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Economics Research: Developing Ideas and Getting an Article Published

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Economics Research: Developing Ideas and Getting an Article Published

Abstract

We describe a classroom-tested method for winnowing economic ideas so that research proceeds only on those that are likely to pay off—in publications and scholarly influence. The method distinguishes projects—and the eventual scholarly articles—that are both original and important—the sine qua non to make something worth working on. We discuss how the research should be written up to be intelligible and publishable, stressing the importance of attention-grabbing titles and abstracts. We offer examples of bad and good-writing in the English language—the medium of scholarly exchange in the economics profession—and how students react to them.

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1 What Makes a Research Question Worth Pursuing? What Makes Its Write-up Interesting?

Before investing months in a project, researchers need to know whether a question is worth asking. This matters for two reasons. First, it avoids spending time on questions that are unlikely to lead to a good result. Second, it increases the chances of getting past an editor's desk, where decisions are driven less by technical execution than by whether the paper offers a meaningful contribution. Students learn theory, data analysis, identification, and causal inference and receive extensive feedback on these dimensions of research. Yet much of this training is aimed at improving the analytical skills needed to answer the research question correctly (List, 2022). At the editorial stage, however, the focus is not on methods, identification, or the credibility of the findings. Many papers are technically sound and empirically credible but fail to attract editors' interest because the research question is unoriginal and unimportant. Correctness is necessary but not sufficient for publication. The sufficient conditions ask whether the paper generates genuinely new knowledge (originality) and whether that knowledge helps understanding an important economic problem (significance). Originality concerns how a paper advances beyond what is already known, i.e., what we normally understand by contribution. Significance concerns why answering the question matters for the discipline or for society more broadly, the "Why should we care?" question.

Economics training offers little guidance on how to judge whether a research question is original and worth pursuing. The reason is what is called tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966). Researchers, editors, and referees can often recognize a good contribution when they see it. Explaining exactly why is harder. As a result, the criteria used to evaluate originality and significance often remain implicit. Existing advice on economics writing explains the importance of effective communication (Hamermesh, 1992, Head, 2020, Bellemare, 2022, Nikolov, 2023, AEA, 2025). It teaches economists how to present a contribution clearly and persuasively, but offers less guidance on the prior question: how to determine whether a research idea constitutes a contribution in the first place.

Recent work highlights the importance of institutions and advisors in the research production process, showing that access to the knowledge needed to produce successful research is unevenly distributed

(Heckman and Moktan, 2020; Angrist and Diederichs, 2024). Recent discussions in the profession similarly emphasize that unequal access to mentoring and tacit knowledge can reinforce inequalities in research careers and reduce the quality of research output (Altonji *et al.*, 2025). This literature establishes that tacit knowledge matters, but does not identify or systematize the criteria researchers use to judge whether a research question constitutes an original and significant contribution. We fill this gap by developing a systematic framework that makes these criteria explicit and applicable before substantial time and resources are invested in a project. Making these criteria explicit can improve the allocation of research effort, broaden access to knowledge, and ultimately improve economic research by directing attention and resources toward questions that generate new knowledge about important economic problems.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 develops our framework for evaluating the originality and significance of a research idea before substantial time and resources are invested in it. Section 3 shows how to use the framework when writing the paper to make its originality and significance clear to readers.

2 A Method for Evaluating a Research Idea

a. Crafting the Core Method

The value-added of a research paper does not depend on the results. Whether the answer turns out to be yes, no, or something in between, the question itself should have the potential to generate new knowledge and improve our understanding of an important economic issue. Yet many researchers devote far more attention to answering questions than to deciding whether those questions are worth answering in the first place. Making that assessment requires a careful review of what is already known and a clear understanding of what remains to be learned. The **Crafting the Core** method provides a structured way to do this. Rather than relying on intuition or tacit knowledge alone, assets that junior researchers have often not acquired, the framework offers a set of practical steps for evaluating a research question.

Table 1 operationalizes originality and significance into a set of concrete evaluation criteria. Panel A focuses on originality, which is directly linked to the research question. The first criterion (**A1: Locating the Contribution**) asks researchers to identify the relevant literature. Most research questions could be

placed in several literatures, and choosing the one in which the contribution is greatest is an important part of the exercise.

The second criterion (**A2: Establishing Existing Knowledge**) requires determining what is already known within that literature. This involves a careful and systematic review of prior work and a clear understanding of the existing evidence. Like an analysis of a new dataset or development of a theoretical model, this stage requires substantial effort and critical thinking. The goal is not simply to summarize previous studies, but to understand what they collectively tell us and where their limitations lie.

The third criterion (**A3: Identifying the Knowledge Gap**) asks what remains unknown. Originality comes from identifying questions that have not yet been answered or parts of a particular question that remain underexplored. A paper should not present itself simply as another variation on previous studies, for example, Professor A studied one setting, Professor B another, and this paper a third. That approach risks making the work look like a footnote. Instead, the researcher must show clearly what the gap is, so that there is no doubt as to what the new knowledge generated by the paper adds.

