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# Writing Strategies

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## Cover Page and Cover Letter

### 1. Prepare a perfect cover page and an abstract

- The cover page should contain complete correspondence information about the submitting author:
  - postal address
  - telephone and fax numbers
  - e-mail address
- If you move, give your new address to the editorial office.
- If updating a paper, give the current date (or month and year).
- Do *not* mention when a paper was first written and when it was revised. The editor can tell how often the paper has been rejected, and may erroneously conclude that it should receive the same treatment. If you really need the information for yourself, you can add such things as a non-printing comment. It is probably more convenient to maintain a separate record that shows the status of all your unpublished papers.
- If the referee figures out that the paper has been rejected more than once, he/she is more likely to recommend rejection.
- The abstract and the paper should be prepared together.
- When the paper is finally accepted, the abstract has to be written, but your memory is hazy. It is better to do it when your memory is fresh.
- The abstract should appear on the second page. Then if the editor rips off the cover page, the abstract will still reach the referee.
- Eliminate typographical errors in the cover page and the abstract. This is an absolute minimum courtesy. If there is an error, it is a sign of gross neglect.
- Of course, you have to check the spelling for the entire paper, and you should do that every time you revise the paper.

### 2. Don't explain how important the paper is in the cover letter

- Editors do not read it.
- Maybe the secretaries do.
- This is a signal that you lack experience and that you are not confident.
- One or two explanatory sentences may not hurt. (You may pass the initial screening.)



## Introduction

### 3. Devote half the writing time to the introduction and conclusion

- Once the ideas of a publishable paper are roughly formulated, writing should be done within a month. Otherwise, you lose interest. You may even forget about the entire paper.
- About half of your writing time should be devoted to writing the main body of the paper, which should be done first.
- The remainder of your effort should be devoted to writing the introduction and conclusion.

### 4. Get their attention early

- Provide evidence of why it is interesting (i.e., why it should be published) in the introduction.
- If an apple does not taste good at the first bite, one simply throws it away without giving any thought on the nutritional value hidden in the apple.
- Likewise, most referees make up their mind at the first bite, i.e., within 15 minutes of reading a paper.
- If the referees don't like a paper, they begin to look for reasons to justify why the paper should be rejected.
- If the referee loses interest from reading the introduction, he/she might postpone reading the paper.
- If a paper is set aside, it could be several months later when the referee picks up the paper again, probably if and when he/she receives a reminder about the review. This is one of the major reasons why it takes a long time to get a report.
- Do not repeat the concluding remarks in the introduction.

### 5. The introduction should be two pages or less

- If the introduction is more than two pages, it is too long.
- Shorten it to 2 pages or 1/6 of the paper, whichever is less.
- If you write more than two pages, then either
  - you are discoursing a lot about other people, in which case you are sending a signal that your contribution is minor, relative to the literature, or
  - you are discussing too many technical details, which do not belong in the introduction.

### 6. Discuss real world examples

- Pass the relevance test by providing citations, statistics, or anecdotes of real world examples.
- Then the referee cannot say the paper is uninteresting, the most common reason for rejection.
- If the referee says it is not interesting, it is a value judgment and there is no appeal! No editors will publish an uninteresting paper.
- One important purpose of the introduction is to prevent the referees from making that disparaging remark.
- Without this sound footing in the real world, your paper may give the impression to readers that it provides a profound solution to nonexistent problems.

## 7. Imitate skillful writers

- Observe how other successful writers introduce their topic, cite literature, and get on with their task.
- Imitate their words and phrases, and modify them to suit your purpose.
- It is easier to imitate what someone else has written than to create a totally new paragraph.

## 8. Do not plagiarize

- The word “plagiarize” means to “steal and pass off as one’s own (the ideas or words of another).” (*Webster’s Third International Dictionary*, 1986)
- Remember Robert Fulghum’s advice “Don’t take things that aren’t yours.”
- If you do, you will pay dearly later when your work is published. You are lucky if the paper is not published!
- If you are quoting statements made by another writer, use identifying quotation marks.
- Some people suggest that one should not copy more than three consecutive words without identifying quotation marks. This is extreme advice that no one can follow.
- Do not copy, but summarize the contributions of other writers in your own words to the extent that they are related to the subject of your paper.
- Mention the cited author with year of publication in the text and give the exact source in the reference section.

