

Chair of Development Economics
(Prof. Dr. Michael Grimm)
Writing a paper/thesis
– A guideline –

This version: November, 2026

Content

Introduction 2
1.Structure 2
2.Substance 3
2.1 Think – Plan – Write – Revise 3
2.2 Little writing tips 6
3.Style 6
3.1 Language 6
3.2 Layout 7
4 Literature 8
4.1 What 8
4.2 Where 8
4.3 Little reading tips 8
5 Plagiarism 9
6 Declaration of generative AI use 9
7 Replicability 10
Bibliography 10

Introduction

The aim of this guideline is to give an informal overview of the contents of any research work to help students who plan on writing a paper – be it a seminar paper, a bachelor or a master thesis – at the chair of Development Economics in the University of Passau. This guide partly draws on Chandrasekhar (2002) and Cochrane (2005).

1. Structure

The structure of any paper is governed by logic and meant to guide the reader through all the steps undertaken to tell your story.

The following structure can and should be adapted to each research question accordingly.

- Title Page
- Table of contents
- (List of Figures/Tables/Abbreviations) (optional)
- Abstract
- Main Text:

Literature Review (seminar paper or Bachelor thesis)	Empirical Paper (e.g. Bachelor or Master thesis)
1. Introduction 2. Background and theoretical/conceptual considerations (incl. selection criteria for reviewed papers) 3. Empirical evidence/results 4. Discussion 5. Conclusion	1. Introduction (incl. a brief literature review)[1] 2. Context/background 3. Theoretical/conceptual considerations) 4. Data and descriptive statistics 5. Methods and empirical specification 6. Results 7. Conclusion

[1] The literature review may also constitute a section on its own if there are good reasons to be exhaustive.

- Bibliography (References)
- Appendix[2]

Systematic Reviews and Replication studies follow a somewhat different structure. In any case, conceive a structure that will help you write in a logical manner; the paper should not be a log of your research process. Succinctly put by Cochrane (2005): “We don't care about the hundreds of things you tried that did not work. Save it for your memoirs."

Once the ‘skeleton’ of your work is set up, you can start to fill it.

2. Substance

You should write with the reader in mind: first describe what you do, then explain it, and then compare it to the alternatives. Be conscious of the emphasis of your work. Is it empirical in nature or descriptive?

Be precise, be clear, and keep it short. Another student – reader – should be able to understand and to reproduce your work.

2.1 Think – Plan – Write – Revise

Think about what you want to write, plan accordingly. Ask yourself what needs to be done to achieve the final product. For example: What is the best way to present my data? Is it graphs or tables? Think about the best way of presenting the work done by others. Write, read, and be critical of yourself. Let someone else read and let them be critical of your efforts.

Take a hint from those with experience: How is data presented in published articles? How do published authors discuss the literature? Reading a couple of papers from a good journal will definitely help you to write your own paper in a professional manner.

Introduction

In the introduction you have to catch the reader’s attention and explain your motivation and background. Give the reader an insight into your work and explain the main idea. An empirical paper should roughly have the following sequence of paragraphs: Problem statement, what your paper does and how it does it, what it finds, and how it contributes to the literature (this is the literature review part), and

[2] The Appendix should only contain information that is not necessary for the immediate understanding in the main text.

finally a brief roadmap of the paper. Read carefully a couple of introductions of papers published in good journals and you will see that they all more or less follow this structure.

After reading the introduction a reader should know the topic, question of the paper, and possibly the main results. Think of it as a trailer that reveals the best scenes in a movie. Revise your introduction after you have written your conclusion and make sure the two match to a 100%. Did you really deliver all you promised? Or did you revise your research goals?

Literature review

You will have to read a lot and much of it you will not use, for that reason you should read methodically. Identify the key authors early on and skim the papers. Read first the abstract, then the conclusion, decide then if it is worth reading in its entirety. If it is, read with a goal in mind. Ask yourself how that article contributes to a better understanding of your research question. How does your research paper relate to that article? Does it support the causal link of your hypothesis? Does it help explain unexpected results? Does it provide background?

A well-done literature review will capture the essence of the knowledge in your topic and is vital in justifying your work as it gives context and purpose to your research question. A review will include key approaches to answering your questions as well as the main contributions of the leading authors. Characterize your research question by pointing out what has not been well explained by the existing literature and carefully explain which are the mechanisms assumed in the theory and how you expect them to show in your own analysis.

For more on the literature (‘What is it and where do I find it?’) see section 4.