The final criterion (**A4: Explaining the Gap and the Opportunity**) asks why the gap persists and what makes it possible to address it now. Identifying a gap is not enough. A convincing contribution explains why previous researchers have not filled it and what new data, methods, institutional changes, or insights now make new knowledge possible. This step is often overlooked. Researchers frequently argue that a question has not been answered without asking why that is the case. Sometimes the answer lies in the availability of new data that did not previously exist. In other cases, a recent policy change generates variation that allows a question to be identified for the first time, or researchers create that variation themselves through an experiment. Progress may also come from theory, either because new knowledge has emerged or because ideas from previously disconnected literatures can now be combined usefully. A claim of novelty is much more persuasive when accompanied by a clear explanation of what has changed and why the contribution can be made now rather than ten years ago.

Panel B of Table 1 focuses on the second sufficient condition, significance. Unlike originality, which asks how a research question advances the literature, significance asks why answering that question

matters. The answer lies in the higher-order problem the paper seeks to illuminate. The criteria require economists to identify that problem (B1), explain why it matters (B2), connect it to central economic debates (B3), and show whether and how answering the research question improves our understanding of it (B4 and B5). Together, these criteria shift attention from the immediate question being studied to the broader economic issue that motivates it.

Criteria B1 through B4 are generally addressed at the outset of a project, before substantial resources are devoted to answering the question. Economists should be able to explain what higher-order problem they are addressing, why it matters, and how their question relates to it before collecting data, building a theoretical model, or estimating an econometric model. It is the motivation, the answer to the “Why should we care?” question. If the case for significance cannot be made early, it is difficult to justify the value of the project.

Criterion B5 is better addressed once results are known. At that stage, we can say more precisely how the findings advance understanding of the higher-order problem and, in some cases, how they may help address it. Whereas B1 through B4 concern the potential significance of the question, B5 concerns the significance of the answer. Once the findings are available, we can assess more clearly how much they have contributed to understanding the broader problem and the implications of their research outputs.

B1, Identifying the Higher-Order Problem, requires articulating the broader economic problem that motivates the question. This may seem obvious, but it is often overlooked, and the question is sometimes presented without explaining why answering it matters. Research questions and higher-order problems are different. The former defines the specific inquiry; the latter provides the reason the inquiry is worth pursuing. A given research question may relate to several higher-order problems. Consider a study examining the effect of childcare availability on maternal employment. One could motivate this question by concerns about gender inequality, labor shortages, economic growth, declining fertility, child development, or the efficient allocation of talent. All are legitimate higher-order problems. The challenge is not to list every possible motivation, but to identify the higher-order problem for which the answer to the research question is likely to be most consequential. If the study provides particularly convincing evidence

on barriers to women's labor-market participation, framing the paper around the efficient use of human capital may be more compelling than framing it around fertility or child outcomes. Choosing the most relevant higher-order problem is therefore an important part of establishing significance.

Once the problem is identified, the second criterion, **B2, Establishing the Problem's Importance**, asks why it matters. To make that case, the problem must be economically meaningful. It should be large enough to affect a substantial number of people or generate significant costs, persistent enough that it is unlikely to disappear on its own, difficult enough that existing policies or institutions have not already solved it, or urgent enough that delaying action would be costly. Consider the higher-order problem of the underutilization of women's skills in the labor market. This problem matters because it affects a large share of the population. It has persisted for decades, and many existing policies have had only limited success in reducing gender gaps in employment and career progression, suggesting that the problem is not easily resolved. The issue is also increasingly urgent. Population ageing, declining fertility, and labor shortages in many advanced economies have heightened the economic costs of failing to make full use of available talent. As demographic pressures intensify, improving women's labor-market opportunities becomes an important determinant of future economic performance. These features make it a problem of clearly economic significance rather than a narrow or transitory issue.

B3, Demonstrating Economic Relevance, asks economists to explain why the higher-order problem matters within the economics discipline. A problem may be important in many disciplines, but significance in economics requires connecting it to central economic concerns, empirical developments, or active policy debates. Experienced economists often do this instinctively. Through years of reading and participating in the discipline, they develop a sense of which problems are central and how a particular question connects to them. For junior economists, however, these connections are rarely made explicit. Criterion B3 aims to make this tacit knowledge explicit by requiring economists to articulate clearly why a problem belongs within the broader conversation of the discipline.

Consider the question, "Can income transfers increase fertility?" The question itself (fertility) is not the higher-order problem. Nor does the higher-order problem have the same meaning across disciplines. In

demography, the concern about low fertility may be understanding long-run population dynamics and survival of the species. In sociology, it may be the role of fertility decisions in shaping gender relations and social inequality. In economics, the relevance of fertility typically arises through its implications for productivity and economic growth. The recent fertility debate provides a telling example. Fernández-Villaverde and Norrick (2026) argue that persistently low fertility threatens long-run growth because a shrinking population ultimately means fewer workers, innovators, and ideas. Acemoglu *et al.* (2026) challenge this conclusion by emphasizing an endogenous technological response: labor scarcity creates incentives for labor-saving innovation, raising productivity and potentially offsetting the growth consequences of demographic decline. The challenge is therefore not simply to identify a higher-order problem, but to show why that problem matters for questions economists care about.

