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"How to Write a Paper that Referees and Editors Want to Read and Accept"

by Valerie Ramey, 3 April 2023

The most important ingredient for successful publishing is high quality research communicated with clarity and polish. Here are some tips, as well as red flags to avoid.

I. How to improve the quality of your research

- Don't do things just because "this is standard for the literature." Applying a **higher standard** to the methods you use can be a substantial contribution.

- Do many **robustness checks,** and think of alternative explanations for your results. After obtaining the initial results, pretend that you are a notoriously tough discussant for your paper, and try to think of all of the ways that your paper could be shot down.

- If you are applying a different econometric technique that changes existing results in the literature, you must provide intuition for why the results change. Without an intuitive explanation, your contribution does little more than add a puzzle to the literature.

- **Be a scholar.** Think, live, and breathe economics. Be devoted to your science. Read endlessly about economics, go to many seminars, watch seminars on livestream and Youtube, and talk endlessly about economics to your colleagues and students. The livestreaming and recording of prominent conferences has provided tremendous opportunities for researchers anywhere to be in-tune with what the leaders in the profession are thinking.

II. Red Flags that make referees and editors want to reject your paper.

Remember that the referees and editors are evaluating your paper based on limited information. This means that they must infer much from small bits of information.

Referees and editors must feel that they can trust that you were careful in your implementation of your procedures, that you are accurately representing your results, and that you are honestly representing your results. For this reason, any slip ups they observe are magnified in importance.

Examples of things that are red flags.

1. Not knowing the latest literature that is related to your work. This omission will make them think you are "behind the curve."

2. Overlooking obvious things in the implementation. This will make them wonder if you know what you are doing.

3. Trying to hide robustness checks that significantly change your results. This will make them think that you are not honest.

III. How to write a polished paper.

(This section borrows extensively from Garey Ramey's 2010 "Guidelines for Graduate Student Research Papers" written for UCSD graduate students.)

Remember that the prospective readers of your paper are researchers and referees who already have dozens of other papers awaiting their attention. They will put messy, unclear papers with questionable contributions to the literature at the bottom of their to-do lists and instead prioritize papers that present novel results exposited with great clarity and insight.

<u>Before beginning your draft</u>

Your research should provide clear answers to the following questions:

1. What important questions are you addressing?

2. What are you doing that the literature has not already done?

3. What are your important results, and do you establish them convincingly?

You should not begin composing your draft until you have nailed down these questions.

General guidelines

1. Your paper should develop one main message. The Abstract and Introduction should be structured to drive it home.

2. Indicate exactly what is new and exciting. The goal of the Abstract is to make this crystal clear. The important details should be laid out in the first two pages of the Introduction.

3. The Introduction should show how your analysis firmly establishes your results.

4. The Introduction should provide a well-focused literature review that adheres closely to your question and results. It is usually best to place the literature review at the end of the Introduction.

Guidelines for body of paper

1. Following the Introduction, the text should be organized into two to four major sections and a Conclusion. Appendices come after this, then References. Tables and Figures are usually interspersed with the text; if not, they should follow the references.

2. Major sections should be broken into subsections as needed. Readers tend to like short paragraphs and sections that serve to relieve tedium and to clarify the logical progression. They dislike slogging through long paragraphs.

3. The Conclusion should lead off by restating your main message in a forceful way, and then reviewing your specific results. At this point it is useful to touch on broader implications that are not nailed down by your paper. Be careful however to label these clearly as speculations rather than results.

4. Aim for 25-29 pages of text (from beginning of Introduction to end of Conclusion). Lengthy, detailed derivations or discussions not directly related to the main argument should be placed in appendices. This makes both the text and the derivations/discussions easier to read.

5. Often you will have more material than will fit in the text. While drafting your paper, stay open to shifting parts between the main text, the published appendix, and the online appendix.

6. If you reference results that are in an appendix, don't write vague statements in the main text such as "we conduct robustness checks in the online appendix." Instead, give a short, but informative, summary of what you did and what the results are so that readers know whether it is worth reading that part of the appendix. Here is a redacted example from a paper from the literature that was particularly adept at referencing appendix material effectively: "In Appendix A.1. we compare the two approaches, and show that the prevalence measures derived from a two-step xx approach have much higher predictive power for future zz."

Guidelines for references

1. Try to include all references that pertain to your specific question. Long bibliographies are better than short ones.

2. Peripheral papers can be grouped together and listed in the text using footnotes.

Guidelines for tables and figures

1. In most papers the results reside in the tables and figures. Therefore you should put serious effort into making your tables and figures attractive and comprehensible. Style is important.

2. Tables and figures should be visually attractive. Readers are put off by tables consisting of a sea of tiny numbers, or figures with many tangled lines or many tiny panels.

3. Your table layouts should make it easy to spot the key numbers that are discussed in the text. Clever use of rows vs. columns, multiple panels, and labeling can make the results really stand out.

4. Figures should have dark lines and clearly labeled axes. Scales and panels should be structured so that lines are not crowded together (unless you aim to emphasize the similar behavior of different data series). Shaded regions should be handled with care, since they often do not translate well across document formats.

5. All tables and figures should include notes in fine print at the bottom. Distilled details from the text pertaining to data sources, sample information, computations, etc. should be included. However, you should avoid too much detail and notes that include more than four sentences. Long paragraphs in fine print make it difficult for readers to extract the essential details.