

Writing Empirical Papers · 6 Rules & 12 Recommendations

In my methods classes, students are asked to perform a quantitative analysis and write-up (a pure methods paper is always an acceptable alternative). As in any graduate courses, strive to write (or at least draft) a publishable article. There are several rules and recommendations for the assignment:

Six Rules

1. Refer to the course syllabus to determine whether coauthorship of papers is either allowed, disallowed, or required. Simultaneous submission of papers to multiple courses requires the permission of all instructors involved and is not guaranteed.
2. Students may write a replication and extension of a published article or pursue an original analysis. Replication and extension may help get the assignment done on time, especially since the quarter system only grants 10 weeks.
3. Except in cases of family or medical emergency, I will not grant extensions or incompletes. Think of this as a favor: I expect the paper to be the product of ten weeks work, not a year, so turn in what you can accomplish in ten weeks to get interim feedback, even if your ultimate research aims are broader than a term assignment.
4. The paper should be at least 15 to 20 pages long. Longer papers are acceptable.
5. The main focus of the paper should be on data, methods, and results (pure methods papers excepted). Justify your modeling choices with reference to the data and present your findings in terms any intelligent person could understand, regardless of their statistical knowledge. This should not limit the sophistication of your methods: just think hard about how to explain results from complicated models in approachable terms.

6. Don't spend too much time on literature reviews or theory but don't neglect hypothesis building, either. (Note, however, that hypotheses often can be clearly explicated without recourse to numbered lists.) By the time I reach the results of your paper, I should have some idea what you expect, what would be surprising, and why. I should also know why your question matters.

Twelve Recommendations

1. Papers that ask interesting, novel, or controversial questions are better – potentially *much* better – than papers that do not, all else equal.
2. Papers that explain their empirical findings in ways non-specialists can understand are better than papers that do not, all else equal.
3. Model specifications informed by test statistics, substantive knowledge and theory are better than model specifications based solely on test statistics, all else equal.
4. Number pages, tables, figures, and sections of your paper for easy reference. Embed all figures and tables in the text, facing the same direction as the text, just as you would see in a book or journal.
5. Tables of regression results should be nicely formatted and selective. Do not just cut-and-paste from your statistical package. Do not star your estimates or provide redundant measures of uncertainty (standard errors *and* *t*-statistics); instead, provide substantively informative measures of uncertainty such as confidence intervals or standard errors.
6. Variable names should be readable, memorable, and clearly denote what the variable is: use *Female* rather than *Gender*, and *Conservatism* instead of *Ideology*.
7. Provide the reader with descriptive statistics of the data. Often, a correlation matrix helps too. In so doing, you are arming readers to pick apart your findings. That is a good thing.
8. Except when precision of presentation is paramount, use graphics rather than tables to present results. Graphics are easier to read, can convey more information, and are far more memorable than tables.

9. Scholars carefully craft prose, but often paste in graphics without a thought to making them elegant, clear, or effective. Graphics are as much a part of the paper as the words, and deserve as much attention – if not more – in design.
10. If possible, use a sophisticated typesetting system like LaTeX. If beautiful text is important to you, use XeTeX, but don't spend too much time on it – feel free to borrow my templates.
11. Start the paper immediately. Ideally, you should start the class with a research topic in mind.
12. If you have not done original quantitative research before, you will be surprised how long it takes to get original data. If you are doing a replication, you will be surprised how hard it can be to get a replication dataset.

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