By forcing economists to answer the question, "Why should economists care about this problem?", B3 requires making explicit a judgment that is often left unstated. One way for junior economists to identify the relevant higher-order problem is to examine influential papers that ask similar questions and study how those papers motivate their importance. The same question may be linked to different higher-order problems at different points in time as the concerns of the profession and of society evolve. B3 should work like an antenna. Once researchers know which higher-order problem their question speaks to, they can more readily detect the new arguments, evidence, and debates that are changing how economists think about it. The fertility example illustrates this evolution. Concerns about a shrinking workforce are now increasingly connected to questions about automation, AI, and endogenous technological change. The emergence of AI makes this disagreement particularly salient, because the capacity of technology to substitute for scarce labor has become a central question for the future of economic growth. The challenge is therefore not simply to identify a higher-order problem, but to recognize how current developments in economics are changing the way that problem is understood. Understanding how the framing has changed helps economists identify the higher-order problem that is most relevant to contemporary economic debates and to which their findings are most likely to speak.

B4, the Question–Problem Link, asks whether answering the research question is likely to generate progress on the higher-order problem. This is different from providing an immediate policy solution or practical tool. What matters is whether answering the question would improve our understanding of an issue that economists care about. That improvement may take many forms. It may clarify the mechanisms underlying an important phenomenon, sharpen existing theories, explain previously puzzling evidence, improve predictions, identify constraints that limit the effectiveness of current policies, or suggest new ways of thinking about a problem. In some cases, it may immediately and directly inform policy. In others, its value may lie primarily in advancing understanding about the higher-order problem allowing tackling that problem in a new way at a later stage. What matters is that answering the question sheds light on the higher-order problem. At this stage, economists are not expected to know the precise implications of their findings. The purpose of B4 is not to predict the eventual results, but to assess whether the question is worth answering in the first place. The relevant test is prospective. If the answer were known, would it advance our understanding of a problem that matters, whatever that answer may be?

B5, The Answer–Problem Link, ties together the research question, the evidence produced, and the broader problem that initially motivated the study. It asks how the findings actually advance our understanding of the higher-order problem once the results are known. Returning to the fertility example, suppose a study finds that income transfers have little effect on fertility. The significance of this result lies in what it teaches us about the broader problem of sustaining economic growth in the face of declining fertility: financial incentives alone may be insufficient to reverse demographic trends, shifting attention toward other constraints and policy responses. B5 therefore asks what we now understand about the higher-order problem that we did not understand before, and how that knowledge changes the way we think about addressing it.

b. Evaluating the Method in Practice

Here we document the usefulness of our framework. To that end, we use survey evidence collected from participants in the masterclass, *Doing Economics. Crafting the Core: The Science behind the Contribution of a Paper* which we have conducted a number of times. The program was launched in

December 2023 and has since been delivered at a range of institutions and through several major professional associations.¹ The masterclass targets Ph.D. students and early-career faculty seeking structured guidance on how to frame and communicate a paper's contribution.

We administered a short survey immediately after each session. Completion was voluntary, and responses were collected anonymously. The sample consists of 220 respondents. The analysis of prior awareness of research framing concepts by career stage is restricted to the 97 respondents who reported both their career stage and their prior familiarity with research framing concepts. The full survey instrument is reported in Appendix A.1, with summary statistics presented in Appendix A.2.

Figure 1 illustrates that the framework addresses a gap in researchers' ability to operationalize concepts of originality and significance, and that participants expect to apply the practical guidance learned in the Workshop to their own research. Panel A reports prior awareness of research framing concepts by career stage. Across all career stages partial familiarity rather than full mastery of these concepts is the norm. Familiarity increases with seniority. Among Ph.D. students, about 70 percent report being aware of the concepts but unsure how to apply them. A similar pattern holds among early-career researchers, roughly 80 percent of whom report partial familiarity. Although familiarity rises with experience, gaps remain in terms of how to apply these concepts in practice. Among more experienced researchers—combining mid-career researchers and professors—approximately 49 percent report that they are fully able to apply the concepts.

Panel B reports whether participants found the Workshop useful. Nearly all report that they plan to apply what they learned to their own work (98.4 percent), would recommend the Workshop to a colleague (96.9 percent), and believe that the material will benefit their mentor–mentee relationships (87.8 percent). Overall, these comparisons suggest that the main constraint is not lack of awareness, but a limited ability

¹ These include the LSE, the Royal Economic Society (RES), the European Economic Association through its Women in Economics (EEA/WinE) network. For details, see [WISPPRH Research Skills and Career Development Program](#).

systematically to put into practice complex and abstract concepts related to originality and significance. The respondents felt that the Workshop can fill this lacuna.

Analysis of the open-ended responses suggests that the program helps translate the tacit knowledge formalized in our framework into concepts that researchers can apply to their own work. Junior researchers report learning a broad range of concepts and benefiting from exposure to foundational ideas across fields. More senior researchers use the framework differently. It helps them sharpen the motivation and framing of their research questions, focusing attention on a narrower set of issues related to significance and the articulation of higher-order problems. Participants frequently describe the Workshop as helping them make explicit concepts that they had previously encountered but struggled to apply systematically. For example, one Ph.D. student wrote, “I’ve struggled writing introductions and knew that these ingredients were needed, but I didn’t know where to start.” Another explained that “The session helped me see the importance of going beyond just identifying a gap in the literature and stating why the gap exists.

