "**Rules of Usage**":

**1. Prepositions.** Do not end a sentence with a preposition. Also, avoid two prepositions in a row, because it is awkward. For example, change "send workers out in search of new jobs" instead to say "send workers to search for new jobs."

**2. Commas.** You always need a comma between two parts of a sentence if each part could be a sentence by itself. For example: "This sentence does not need a comma and has no comma." However, "This sentence does need a comma, and it has one."

**3. Hyphens.** An adverb modifies an adjective, and it needs no hyphen ("the densely populated area"). If two words together are modifying the noun, however, then they do need a hyphen ("labor-intensive sector"). Thus, you speak of the life cycle or of the life-cycle model.

**4. Split infinitives.** Some people think it's okay, but I'm a stickler. Instead of saying "we want to effectively use the model", you can say "we want to use the model effectively."

**5. The word "data" is the plural of datum.** You can say that the data *are* collected and assembled, or you can say that the data set *is* collected and assembled.

**6. Avoid "we"** in a paper with one author. Change "we discuss ..." to say "I discuss ...", or else just say "this paper discusses ...".

**7. Which vs. that.** Most people use the former when they really mean the latter, so go on a "which" hunt, and change "which" to "that." You should only use "which" in a parenthetical phrase that could be removed from the sentence. For example:

"The results, which are significant, are generated from the 2SLS model."

"The results that are significant are generated from the 2SLS model."

These two sentences differ by one word, but they have completely different meanings. The first sentence contains a parenthetical remark. It says we have one set of results (which, by the way, are significant), and these results are generated by the 2SLS model. The second sentence implies that we have at least two different models with two different sets of results, because it says that the significant results are the ones from the 2SLS model. Use the computer to search for every "which", and see if you can set off the phrase with commas. If not, replace it with "that."

Now for some "**Matters of Style**", otherwise known as "good advice":

**8. Avoid parentheses.** They usually mean that more thoughts have just been crammed into the same sentence, and they often signify that the author is too lazy to rewrite the passage properly. Any parentheses are best used at the end of the sentence (after finishing the main point).

**9. "There are".** You can always avoid "There is", "There were", or "There have been" (phrases often called "passive voice"). Such a sentence has no real subject and no real verb. It just sits there. Put some action into your sentence. For example: "There are many ways that a sentence can be mangled, but there is one way that bothers me the most." This sentence is long and convoluted. Use the computer to search for every appearance of "there" and rewrite the sentence in direct fashion: "A sentence can be mangled many ways, but one way bothers me the most."

**10. Avoid long or convoluted sentences.** You may think they sound more erudite, but they really just sound like you are trying to be erudite. Long sentences are hard to follow, so "divide and conquer." Also, don't wait to the end of a long sentence to put the verb. Finally, even a sentence of normal length can have too many phrases separated by too many commas.

**11. "List" at the end.** If you start a sentence with a list of subjects, before the verb, then the reader has to wade through the whole list before knowing the point of the sentence. Rewrite to put the list at the end of the sentence. "Political instability, demographic transition, deforestation, and concentration of land continue to occur in the Amazon." To make it clearer, begin with "The Amazon continues to experience political instability, ...".

**12. Avoid "etc."** It's vague and unhelpful. In speaking of factors of production (labor, capital, etc.), you can use "such as" to signify that these are just examples (such as labor or capital).

**13. Use present tense:** it will help you be consistent. Instead of "This paper will ..." in the intro, or "this paper did ..." in the conclusion, just say "This paper does ...". Also, "Harberger (1962) provides the first general equilibrium tax model" (it still *does* provide the *first* one).

**14. Avoid italics.** Too much emphasis can get tiresome and look silly. For an example, see the sentence just above. It would probably look better without the italics.

**15. Avoid "should."** Several meanings could be confused. Any use could have a normative meaning that tells us your opinion, which is to be avoided, or a positive meaning that tells us what you predict. Instead of "the results should be ...", just say "the expected result is ...".

**16. Omit needless words.** "The question as to whether ..." can be changed to "Whether ...". For another example, "In spite of the fact that ...", can be changed to "Since ...".

**17. Notation.** Define every symbol carefully, in complete, separate sentences.

**18. Tables and Diagrams.** Incorporate the table or diagram into the text; refer to some of the numbers. Point out how the table or figure is to be used, what it implies, and why. Don't try to let the table talk for itself. For example: "The first row shows the optimal tax rate in each of the four cases. In case I, shown in the first column, the optimal tax rate is .32, but in case II, ...".

**19. References and Footnotes.** Be consistent and complete. A convenient convention in economics is to put references at the back of the paper, listed by author (year), title, city, publisher. Then you can refer to a reference in the text by author (year), rather than using a footnote. If one author wrote more than one article for reference that year, use (1994a, 1994b) in both the text and the references. Then footnotes can be used for supplemental points: asides, information or discussion that is not in main context. "For further interest ...," or short remarks on where to find further information. The result is that you do not need any use of *ibid* or *op cit*.

The following is on multiple websites (but without a date or any information about the author):

**HOW TO WRITE GOOD**  
**by Frank L. Visco**

My several years in the word game have learnt me several rules:

1. Avoid alliteration. Always.
2. Prepositions are not words to end sentences with.
3. Avoid cliches like the plague. (They're old hat.)
4. Employ the vernacular.
5. Eschew ampersands & abbreviations, etc.
6. Parenthetical remarks (however relevant) are unnecessary.
7. It is wrong to ever split an infinitive.
8. Contractions aren't necessary.
9. Foreign words and phrases are not *apropos*.
10. One should never generalize.
11. Eliminate quotations. As Ralph Waldo Emerson once said: "*I hate quotations. Tell me what you know.*"
12. Comparisons are as bad as cliches.
13. Don't be redundant; don't use more words than necessary; it's highly superfluous.
14. Profanity sucks.
15. Be more or less specific.
16. Understatement is always best.
17. Exaggeration is a billion times worse than understatement.
18. One-word sentences? Eliminate.
19. Analogies in writing are like feathers on a snake.
20. The passive voice is to be avoided.
21. Go around the barn at high noon to avoid colloquialisms.
22. Even if a mixed metaphor sings, it should be derailed.
23. Who needs rhetorical questions?