

Making the best of your Essays, Assignments and Projects

Presenting your work

The Economics Department is keen to encourage you to gain the highest mark possible for your Assignments and/or project. However, there is concern that many students lose marks because of poor presentation (style and layout) of their work.

This part of the handbook is intended to help you in presenting your work to its best advantage.

Here are two little books that you will find useful in preparing written work:

- *Levin, P. Write great essays!* (Open University Press, 2004)
- *Strunk, W. and E. B. White. The Elements of Style* (Published by Allyn and Bacon, latest edition Aug 1999). Although it may appear old fashioned, this book contains lots of wise advice.

You are strongly encouraged to follow guidance in both of these books. If you do so you will be surprised at the improvement in your marks.

Layout

(In what follows, “paper” should be understood to include Assignments, projects or essays, i.e. any piece of submitted work for which you have discretion with regard to presentation.)

An economics examiner commented recently, “structure is not quite all but it is a lot!”

If your paper is well organised you stand a much better chance of getting the reader (examiner) on your side. Well organised papers receive their just rewards. Poorly structured papers will receive a lower mark than those which are well organised.

Points to keep in mind:

Introduction and conclusion

- Always divide your paper into sections with an Introduction and a Conclusion. Each section should form a coherent element of the whole paper.
- The introduction...
...informs the reader about (a) the issues you will discuss, (b) the questions you will address, and (c) how the arguments will unfold in the following sections. It is not necessary to include a separate abstract (a very brief overview of the paper). Consider leaving the introduction to write last of all – by which stage you will know exactly what follows.
- The conclusion...
...can be used to summarise the previous sections, to draw the threads of the argument together and, perhaps, to offer some comments about unresolved problems that deserve future research.

References

- Providing bibliographical references is so important that it merits a separate section, see below. Pay special attention to referencing.

Statistical results

- When presenting econometric results, say from STATA, do not simply paste in the computer output. That suggests laziness. Usually, you will need to construct tables of results. Sometimes you may wish to present regression results in an equation format with standard errors in parentheses under the estimated coefficients.

Very important:

- You must make absolutely clear when you are reproducing statistical results obtained by others.
- You must cite the source. (See the section on References, below.)
- If you fail to cite the source, the reader will presume that you have obtained the results yourself. Then, if the examiners spot that the results have been copied from elsewhere without acknowledgement, you will be in serious trouble as this is evidence of unfair practices and will be dealt with as an academic offence.

On the positive side, blow your own trumpet! Leave the reader in no doubt about your own contribution in terms of statistical results or any other original aspect of your work. Don't hide any originality that you believe deserves credit. Be bold about what you have achieved. However, be careful not to overstate your results – do not claim conclusions beyond the evidence you have provided.

Footnotes and appendices

Footnotes...

...can be used for short clarifications and extensions of your argument that would otherwise interrupt the flow of your paper. Try to keep them to a minimum.

Appendices...

...can be used for material of a detailed background or ancillary nature, too long for a footnote. Appendices are often devoted to (a) descriptions of data sources and about how the data have been transformed; (b) listing data (but only when the data have been obtained from non-standard sources); (c) technical derivations of results (e.g. theorems) discussed in the body of the paper. It is not normally necessary to list data in Assignments or projects; but you must always be prepared to supply the data if requested.

Footnotes and appendices should not be used in an attempt to evade the word limit. Markers find this ploy unacceptable.

Referencing

Providing full and accurate references to your sources is a very, very important part of presenting your work.

There are two aspects of this:

- a) Citations that point to references (e.g. Keynes (1936), p.383)
- b) The bibliography, which contains information about the references themselves.

Here are some guidelines:

- You must always include direct quotations from other people's work (published or unpublished) in inverted commas: " "
 - Failure to do is a serious academic offence.
- Always follow a quotation with the relevant citation.

Example:

Many commentators believe that policy makers are pragmatic and not much influenced by ideas. Keynes disagreed: "Practical men... are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back."
(Keynes, 1936, p. 383) Whether Keynes should be taken seriously is a debatable matter....

- The citation, Keynes, 1936 in the example, should point to exactly one reference in the bibliography, which appears at the end of your paper.
- It is not enough merely to include the cited work in the bibliography. The quotation in your paper must be accompanied by a citation as described.

When not to quote:

"Commonly known facts, proverbs, and other familiar expressions require no source citation unless the wording is taken directly from another work." (Chicago Manual of Style, 15th edition, p. 445)

If you do take the wording from another work, you must include the quoted words in inverted commas.

- **Citations** must also appear when you refer to the work of others without direct quotation.

Example:

...In their model of commodity prices, Deaton and Laroque (1992) postulate the existence of a single threshold price, above which stocks of the commodity have been driven to zero....

