

# On Writing Economics Papers

**Albert Ma**  
**Boston University**

## Nightmare

- Referee report:

I have spent a reasonable amount of time on this paper, but failed to understand it.

- Editor's decision:

Paper rejected

## Worse nightmare

- Referee report:

The paper seems interesting, but I needed a lot of time reading it. In my opinion it'd be too much time and effort to baby-sit the authors through a rewrite. I am not optimistic.

- Editor's decision:

Paper rejected

## Worst nightmare

- Referee report on the revision:

The paper now reads better than the first version, which was really difficult to understand. But now that I have a better understanding of it, I think that the ideas and the execution are not strong enough for publication.

- Editor's decision:

Revised paper rejected

## Writing a paper

- In English
- Learn good English
- Learn English for scientific writing
- Use local resources: public libraries, even classes for immigrants
  - especially, free classes at BU:  
<https://www.bu.edu/academics/cas/courses/writing/>
  - get grammar books, use dictionary
- English not your native language?

## Who wrote this?

**We provide a theory of rational stock price bubbles in production economies with infinitely lived agents. Firms meet stochastic investment opportunities and face endogenous credit constraints. They are not fully committed to repaying debt. Credit constraints are derived from incentive constraints in optimal contracts which ensure default never occurs in equilibrium. Stock price bubbles can emerge through a positive feed-back loop mechanism and cannot be ruled out by transversality conditions. These bubbles command a liquidity premium and raise investment by raising the debt limit. Their collapse leads to a recession and a stock market crash.**

## Economists whose native language is not English



- English not being your native language:
  - Not an excuse
  - Not an impediment

## Books

- **Strunk and White 1959: “The Elements of Style”**
  - must have; must read; must follow
- **McCloskey 1987 (and later editions): “Economical Writing”**
  - written by an economist; so you can argue about this and that
- **Thomson 2001: “A Guide for the Young Economist”**
  - deals with many aspects for the budding economist
- **Gladwell 2008, “Outliers: The Story of Success”**
  - a journalist’s synthesis; about your training (because a PhD is like an outlier)
- **Other resources, e.g.**  
[http://writing.ku.edu/sites/writing.drupal.ku.edu/files/docs/Guide\\_Writing\\_Economics.pdf](http://writing.ku.edu/sites/writing.drupal.ku.edu/files/docs/Guide_Writing_Economics.pdf)



## Do Not

- Write a paper like it is an anthology
- Write a paper like it is a memoir of your research
- Write a paper like it is a poem
- Write different parts of paper with emphasis equal to their discovery efforts
- Write a paper in a personal style

## Basic Principle: KISCC

- **Keep**
- **It**
- **Short**
- **Clear**
- **Consistent**

## **Short: Sentences, Paragraphs, Sections and Subsections**

### **Abstract 1**

- 1. The paper proves the existence of a subgame perfect Nash equilibrium in a vertically differentiated duopoly with uncovered market, for a large set of symmetric and asymmetric distributions of consumers, including, among others, all logconcave distributions.**
- 2. The proof relies on the “income share elasticity” representation of the consumers’ density function, which ensures the analytical tractability of the firms’ optimality conditions at a high level of generality.**
- 3. Some illustrative examples of the solution are offered, in order to assess the impact of distributive shocks on the equilibrium market configuration.**

## **Abstract 2**

- 1. We study subgame-perfect equilibria of the classical quality-price, multistage game of vertical product differentiation.**
- 2. Each of two firms can choose the levels of an arbitrary number of qualities.**
- 3. Consumers' valuations are drawn from independent and general distributions.**
- 4. The unit cost of production is increasing and convex in qualities.**
- 5. We characterize equilibrium prices, and the effects of qualities on the rival's equilibrium price in the general model.**
- 6. Equilibrium qualities depend on what we call the Spence and price-reaction effects.**
- 7. For any equilibrium, we characterize conditions for quality differentiation.**