Among more experienced researchers, comments often focused on the role of the higher-order problem in motivating and positioning research. One postdoctoral student noted, “How to think about how to frame the paper in a structured way. I knew how to write a contribution paragraph but struggled with framing the paper around a big question.” Another remarked that “Often times when we are stuck it’s because we lose sight of the higher-order problem and how different pieces of evidence enter the objective of the paper.” These responses suggest that the framework helps researchers at different career stages address different challenges, while providing a common language for thinking about originality, relevance, and contribution.

Figure 2 presents word clouds constructed from participants’ responses to the open-ended survey question, “What did you learn most from this Workshop?”, separately for Ph.D. students and postdoctoral researchers.² Among Ph.D. students (Panel A), responses span a wide range of concepts, including contribution, literature gap, higher-order problem, identification of research questions, introduction

² Appendix A.3 describes the text-analytic procedures used to construct these figures.

structure, and methodology. The diversity of prominent terms suggests that junior researchers acquire a broad toolkit covering multiple stages of the research framing process. In contrast, responses from post-Ph.D. researchers (Panel B) are more concentrated around a smaller set of concepts, particularly the higher-order problem, contribution, and significance. The prominence of terms related to the higher-order problem indicates that more experienced researchers primarily struggle with clarifying motivation and positioning their work within broader economic questions, not with the mechanics of structuring a paper. These patterns suggest that the framework supports researchers at different stages in distinct ways.

3 Writing Up the Idea—and Marketing It

You can be brilliant and gorgeous, but if you do not take decent care of yourself, it is difficult to have people take you seriously. Similarly, if your research idea is original and important, as aided by our framework, unless you write the idea and results up well you will have difficulty getting it past editors and referees. The most visible item in your research paper is its title. A good title should indicate, as succinctly as possible, what the main points and novelties of the paper are—it should grab the reader’s attention. It can do this, for examples, by using unusual but apropos words, by using the rhetorical standard of triplets of words, or by posing a question. A few excellent albeit now old titles are “The Peculiar Organization of Organized Sports” (Neale, 1964); “Jumping the Gun” (Roth and Xing, 1994); and “The Church vs. the Mall” (Gruber and Hungerman, 2008). The upper part of Table 2 lists pairs of suggested titles of papers by the second author that were offered as choices to a seminar for Ph.D. students, inviting them to choose which title within each pair is more attractive.

There are numerous examples of bad titles, but many take forms like: “...: The Case of [Country X]”; “A Note on X”; or “...: Evidence from ...” The first tells the prospective reader that you are simply trying to answer an old question on another country’s data. The second, by including “Note,” implies that this is a minor contribution. The third, a format that is ubiquitous today (e.g., in the August 2026 issue of the *American Economic Review* 6 of 11 articles included this subtitle), is formulaic and demonstrates a lack of imagination.

Also often included below the title page is an Acknowledgement footnote, thanking everyone whose help or comments improved the article. This list should be extensive, but should include only those who wrote or said something that you took into account in the current or previous versions of the article. It also should not be a travelog listing all the places where you have presented the paper: Nobody wishes to read about your peregrinations, and a long list is neither impressive nor demonstrates the importance of your work. Suffice it to write something like “I [we] thank participants at seminars at several institutions.” The title page should also show the date of your draft; if you are writing a second- or higher-order draft, the date of the first draft should also be listed, both to demonstrate that the work is not slapdash (one hopes) and to establish priority for your work.

The title is the equivalent in your paper of a first *amuse bouche* at a Michelin-starred restaurant. The Abstract is the equivalent of the first course. It should be written only after the paper is drafted, and it should not be a paragraph from the Introduction or Conclusion to the paper. It should summarize what the novelty (originality) and findings of the paper are. If the article is empirical, the Abstract should state what data are being used. Most Abstracts are limited to between 100 and 250 words, and it is crucial to stick to the particular word limit of whatever discussion paper series or journal to which you submit the paper. Appendix B.1 contains two examples.

Readers of a scholarly article assume that the author is familiar with the relevant literature and has taken it into account in developing the idea and results. Too often inexperienced authors think that the first section of their paper after an Introduction should be the “lit review.” If you examine articles in leading economics journals, you will not find such a section. The relevant literature can be woven into the motivation of the paper in the Introduction or as the argument and results are developed. Indeed, that kind of weaving should be part of the process by which you developed the idea in the framework we have outlined.

After the Introduction an empirical paper can move directly to a description of the data used or can include a theoretical model motivating the research. The latter should be done, however, only if the theory adds something that would not be obvious to any reader who is familiar with basic economic theory or if the empirical work produces specific, theoretically-based parameter estimates. The data section should be

long if, as is increasingly the case, you collected the data yourself, e.g., through web-scraping, surveys, or original experiments. Especially since your data will eventually need to be archived and accessible to potential future users, this is a good place to detail what you have done. If the data set is secondary and standard, such as one of the many representative household surveys (e.g., PSID, CPS, NLS, GSOEP, and others) just mentioning the data source is sufficient. This section should also include descriptive statistics based on your data. While those are often just background to your subsequent detailed empirical work, in some cases they are sufficient to provide a clear view of your findings. If the latter, they clearly belong in the body of the text.

Too often junior faculty, having spent large amounts of effort collecting and cleaning their novel sets of data, treat the presentation of results as a breathless romp through the data. Unlike sexual activity, foreplay is less important than the main event, in this case, a thorough discussion of your central results—the things that produce the original points at which your initial discussion aimed. Stress the novel, central results; those that are standard and not new merit at most a brief discussion. They should not be included in any tables, at least not in the body of the text. If possible, this is a good place to link your novel results to any theoretical derivation or motivation that you might have offered in the first post-Introduction section of the paper.