## 9. Do not use I

- Some authors do get away with I.
- Referees are generally biased against egocentric persons.
- Take the writing task seriously, not yourself.
- "The paper achieves...." sounds softer and more humble than "I did this."
- Avoid starting a paragraph with I.

## 10. Create a packet of related articles for each paper

- All cited and other related papers must be at hand.
- This practice saves time, especially when writing the introduction and conclusion, and when you revise the paper.
- If you maintain the background packet, you do not have to go to the library every time you revise the paper.

## 11. Treat others generously

- Emphasize the importance of the paper being written, but not at the expense of others. They are probably your referees and they are sensitive.
- Don’t hit people (Robert Fulghum). Do not hurt their feelings.
- When mentioning the works of other persons, avoid using negative terms.
- Examples:

- "The deficiency of Smith's approach is..."
- "The problems of these papers..."
- Papers that attack others are likely to be rejected, especially when the authors or their friends become your referees.

## **12. Avoid predominantly citing your own works**

- The referees may think you are a self-centered clod. There are others who have contributed to the literature.
- If the first page only mentions your past work, and not that of others, it means either
  - you are probably digging into an area in which no one else is interested—this implication is bad—or
  - you are an egotist who disregards the contributions of others, which is even worse.

## **13. Cite the papers of potential referees in the introduction**

- In many situations, whether your paper is accepted or not primarily depends on who referees it.
- If you offend the referee by your thoughtless comments, this paper and many of your future papers will have no place to go.
- Important references should be mentioned in the first page.
- Hopefully, the editor will read the first page (or the next) when choosing the referees.
- The editor may choose referees from those mentioned in the introduction and references.
- Works of potential referees should be mentioned in the introduction, rather than buried deep in footnotes or the main body.

## **14. Give (accurate) credit generously to the most likely referees**

- Be generous to all authors cited, but particularly to those who are likely to be referees.
- Explain why their works are significant for your analysis.
- Write one or two sentences about the contributions of each of the most likely referees and how their works are related to yours.
- This takes up less than 1% of the space, but it can affect the probability of acceptance significantly.

## **15. Find quotations from well-known authors**

- This strategy increases the credibility of the paper.
- For instance, if John Maynard Keynes or Kenneth Arrow said something about the topic, it is difficult for the referee to argue that your paper is uninteresting.
- Quoting a live, famous person is more effective; his or her students might be referees.
- Do not quote dead people too often; they won't be your referees. (No pun intended.)
- Do not quote yourself. This implies narcissism or lack of exposure to the thinking of other economists.

## 16. Do not be apologetic

- You may acknowledge the limitations of the approach only once in the conclusion.
- But do not apologize for what the paper cannot do.
- The more you mention to the referees what the paper does not do, the less contribution it seems to make to the literature.



## Preparing the Main Body

### 17. Prepare a rough outline before writing

- Sketch briefly the content of each section. Then generate the text. Smooth out the connections. Without this rough blueprint, the paper often evolves in a different direction than you intended.
- This blueprint reduces the chances that you will lose direction and dwell too much upon minor points.
- This sketch needs to be changed as you go.

### 18. Start writing before the paper is finished in your head

- The precise connection of words from beginning to end cannot be done in your head, except by a few geniuses like Shakespeare.
- A 15-page paper may contain about 4 - 5,000 words. Writing a paper is like stringing pearls to make a necklace. There is an optimum order for these pearls to form a paper, and some pearls are better left out.
- Begin the main body of the paper with empirical or theoretical results. Then create the introduction and conclusion.
- Tables and references may be added as needed.