## Differences?

- **On the same topic, but**
- **Abstract 1: 88 words; 3 sentences**
- **Abstract 2: 87 words; 7 sentences**

## Suggestions

- Long sentences, paragraphs; difficult to construct, to read
- Break up long section into subsections
- Lemmas, Propositions, Proofs, Results, Robustness Checks?
  - Same “length-avoidance”  $\leftrightarrow$  principle
- DO NOT DISMISS LONG STRUCTURES
  - Long sentences need more work, but can be beautiful
  - See for example Margo 2016, J of Econ History:
    - “I have chosen the Obama inauguration because the visual image is so arresting, but it would be easy to summon many other examples, mundane and otherwise, of highly successful African-Americans, in virtually any walk of economic life”. (37 words)

## Notation

- $p_{ijk}^{lm}(x_t^s) = \left[ \alpha_i \beta_{ij} \gamma_{ijk} \delta_l \lambda_m \theta_{lm} \right]_t \cdot X^{t-s} + \varepsilon_t$ 
  - has 7 indexes, and 9 variables
  - well beyond comprehension limit
- Use notation with a logical structure
- Use common notation
- Use notation that can be spoken out loud
  - $\Psi^{\S}$ ,  $\mathcal{K}^{\blacktriangle}$ ,  $\rho^{\spadesuit}$   $\diamond^{\circ}$  may look cute, but are impossible to say

## Clarity: most important

- **Very much related to the research**
  - **Writing = research**
  - **WRONG: “I’ve done the research; now I write it up.”**
- **Clearly written paper requires clean results**
  - **Making results clean is research**



## Pay Attention to Form

- 1 inch (2.54cm) margin on top, bottom, left, right
- doubleline spacing
- 11pt font size
- Don't put "Figure 1 about here" on page 15 when the actual figure is on page 65
  - Put Figure 1 on page 15!
- Ditto with Tables, Charts, etc

## Your readers

- **Editor, associate, editor, referees 1 and 2, maybe 3, and possibly 4 or 5!**
  - **most important and critical readers, so write for their convenience**
  - **NOT ACCORDING TO JOURNAL STYLE RULES**
  - **convert to journal rules after acceptance**
- **How do they read your paper in the first five minutes?**
  - **Title; name or names; date; acknowledgment; references—0.75 minutes**
  - **Abstract—1.25 minutes**
  - **Introduction, the beginning part of it—3 minutes**

## Title

- **Title for effects?**
  - **Love among Mafias: Eastern European Style**
    - **What kind of information does it convey?**
  - **Social Network in Organized Crimes in Eastern Europe**
    - **Does it say something meaningful to an economist?**
- **Drama vs information**

## Names and Date

- **Names are not as innocuous as they seem**
  - **Especially when you have not yet published anything**
  - **names CAN and DO change**
- **Alphabetical order, but not always**
- **Do put a date on your paper—on title page**
  - **No paper is timeless**
  - **It is November 2018 now, do update if paper still has date of 2016 version**

## Acknowledgment

- **Be consistent in listing names of people and financial support agencies**
  - **Special mention, such as advisors, collaborators in related projects, etc (but perhaps not your partner, parents or children)**
    - **Go first**
  - **Others, seminar or conference audience**
    - **Go second**
  - **Funding or financial support**
    - **Go last**
  - **In a consistent order: often alphabetical, or lexicographical**

## References

- **Very, very important**
- **Consistent style (but not necessarily one prescribed by journal)**
- **Must be consistent with cites in paper**
- **Nothing irritates editors, referees more than**
  - **finding their names cited in text, but papers not in References**
  - **finding their cites in References, but their names not in text**
  - **wrong cites...such as Manove (1945) or Bronfenbrenner (2017)**
- **If peripherals not meticulous, can paper content be trusted?**