Numerous computer programs make constructing graphs to use in Figures easy these days. Graphical presentations can make your results much clearer than can tabular presentations. Using both a graph and a table to make the same point is boring; one should choose which makes your point more clearly and does so in a lesser amount of space. Constructing good graphs is an art that should be learned (and on which Tufte, 1983, provides excellent instruction).

While not within the paradigm of Baconian science, it occasionally makes sense in an empirical article to include a theoretical discussion after the empirical results are presented. Such a discussion, even including a theoretical model, can clarify what economic behavior and conditions might be necessary and sufficient to generate the empirical results that you have discovered. As such, it provides a nice check on the reasonableness of your empirical results.

The article's Conclusion should be more than a summary. A summary should be included, and it makes a very good first paragraph. But the Conclusion is also the place to outline the implications of the results that you have presented in the previous section(s). This stage is where B5, the Answer–Problem Link, becomes particularly important. In an empirical paper, now that you know the specifics of the findings that were based on your original motivation, this is a good place to make the link between the motivation and your results and to show specifically how the new knowledge that you have generated should alter future researchers' treatments of related questions. If there is something in your results that is directly relevant for some economic policy, the Conclusion is a good place to show it. Finally, a section indicating paths for future research (NOT just modifications or replications of what you have done) is very much worth including. A good rule in a full-length research paper is that a Conclusion of fewer than three paragraphs is insufficient.

Economists used to write books. Today they write extremely long Discussion Papers: The ten most recent NBER Working Papers as of this writing averaged 62 11-point double-spaced pages and ranged from 36 to 79 pages. Most journal editors do not wish to publish these entire tomes, and many journals have limits on the number of words a submission can contain.³ Coping with these limits can be done through the use of Appendices that are included in the Discussion Paper but not in the submission to a journal (in which it would be an "Online Appendix"). In theory papers this means relegating less-important proofs to the Appendix. In empirical articles, in which the increased ease of computing and creating graphs has generated growing logorrhea, detailed descriptions of data, descriptive statistics, and less important results should be relegated to an online Appendix(ices).

We admit little knowledge of how specifically to structure a purely theoretical paper. Our points about the Title, Abstract, and Conclusion apply equally to purely theoretical as to empirical articles. In those articles too, clarifying what you have done and differentiating your product are crucial.

³ The ten most recent NBER Working Papers as of the time of this writing averaged 62 11-point double-spaced pages and ranged from 36 to 79 pages long.

Today English is the *lingua franca* of economics (admittedly an unusual usage!), with journals that are specific to non-English-speaking countries, such as the *China Economic Review*, *German Economic Review* and the *Journal of the Japanese and International Economies*, even publishing most articles in English. With the majority of younger economists who are doing research at institutions in English-speaking countries not being native speakers, this concentration of language usage in economics publishing puts many economists at a disadvantage. English is an easy language to speak sufficiently well to function in an English-speaking environment, including in today's Ph.D. programs outside the English-speaking world. It is an extremely difficult language to write well, even to write grammatically. This problem is important: If your writing is very obscure, convoluted, and/or so ungrammatical and error-ridden, editors, referees and other readers who might be otherwise disposed to being interested in your work will "tune out." Think of meeting someone for the first time who arrives late, is badly dressed, and struggles to explain what they do. They may be exceptionally capable, but you are unlikely to come away with a favorable impression. A paper works in much the same way. Readers can only judge the quality of the research through what you put in front of them.

The bottom part of Table 2 provides some instructive mis-uses of the language, ranging from writing that is essentially incomprehensible to writing that is not quite correct. In seminar presentations Ph.D. students were asked to determine what the errors in the excerpts were and how to fix them. Most non-English speakers had no difficulty realizing that one example made no sense, but had much greater difficulty making corrections on finer points of usage, grammar, and punctuation. The bottom part of Appendix B provides corrected versions of these examples.

What can a non-native English-speaker do about the need to write economics research in at least somewhat decent English? There are useful guides to writing up economic research (Thomson, 1999, for theoretical papers; McCloskey, 2000, more generally) For more specific solutions one is tempted to use computer-based assistance to solve writing problems. Relying on WORD to catch errors will, however, remove at most only a small part of any deficiencies. It will catch small problems—misspellings or egregious misuses—but it will not improve obscure or convoluted writing. It usually will not even catch all

grammatical errors. An AI agent will help tremendously, but such agents should only be asked to re-write what you have already written in a grammatical and more user-friendly style. Using an AI agent at the start guarantees that your article will read like verbal pabulum.

All these computer-based solutions will not solve all the language problems in the draft of an article. A “human agent”—a live person whose English is at least very good (preferably a native English-speaker)—should be asked to go over the paper for usage and general readability. Most important, you should read it aloud word-for-word yourself for errors and usage before submitting it to a discussion-paper series or journal; better still, do this before showing it to anyone outside your narrow circle of colleagues.