### 19. Do not read too much

- Do not read too much before you begin to write. It can interfere with your own thinking and writing.
- Imagine how much time a prolific writer would spend reading the contributions of other people.
- It is impossible to read every paper ever written on a subject.
- Remember your goal is to write and publish a paper, not to read everything.
- You have other important things to do (e.g., taking care of spouse and children)!
- If your family is neglected, what good is your paper?
- If you read a dozen papers on a topic, you should have enough material to write a paper. Now add your own ideas to this base of knowledge.

## 20. Develop consistent and simple notations

- Invest enough time to design efficient notations for your papers.
- Do this not just for one paper, but for most of your papers. This helps you remember when you revise a paper.
- If the notations are confusing, the paper cannot be very illuminating.
- Each paper may have some notations that are specifically tailored for the task. But the variables should come from a well-designed and consistent set of notations so that you may readily remember what they stand for.

## 21. Strike a balance between theory and applications

- A theoretical paper should say something about policies, applications, or empirical work.
- An empirical paper should say something about the theory that led to the empirical work.
- Check the preferences of the journals that you are considering.

## 22. Divide long paragraphs

- If there are two or more ideas in a single paragraph, split them up.
- Break up long paragraphs even if they contain a single idea.
- Readers tend to skip long paragraphs. They discourage referees and readers from reading the paper.
- The eyes of readers are subconsciously looking for open space. This is why important equations should be displayed, rather than buried in the text.
- No paragraph should be longer than half a page.
- As a general rule, a paragraph should have more than two sentences.

## 23. Each full page should have more than two paragraphs

- A paragraph extending over a page indicates that you are not an experienced writer.
- Referees and readers skip long paragraphs.
- When there are many equations, it is easy to forget to control the length of a paragraph.

## 24. Summarize theoretical findings in propositions

- If you do not want the referees to miss important results, repeat them in propositions.
- The referees do not read every word you write. They are more likely to read the displayed items.
- **Minimize** the number of words in a given proposition.

## 25. Use tables to summarize results or to compare with the literature

- Tables provide another way to catch the attention of referees.
- Avoid too many numbers in one table.
- Do not present more than three tables, except in empirically oriented papers.

- Do not present more than six tables even in empirical papers.

## 26. Minimize numbered equations

- There should be some equations. Otherwise, the referees might think that it is a purely descriptive paper.
- But do not include too many equations. A paper with more than 30 equations seems difficult to read.
- Do not display every equation. Less important equations can be buried in the text.
- Not all equations need to be numbered.
- Use primes or other variations such as (3') or (7a), (7b), etc. to group related equations.
- If there are more than a score of equations, move long derivations to the Appendix.

## 27. Simplify figures

- A (good) figure is worth a thousand words.
- Do not use too many curves, lines, or labels.
- Ten years after publication, readers may not remember anything about a paper, not equations nor derivations. But they may recall a figure.
- As a general rule, a paper should not contain more than two figures and rarely more than three.
- Too many figures suggest that the paper represents a low-tech research effort.



## Conclusion

### 28. Summarize the contribution briefly in the conclusion

- A paper needs a concluding remark. A note does not, but it may include such a remark.
- Mention the limitations of the results (without being negative).
- Discuss how the theory may be extended in certain areas.
- The referees may be interested in writing a related paper. If they are honest, they would need your paper as a basis, and hence are likely to recommend acceptance. That—stimulating a reader to extend your research—is your contribution.
- Compare your results to those in the current literature.
- If the literature does not have comparable results, discuss how your paper is related to the literature.
- Do not repeat some portion of the introduction in the conclusion.

### 29. Discuss policy implications

- Explain how the theory applies to real world examples.
- Example: In practice, A is used, but you recommend B, etc.
- Do not rehash what you already said in the main body of the paper. Especially, do not copy and paste it in the conclusion.

- If you do, the referees will know you are not articulate.
  - Present the bottom line. Mention the implications for policy makers, practitioners, or other researchers.
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## Abstract and Title

### 30. Write a provocative abstract

- Write the abstract only after the conclusion is written.
- The referees read it more often than any other paragraph in the paper.
- In 15 seconds, you have to convince the referees (and readers) that they should proceed with the rest of the paper.
- So do an excellent job here.
- If it is boring, your paper is hopeless.