- In this example, the citation Deaton and Laroque (1992) alerts the reader to the source of the work being discussed.
 - You should include a citation such as this whenever you paraphrase the work of others or base your exposition on the works of others.
- **Indirect references**

Suppose that you wish to make a reference to something that itself includes a reference to a third source.

Example:

Suppose you wish to quote the following from Marx's Capital that you read in another book:

"This expropriation [of the capitalist] is accomplished by the action of immanent laws of capitalistic production itself, by the centralization of capital. One capitalist kills many."

- Unless you have actually read Marx's capital (and can quote the volume and page number) you must cite the place from which you obtained the quote.
- In this example, here is a correct citation following the quoted words above: "Marx, Capital, as quoted in Harold James, The End of Globalization: Lessons from the Great Depression, page 21."

The rule is: only cite sources that you have actually accessed.

If your reference is to a source cited in something you have read you must make this clear.

In your bibliography you should include only those sources that you have accessed and have cited in your essay, Assignment or project.

You must treat information from the internet in exactly the same way as other published or unpublished material, even if you cannot identify the author.

- If you cut-and-paste information from any electronic source, you must place it in quotation marks and cite the source in such a way that the reader can readily locate it.
- Failure to do so is evidence of an academic offence, even if you claim that your action is the result of negligence.

The **bibliography** is a list of references that appears at the end of your paper.

- The following information should always be included:
author; date of publication; title of the work.
 - For a book you should also include: the edition; place of publication; publisher.
 - For an article you should include the journal or book in which the article appears as well as page numbers and if possible, the volume number.
 - For unpublished works, you will need to use your discretion about how to give the reference but always make clear the origin of the work (i.e. from where it can be obtained).

- The fact that a source is unpublished is no excuse for not citing it and omitting it from the bibliography.
- Lecture handouts (whether issued in paper or electronic format) must also be referenced: give the teacher's name, the module code and any other relevant information needed to identify precisely the handout to which you refer.
- List the references in alphabetical order by author.

Examples:

Brittan, S. (2002) "The rules need fixing, but greed can be good", Financial Times, 04/07/02.

URL: http://www.samuelbrittan.co.uk/text118_p.html (accessed on 27 Nov 2008)

Deaton, A. S. and G. Laroque (1992) "On the Behaviour of Commodity Prices" Review of Economic Studies, vol. 59, pp. 1–23.

Keynes, J. M. (1936) The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money London: Macmillan.

Krugman, P. (1999) "Thinking about the Liquidity Trap" (unpublished) December 1999 URL: <<http://www.wss.princeton.edu/~pkrugman/trioshrt.html>> (accessed on 19 Jan 2010).

Belot, M., V. Bhaskar and J van de Ven. (2007) "Is Beauty only Skin-deep? Disentangling the Beauty Premium on a Game Show" (unpublished) University of Essex Economics Discussion Paper Series, No. 624, January 2007.

- Notice that the Brittan (2002) and Krugman (1999) references are to internet resources. In this case it is conventional to provide the URL (i.e. the address) between angle brackets: < >, and also the most recent date on which you accessed that URL
- You have discretion in terms of how you present your citations and bibliography. That is, you are not required rigidly to adhere to the style outlined above. But remember, you will lose marks for sloppiness. If in doubt, adopt the format outlined above.
- You may come across non-standard cases which do not fit into the above categories, in which case try to be as systematic as you can.
 - For instance, if there is no author (such as for a newspaper article) give the reference by title.

Example:

The Economist (2008) "Endurance test: some reasons not to expect a collapse in raw-materials prices" August 23rd 2008, pp. 61-2.

Two important rules:

1. For every citation there must be exactly one reference in the bibliography.
2. For every reference in the bibliography there must be at least one citation.

Never include references in the bibliography that are not cited in your paper.

Why not?

Because the reader is left puzzling about the role and significance of such references in your paper.

- You must cite any other work of your own on which your paper draws. For example, suppose that your final year project is on the same topic as one of your Assignments. If you use any of the same material in your project as in the Assignment you must cite this (preferably at the beginning) - otherwise you will have committed an academic offence.
- It is bad style to string together long quotations. Use quotations to support your argument not as a substitute for it. Examiners interpret long quotations as a sign of laziness. You will not be accused of plagiarism – so long as the quotations are in inverted commas and properly cited. But the paper will be awarded a lower mark than otherwise. If you submit a paper which is largely a collection of quotations, you will get a very low mark (probably a fail mark, depending on how much of the paper comprises quotations).

Last words

Visit the online essay writing programme: www2.essex.ac.uk/essay-writing/

- Make sure that you spell check the final version of your paper before you print it.
- Follow the guidance offered above and your paper will be awarded the mark that it deserves. Ignore the advice and your paper will receive a lower mark than you might expect.
- If you need further advice ask your teacher or project supervisor before the work is submitted. It's no good grumbling afterwards when you get a mark lower than you expect or if you are accused of an academic offence.