Context/background

Provide context and background knowledge that is relevant for your study. This could be the political and social context in which a certain project is embedded or particular country circumstances, historical facts about a conflict or some social norms. Whatever helps the reader to understand what makes this case special. It should also help readers to assess to what extent the findings might be transferable to other contexts.

Theoretical/conceptual considerations

The context and structure of this section depends heavily on the type of your paper. It could define and explain important concepts (e.g. capabilities or income mobility), provide a theoretical framework (e.g. how we should think school meals impact cognitive development) or a full-fledged theoretical model (e.g. how inequality affects

economic growth). Overall, it should guide your empirical analysis.

Data and descriptive statistics

Describe your data so that a reader will be able to follow all subsequent analysis without wondering what type of information is being used. Relay the database (source) and the timeframe. What variables do you have at your disposal, what is their unit of analysis?

If you transform data explain the reasoning behind this decision and discuss alternative approaches. Say, for example: 'I adjust income by the square root of household size'. Then explain why you do this and then discuss other adjustment functions.

Descriptive statistics are helpful in showing trends that might hint at the mechanisms used in the analysis of the data.

Each table should have a self-contained caption, so that every reader can understand what is being presented without having to look for the corresponding paragraph in the text. The same goes for figures.

Highlight also what is missing or issues with the data quality. If you do an impact evaluation issues of attrition and balance become relevant.

Methods and empirical specification

In the methods-section describe all the steps of your analysis and back them all up with literature. In case you are doing empirical work, explain what is your identification strategy and the theoretical reasoning behind it. Describe the main assumptions in your econometric model (e.g. parallel trends) and state its limitations as well as the steps you take to deal with them.

If you are not doing empirical work – say, a literature review – describe the methods used by others. Who did what and how? What influence did their methodology have on the results? Are the findings robust? Compare the methodologies and results of different authors. Is there a consensus in the literature?

Results

Present your results in a straightforward and accessible way. What was said about tables and figures above counts also for this section. If you are reporting regression results, the caption should contain the left-hand variable. State significance levels and other reported information in the notes.

Explain if your results are in accordance with the theory presented before. When

interpreting your results pay attention to the statistical and to the economic significance of your variables. Be critical of your own findings and question your results. Are the numbers sensible? Are you including robustness checks? Be transparent regarding unexpected findings. Don't try to explain findings that are 'impossible' to explain.

Conclusion

In the conclusion, you synthesize your work. What happened to your hypothesis? What new knowledge did you gain? This is the opportunity to show your readers why your paper is meaningful and also useful. Can you draw policy implications, need for further research or other uses of your findings in the 'real world'? State them here! Discuss the external validity of your findings, if applicable.

2.2 Little writing tips

Start writing early. The amount of time needed to have a finished paper is grossly underestimated, especially if you lack experience. Estimate the amount you think it will take you to finish your paper and then multiply by three to arrive at a more realistic figure. No one really writes a 20-pages final paper in a weekend, at least not a good one.

Start pinning down your thoughts and impressions as soon as you start researching your chosen field/topic. Keep detailed records/dairies/notes of your research and be sure to structure them in a logical manner, especially if you are doing empirical work. This exercise will firstly help you get your thoughts in order and help you spot errors in the argumentation early and secondly, it will force you to write. Much of what you write early on can be used later when building your paper.

Write in three drafts: put your facts together, then check for coherence and then edit. Rinse and repeat until the deadline or until you are satisfied.

3. Style

3.1 Language

Be precise, clear and strive for brevity. Are you at a loss for words? Try 'Bloom's taxonomy'.[3]

Avoid adjectives, they are not precise. Do not write: 'very significant' or 'quite small'; and if you must, don't use double adjectives. There is no such thing as 'very novel results'. If you are writing alone, don't use the royal 'we' when it is only you that does

[3] Found for example here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bloom's_taxonomy [Accessed Feb. 10, 2014]. (Oh, and avoid quoting Wikipedia!).

something. The ‘we’ can be used when you are including the reader, say for example: ‘we can see that these results are consistent with the theory’.

3.2 Layout

Format

The formatting is done in a way that eases the reading. Use wide line-spacing and justified text. Leave wide margins to the left and to the right. The 2 cm in this document are a minimum, but unlike many theses, it is not bound. Adjust the left margins accordingly.

Length

For a bachelor thesis the number of words should be between 8.000 and 12.000 words. For a master thesis, the respective number of words is between 12.000 and 15.000. The word count is done without the References and the Appendix. Please state the final word count on the Title Page.

Quoting

We don't abide a particular style (although recommended styles are for instance Harvard, APA, AER or Chicago), but we do expect consistency. Just follow some basic rules.