If they read your work carefully, colleagues should catch mistakes, both in your economic analyses and your empirical work. But being as focused on specifics as they are likely to be, they cannot catch any lack of clarity that might make your draft unintelligible except to specialists on your narrow topic. You cannot expect non-specialists to catch specialized problems in your writing; but they can let you know if what you have written makes any sense. You should ask a partner, very close friend, or non-specialized mentor to read over the paper to comment whether its message—its novel ideas and findings—is clear.

Of course, a Ph.D. student’s advisor(s) would (or at least should) provide detailed comments on every draft. Beyond that, however, and for slightly more advanced scholars, it is exceedingly difficult to elicit comments on a draft of an economics article. People are busy; and there are few if any incentives for commenting on others’ work. The best solution for improving your article is to present it on every occasion that you can. This means jumping at opportunities to present at your home institution. Also, you should submit the paper to meetings, not being shy about submissions to annual meetings of regional or specialized associations. Similarly, if you have friends or graduate-school classmates at other institutions, inform them about your new work and ask if they would be willing to invite you to present in a seminar series at their institution. Any presentation creates a captive audience of people who are forced to listen an exposition of your ideas for at least an hour. Many seminar participants will offer no comments; but a few will provide useful feedback that you otherwise will not get.

Much of our research, even very important work, is uninteresting and/or unintelligible to the educated layperson. Much of what we write, however, is potentially important to the public, both directly affecting what people think about a specific issue, or providing a background to thought more generally. Even papers that might be important are not understandable by non-economists. Involving public/media relations people in your institution is a great way to solve the problem of making your ideas available publicly. Hopefully one reason that we do economic research is that we believe it is generally important. Having a media-relations person at your institution go over your draft and publicize it is the main way in which your ideas can reach the general public. This kind of contact is especially important if you do not have access to the more widely-read discussion-paper series (e.g., the NBER or CEPR series). This kind of exposure often has the by-product that it generates useful substantive comments. It can be especially helpful if you can develop the skills necessary to deal effectively with the media yourself (Hamermesh, 2004).

With sufficient exposure one is bound to receive comments on drafts of an article. Too many will be of the sort “What about this?” and “Why not try that?” The paper is yours, however: Too many commentators, and especially too many referees, view themselves as silent co-authors. It is up to you to decide which comments improve the paper as you envisioned it in light of our framework in Section 2 and to account for them. In a few cases the comment might even be really important, allowing you to generate new results in the context of your novel idea or to provide the opportunity to derive additional implications of your results that you had not considered.

Some comments are either minor or suggest ideas that do not belong in your article but might well merit an entirely separate paper, either by you (if you are that interested in the point) or somebody else. Other comments might be merely bibliographical. Among the latter only those that are references to works that you have missed but that you deem central to your research should be referenced and included somewhere in your paper.

At some point (hopefully not before at least a third draft) you will submit your article to a journal. A few submissions result in requests to Revise, with no promise of eventual acceptance; and those will also usually contain detailed referees’ and editors’ comments. Such comments are classifiable under the same

rubrics listed above, and they should be treated the same way. Of course you have to justify ignoring comments, both in your own mind and in writing to the Editor. But the article is yours, and you the have the right and even the obligation not to let it get cluttered with irrelevant asides, detours down side roads, or references of secondary importance.

4 Summary and Conclusion

We have outlined a proven method of developing economic ideas into research articles that can stand the test of scrutiny by other economists, including referees and journal editors. The method provides a way to create a worthwhile research project; and we have outlined issues in writing up the research results in a way that leads to their publishability. Not all research ideas will make it into a highly visible publication. But with careful use of our method to design projects and attention to our admonitions on writing up the results, an endeavor on which you have spent so much time and effort will see the light of day. It will be noticed by many other economists and will have an impact on the broader society.

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TABLE 1. Criteria for Evaluating the Sufficient Conditions

Criterion	Title	Description
Panel A. Originality		
<i>What do we learn from answering the research question?</i>		
A1	Locating the Contribution	Identify the most relevant body of literature and position the research question within it.
A2	Establishing Existing Knowledge	Determine what is already known about the question by critically reviewing and synthesizing the existing literature.
A3	Identifying the Knowledge Gap	Clearly state what remains unanswered, underexplored, or insufficiently resolved in the literature.
A4	Explaining the Gap and the Opportunity	Explain why the gap persists and why it can be addressed now through new data, methods, theory, institutional changes, or other developments.
Panel B. Significance		
<i>Why does answering the research question matter?</i>		
B1	Identifying the Higher-Order Problem	Clearly define the broader economic problem that motivates the research question.
B2	Establishing the Problem's Importance	Explain why the problem matters because it is large, persistent, costly, resistant to existing solutions, or urgent.
B3	Demonstrating Economic Relevance	Show how the problem relates to central debates in economics.
B4	Question–Problem Link	Explain whether answering the research question could improve understanding of, or help address, the higher-order problem.
B5	Answer–Problem Link	Explain how the findings improve understanding of, or help address, the higher-order problem.

Notes: Panel A criteria assess originality and are addressed before the study is undertaken. Panel B criteria assess significance: criteria B1–B4 are addressed before data collection, while B5 is assessed once results are available.

TABLE 2. Writing: Titles and Examples of Bad Writing

A. Titles Contest: Pick the better title within each pair

“The Effects of Disability on Variety in Time Use”

“The Time Cost of a Disability”

“The Economic Impact of Heritable Physical Traits: Hot Parents, Rich Kid?”