## Abstract

- **Different journals allow different maximum word counts**
  - **From 100 to infinity**
- **It is not to describe EVERYTHING**
- **From Webster:**
  - **a summary of points (as of a writing) usually presented in skeletal form**
  - **also: something that summarizes or concentrates the essentials of a larger thing or several things**
- **Examples above: all abstracts**

## Introduction: the last 3 of the first 5 minutes

- Last step for the first impression
- It's all about page one: *The First Cut is the Deepest*



**Arguably most important paper in 20th century**

# ON THE ELECTRODYNAMICS OF MOVING BODIES

BY A. EINSTEIN

June 30, 1905

It is known that Maxwell's electrodynamics—as usually understood at the present time—when applied to moving bodies, leads to asymmetries which do not appear to be inherent in the phenomena. Take, for example, the recipro-

**Arguably most important paper by a BU faculty**

# Migration, Unemployment and Development: A Two-Sector Analysis

*By* JOHN R. HARRIS AND MICHAEL P. TODARO\*

Throughout many less developed economies of the world, especially those of tropical Africa, a curious economic phenomenon is presently taking place. Despite the existence of positive marginal products in agriculture and significant levels of urban unemployment, rural-urban labor

determined minimum urban wage at levels substantially higher than agricultural earnings.<sup>1</sup> We shall then consider the effect of this parametric urban wage on the rural individual's economic behavior when the assumption of no agricultural labor surplus is made, i.e., that the agricultural

## What do these papers have in common?

- **Einstein (1905), all on page 1**
  - It is known that Maxwell's electrodynamics...leads to asymmetries...
  - We will raise...“Principle of Relativity” to...a postulate...and introduce another postulate....light [has] a definite velocity  $c$  independent of the state of motion of...emitting body
- **Harris Todaro (1970), all on page 1**
  - Conventional economic models with...full employment equilibrium....are hard put to provide rational behavioral explanations...of urban unemployment
  - We shall diverge from ...full employment...models...by formulating a two-sector model...that migration [responds] to urban-rural differences in expected earnings

## First page

- **Must state problem**
- **Must state solution**
- **On the first page**
  - **Or maybe on first two pages**
- **Last three of the first five minutes**
  - **of the editor's, referees' time on your paper**
  - **Critical moment!**

## Rest of the paper

- Pay attention to words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, subsections, sections
- Literal meanings:
  - Economist A says to coauthor Economist B:  
*each of us has published two papers, which appear in different journals, but all our published papers appear in the same issue*
  - How many papers have A and B written together? How many papers have A and B not written together?
- Ambiguity is to be avoided at all cost!

## Consistency

- Editor, referees not sitting next to author
- Cannot ask questions
- Will not call up journal to send inquiry to author
- Any inconsistency cannot be resolved
- Editor, referees can only guess
  - What if they guess wrong?
  - Can't find what they need?
- Blame author!

## Referencing

- Citations: accuracy, format
  - names, first names, year, journal volume, issue,
  - to el. al. or not, with three, or four coauthors; same style throughout
- Tables, figures, charts, equations
  - Table 1 first appears on page 15
  - Later pages then call that Table A
- Ambiguous referencing
  - Equation above? where?
  - Column 5 in Table 1, but Table 1 does not number columns explicitly

## Words

- **Jargons, words created by economists**
  - **unavoidable, but mistakes are easy**
- **Compound words**
  - **health care; healthcare; health-care**
- **Acronyms: risky, not really saving space**
  - **ICBM; SPE, IC, DGE, CAA, CAD, IED**
  - **Can they create confusion?**
  - **What if referee goes directly to Section 2 when ICBM only defined in Section 1?**



## Final remarks: KISCC

- **Writing is difficult work**
  - **Start early, like yesterday, last year, or last decade**
- **Practical suggestions:**
  - **Write something each day**
    - **One page a day chase bad writing away**
  - **Read to learn to write**
  - **Think in English**
- **Research and writing always go together**