When quoting in text:

- The name of the author and the publication year should be in parentheses (and not in a footnote).
- If your quote is literal, use quotation marks and indentation. For direct quotation you should report the page number.

In the references (bibliography):

- Organize the references alphabetically by first author.
- Every reference contains the name(s) of the author(s), the year, the name of the item.
- The citation of a scientific article contains the name of the journal in italics. Included have to be also the issue, the volume, and the pages where the article is found.

- The citation of a book contains the name of the book in italics. Included are also the publisher and the city where the publisher resides.
- If you are quoting from the internet, you have to report the date when the item you are citing went online and when you accessed it, as well as the full URL.[3]

4 Literature

4.1 What

By 'literature' we mean the traceable, reliable body of work that encompasses the current knowledge in a field. This knowledge is usually presented in books and articles ('papers').

- Books
  - Handbooks and textbooks.
  - Monographs on specific topics
  - Collections of papers (often conference proceedings).
- Discussion or working papers: disseminate research quickly in order to get comments and suggestions for revision or improvement before they are submitted to refereed journals.
- Journal articles that are reviewed by the editor and associates, then independent reviewers. There are general interest journals such as the *American Economic Review*, the *American Economic Journal* (different issues) or the *Economic Journal* or field journals, such as the *Journal of Development Economics*. The most important field journals in development economics are: *Journal of Development Economics*, *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, *World Bank Economic Review*, and *World Development*.

4.2 Where

- Repec
- Google Scholar
- J-STOR

4.3 Little reading tips

Besides the tips given in section 2.1, here are some questions you should keep in mind when reading any article:

1. What is the research question(s) that the authors are trying to address in their paper?
2. What is their contribution to the already existing (empirical) literature?
3. What methodological approach are they using?
4. What kind of data are they using for analysis?
5. Is the methodological approach/data appropriate to address the research question? Can you think of alternatives?
6. What are their main findings and (policy) conclusions? Do you agree with their point of view?
7. Are there any shortcomings in their analysis?
8. Do you have any questions which remain unaddressed/issues that remain unclear?

5 Plagiarism

The completion of a seminar paper or a bachelor/master thesis at our chair is based on mutual trust. You commit to producing these examination performances independently and without external assistance. This includes marking adopted sentences and texts as citations. Without the origin of such material, especially sources accessible on the internet, these are considered plagiarism. The chair reserves the right, in the case of plagiarism, to not grade the work in whole or in part. By submitting your work to our chair, you acknowledge these rules and agree that it may be analyzed using plagiarism detection software. You need to submit a declaration of originality with your paper.

6 Declaration of generative AI use[4]

You must also declare the use of generative AI tools in the manuscript preparation process upon submission of your paper.

You may use AI tools. However, these tools must never be used as a substitute for human critical thinking, expertise, and evaluation. AI tools may only be applied with human oversight and control.

Ultimately, you are responsible and accountable for the contents of your work. This includes accountability for:

- Carefully reviewing and verifying the accuracy, comprehensiveness, and

[4] Section 6 draws on Elsevier's journals AI use policy.

impartiality of all AI generated output. This includes checking sources, as AI generated references can be incorrect or fabricated.

- Editing and adapting all material thoroughly to ensure the manuscript represents your authentic and original contribution and reflects your own analysis, interpretation, insights, and ideas.
- Ensuring accuracy and originality of any AI generated images and providing appropriate attribution where relevant.
- Ensuring the use of any tools or sources, AI based or otherwise, is made clear and transparent to readers. If AI tools have been used a disclosure statement is required upon submission, example below.
- Ensuring the manuscript is developed in a way that safeguards data privacy, intellectual property, and other rights, by checking the terms and conditions of any AI tool that is used.

You should not list or cite AI tools as an author or co-author on the manuscript since authorship implies responsibilities and tasks that can only be attributed to, and performed by, humans.

The use of AI tools in the manuscript preparation process must be declared by adding a statement at the end of the manuscript when the paper is submitted:

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process. Statement: *During the preparation of this work, I used [NAME OF TOOL/SERVICE] to [REASON]. After using this tool/service, I reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.*

7 Replicability

If your paper is based on your own empirical analysis, you need to submit with your paper the corresponding, excel or do-files, log files and the data files, so that your grader can replicate what you have done.

Bibliography

Chandrasekhar, R. (2002). How to write a thesis: A working guide. The University of Western Australia.

Cochrane, J. H. (2005). Writing tips for Ph.D. students. Graduate School of Business, University of Chicago.