“Human Beauty Illustrates the Economic Impact of Heritable Physical Traits”

B. Examples of Bad Writing

“EPL coverage reduces the dismissal rate only in establishments above 10 employees, being the estimated effect for establishment below 15 employees statistically significant than for establishment above 15 employees.”

“...each individual has its own utility function and both partner agree to maximize....”

“The collectors of the data graded each tasks difficulty....”

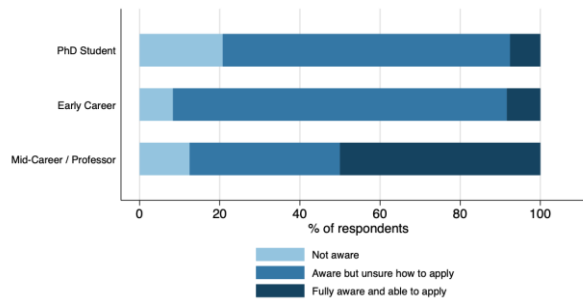
“...hence my OLS results probably underestimate the true impacts of SOE status. Of course, it should be cautioned that these people are younger and hence are not necessary the same....”

“The dependent variable takes the value of one if student i reports to have suicidal ideation....”

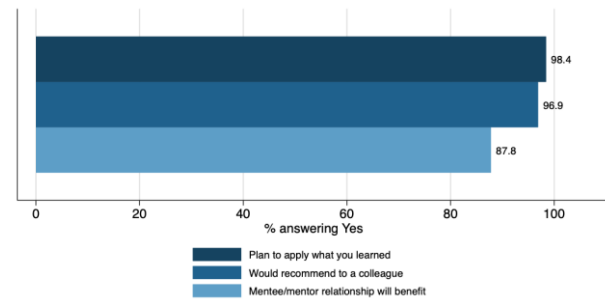
“It is however difficult to see which variables this might be.”

FIGURE 1. Training Needs and Workshop Evaluation Outcomes

(A) Prior Awareness of Research Framing Concepts by Career Stage



(B) Workshop Satisfaction



Notes: Panel A reports prior awareness of research framing concepts by academic career stage. Percentages are calculated within career stage categories. Respondents with missing career stage or missing prior awareness are excluded (N = 97; Ph.D. Students: 53, Early Career: 36, Mid-Career/Professor: 8). Panel B reports participants' self-assessed evaluation of the Doing Economics: Crafting the Core masterclass. Bars show the percentage of respondents answering "Yes" to each binary outcome. Sample sizes vary across items due to item non-response: N = 190 for Plan to apply what you learned, N = 192 for Would recommend to a colleague, and N = 172 for Mentee/mentor relationship will benefit.

Appendix A. Survey Materials

A.1 Survey Instrument

This appendix reproduces the survey instrument administered to participants of the masterclass *Doing Economics. Crafting the Core: The Science behind the Contribution of a Paper*.

Thank you for attending the course “Doing Economics – Crafting the Core: The Science behind the Contribution of a Paper.” We would appreciate if you could take five minutes or less to respond to a brief survey and share your experience.

1. Please select the option that best describes your current academic or professional stage. • Ph.D. student (currently enrolled in a doctoral program)
 - Early career (within five years of completing a doctoral degree or in early stages of an academic or professional career)
 - Mid-career (five to fifteen years of experience in academic or professional settings)
 - Professor or advanced career (over fifteen years of experience in academic or professional settings)
2. Do you plan to apply what you learned from the Workshop?
 - Yes
 - No
3. Would you recommend this Workshop to a colleague?
 - Yes
 - No
4. Do you think the mentor–mentee relationship will benefit from what you learned in this Workshop?
 - Yes
 - No
5. Before attending this masterclass, which of the following best described your understanding of how to frame a research question using key concepts such as the higherorder problem, the gap in the literature, and the reasons for that gap (to establish both originality and relevance)?
 - I was fully aware of these concepts and knew how to identify and position my research accordingly.
 - I was aware of these concepts but did not know how to identify or use them to frame my research.
 - I was not aware of these concepts as distinct or essential to the research process.

6. What is one thing you learned in this masterclass about the research process that you did not know?
Open text

7. We would appreciate any additional comments or feedback about this Workshop.
Open text

A.2 Survey Response Summary

TABLE A1. Summary Statistics from Masterclass Evaluation Survey

Variable / Category	N	Mean	SD	%
Panel A. Satisfaction Outcomes (1 = Yes, 0 = No)				
Apply what you learned	190	0.984	0.125	98.4
Would recommend to a colleague	192	0.969	0.174	96.9
Mentor–mentee relationship will benefit	172	0.878	0.328	87.8
Panel B. Career Stage				
Ph.D. Student	97			44.1
Early Career	54			24.5
Mid-Career	14			6.4
Professor / Advanced Career	11			5.0
Unanswered	44			20.0
Total	220			100.0
Panel C. Prior Awareness of Research Framing Concepts				
Not aware	15			15.2
Aware but unsure how to apply	72			72.7
Fully aware and able to apply	12			12.1
Unanswered	121			—
Total	99			100.0

Notes: Panel A reports binary indicators (1 = Yes, 0 = No) measuring satisfaction with the masterclass. N reflects the number of valid responses; the remaining respondents out of 220 did not answer each item. Panel B reports the distribution of respondents across academic career stages (total N = 220). Panel C reports prior familiarity with research framing concepts. Percentages are calculated among the 99 respondents who answered this question; the remaining 121 respondents did not answer.