### 31. Choose an interesting title

- Give the paper an eye-catching title.
  - If the title is boring, readers will avoid your paper even when it is published. The paper won't generate many citations.
  - Never try to squeeze the content of the paper in the title.
  - Giving a title to a paper is like naming your child. The title should be short.
  - One line is best. Never use more than two lines.
  - Avoid "On the...". It implies that the paper is actually a note. Because it is on a well-known subject, the editors are led to believe that the paper probably contains little that is new.
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## References

### 32. Minimize references

- An inexperienced writer rarely resists the temptation to cite all papers that have ever been written on the subject.
- This practice may be appropriate for a doctoral dissertation, but not for a journal paper.
- An ideal number of references is one dozen. A practical upper limit is twenty.
- For all papers, follow the reference style of a well-known journal in the field.
- Do not revise the reference style each time you submit the paper. The acceptance decision is not based on the style of your references.
- After the paper is accepted, you can use the style of the journal in question.

### 33. Include references to authors who are known to like your papers

- Perhaps they might become referees.
- Include references to people with whom you have had favorable correspondence.

- This is not to bias opinions, but to get a fair hearing.
- Referees have to make a conscious effort and must be alert in order to be fair to unknown authors.
- Include liberal references to famous economists, dead or alive, who are unlikely to be your referees.

### **34. Delete or hide the references to undesirable potential referees**

- Even with double blind reviews, one can often guess the identity of the referee from the report because of references and writing style, etc.
- Editors often select referees from your references.
- If some referees consistently recommend rejection of your papers, drop their papers from your references (in the initial submission).
- You can add them later (after the paper is accepted).
- This may require rewriting the introduction with a somewhat different perspective, but it is probably worth the effort.
- Depending on the journal, you may ask the editor to eliminate some persons from the pool of referees. But you should ask informally (e.g., via e-mail) in advance if it is okay.

### **35. Cite your own articles**

- An article is considered "important" if it is cited 30 times or more by others.
- Cite your own related papers, provided that they were published or are forthcoming in a prestigious journal. Others may look up your other papers and cite them.
- But do not cite too many.
- If you have a good reputation, this practice can be useful because the referee may figure out that it is your paper.
- Do not cite your own unpublished papers or publications in an obscure journal. The editors and referees may conclude that the current paper also should be published in such journals.
- Do not cite your dissertation. The referees will know you are inexperienced.
- Do not cite someone else's dissertation. The referees may erroneously conclude that you are him or her or a close associate, all of whom are inexperienced.



## **Endnotes and Appendix**

### **36. Put technical, detailed comments in notes**

- Combined endnotes, tables, references, and appendix or appendices should be smaller than the main body of the paper. Otherwise, readers wonder "where is the beef?"
- The main text should be free from technical details, and the major ideas should emerge from reading it.
- Intellectual clutter should be relegated to closets, i.e., notes.
- Use notes to insert references and to make points that do not distract typical readers.

- No more than 10 endnotes should be provided. Avoid them like the plague (Horowitz, 1995).
- Notes should be short, not exceeding a page and never more than two pages.

### **37. Put long derivations in an extended note or an appendix.**

- Long derivations of an essential result or an equation which may be over half a page can be included in an extended footnote, if there is risk of boring readers.
- If there are two or more extended notes, they should be converted to an appendix.
- If the derivation is purely mathematical without apparent insight, it should be in an appendix.

### **38. Notes intended for referees should not be in the appendix.**

- Anything intended for referees' eyes only should be explained in the notes.
- Do not detach such notes from the paper, but write "Not for Publication" on them. If you detach the notes from the paper, they may not reach the referees.

### **39. Your paper should not exceed 25 pages**

- If this is difficult, at least keep the text within 20 pages (Horowitz, 1995). This is the amount the referees would read.
- As the length of the paper increases, the probability of acceptance decreases. The referees are more likely to find something wrong.
- As the length of the paper increases,
  - You are more likely to make mathematical errors.
  - The chance that the referee thinks you made a mistake increases (even when you are right).
  - § You are more likely to make statements that will offend referees.