A.3 Text Analysis of Open-Ended Survey Responses

This appendix describes the text analysis methods applied to the open-ended survey question “What did you learn most from this Workshop?”.

Data preprocessing.

The preprocessing pipeline is applied identically to all responses to the question prior to visualisation and statistical analysis. Given a response d_i , the processing steps are as follows.

Step 1: Compound concept protection.

Before tokenisation, domain-specific multi-word expressions drawn from the *Crafting the Core* framework are detected using regular expressions and replaced by underscore-joined tokens. This ensures that conceptually meaningful phrases remain intact during tokenisation and frequency analysis.

The protected compound concepts include:

- Higher-Order Problem (including HOP)
- Research Question
- Research Framing
- Value Added
- Literature Gap
- Causal Effect, Causal Evidence, Causal Inference
- Identification Strategy
- Research Design
- Mentoring Relationship
- Literature Contribution
- Paper Structure, Paper Introduction
- Tacit Knowledge
- Necessary Condition, Sufficient Condition
- PEE Method

For example, any reference to a higher-order problem, including variants such as “higherorder economic problem” or “HOP,” is recoded as the single token `Higher_Order_Problem` before further processing.

Step 2: Normalisation.

All responses are converted to lowercase. Characters other than letters and underscores are replaced with spaces.

Step 3: Tokenisation.

The cleaned text is tokenised using the word `_tokenize` function from the NLTK library (Bird *et al.*, 2009).

Step 4: Lemmatisation.

Tokens that do not contain underscores (i.e., single-word tokens) are lemmatised using NLTK's WordNetLemmatizer. Compound tokens generated in Step 1 are preserved unchanged.

Step 5: Stop-word removal.

Tokens are removed if they appear in predefined stop-word lists or contain fewer than three characters. Three classes of stop words are used:

1. Base list:

- Standard English stop words from NLTK and WordCloud
- Instructor and institution names
- Event-related terms (e.g., Workshop, session, masterclass)
- Common filler expressions (e.g., think, know, would)

2. Learning-specific additions:

Terms frequently repeated because of question wording rather than substantive content (e.g., paper, research, learn, framework, tool).

3. Feedback-specific additions:

Generic positive expressions and evaluation terms (e.g., valuable, informative, insightful), as well as general commentary words.

Word cloud construction.

Word clouds are generated using the Python WordCloud library (Müller, 2023). Font size is proportional to word frequency, providing a visual summary of dominant concepts.

All circular figures use a disc-shaped mask (900 × 900 pixels). Terms are placed in descending frequency order so that the most frequent terms appear near the centre.

The collocations option of the WordCloud library is disabled. Multi-word expressions are handled exclusively through compound-token protection in Step 1.

Each word cloud displays at most 60 terms. Font scaling uses:

`relative _scaling = 0.60`

This increases visual separation between frequent and infrequent terms.

A blue gradient colour scheme is applied across figures. High-frequency terms appear in darker tones, while low-frequency terms appear in lighter tones. Colour assignment is tied to frequency-based font size to maintain visual consistency across figures.

Appendix B. Illustrations for Section 3

B.1 Abstracts.

Intergenerational transmission of inequality is a central question in the social sciences. We use one trait, beauty, to infer how much parents' physical characteristics transmit inequality across generations. Analyses of a large-scale longitudinal dataset in the United States, and a much smaller dataset of Chinese parents and children, show that increases in parents' looks are associated with increases in their child's looks. A large dataset of U.S. siblings shows a positive correlation of their beauty. The appropriate weighted average from the three samples shows that a one SD increase in ratings of both parents' looks is associated with a 0.25 SD increase in their child's. Coupling these estimates with those from large literatures measuring the impact of beauty on earnings and the intergenerational elasticity of income suggests that a one SD difference in parents' looks is correlated with a 0.074 SD difference in their adult child's earnings, about U.S. \$2,170 annually. Hamermesh and Zhang (2025)

Most organizations rely on managers to identify talented workers. However, managers who are evaluated on team performance have an incentive to hoard workers. This study provides the first empirical evidence of talent hoarding using personnel records and survey evidence from a large firm. Talent hoarding is self-reported by three-fourths of managers, is detectable in manager ratings of worker talent, and occurs more frequently under stronger hoarding incentives, proxied by performance-related pay, team size, and talent visibility. Using quasi-random exposure to talent hoarding, I show that hoarding deters internal job applications, inhibiting career progression and altering talent allocation in the firm. Haegele (2026).

B.2. Corrections to Table 2.

"EPL coverage reduces the dismissal rate only in establishments above 10 employees, being the estimated effect for establishment below 15 employees statistically significant than for establishment above 15 employees."

This is not correctable, since as it is written it is completely unclear what the author meant.

"...individuals have their own utility functions and both partners agree to maximize...."

"The collectors of the data graded each task's difficulty...."

"...hence my OLS results probably underestimate the true impacts of SOE status. Of course, it should be cautioned that these people are younger and thus are not necessarily the same...."

"The dependent variable takes the value of one if student i reports having suicidal ideation...."

"It is, however, difficult to see which variables these might be."