

## Advice for Writing Economics Working Papers, July 3, 2003

1. Never use endnotes instead of footnotes. Was there ever writing in which an endnote was better for any reason except the obsolete one of typesetting cost?
2. A common vice of theorists is this trick of phrasing: “The price is high (low) if the quantity is low (high).” How quickly can you understand that statement compared to, “The price is high if the quantity is low. The price is low, on the other hand, if the quantity is high.” Writing for people is different from writing for computers. Redundancy helps real people read faster. That is why I didn’t write “Rdnncy hlps pple rd fstr”, even though the condensed sentence is precise, unambiguous, and short.
3. Political correctness has had an unfortunate impact on academic writing. In English, “ he” and “his” have two uses. One use is when we want to refer to a male. The other is when we want to be bland and not specify gender. It has become common to throw in “she” and “her” for the second use. In reading along, we are thinking, ‘no special sex’ until we hit “her,” when a flag goes up and we think that gender must matter. After that first flag, a second flag goes up, “Ah, this is just an expression of the writer’s political correctness,” the reader thinking this with satisfaction or with irritation depending on his or her political views. In either case, the reader is distracted from what is being written, which is bad unless the writer considers working to destroy patriarchy more important than whatever he (or she!) is writing about.

There are milder forms of political correctness. One is to use “he or she” (as above). This has the disadvantage that it is three times as long as “he” and rather distracting to the reader, who wonders why the author is being so verbose. Another, more insidious form is to resort to the third person, and use “they”. This sounds more natural, because we often do that in daily conversation when we want to be purposely

vague, not knowing who is doing some particular thing. That vagueness is less desirable in writing, where the singular is generally more desirable because of its extra precision and punch.

4. The title page should always have (1) the date, (2) your address, (3) your phone number, and (4) your e-mail address. You might as well put your fax number and web address down too, if you have them. The date should be the exact date, so that if someone offers you comments, you know what he mean when he says, “On page 5, line 4, you should say...”. Also, include an abstract, and make sure it says what the paper’s contribution is, not just its subject (Don’t say: “This paper describes the properties of a new model of search”; say ”This paper shows why search might result in extreme price dispersion.”).
5. References to books should be specific about which part of the book is relevant. Give the chapter or page number.
6. Circle, box, boldface, or underline the important entries in tables. Often you will wish to present the reader with a table of 100 numbers and then focus on 2 of them. Help the reader find those two.
7. There is no need to use peculiar code names for variables. “Density” is a much better name than the unpronounceable and mysterious “POP-SQMI.”
8. Always refer to figures and tables in the text. Otherwise, the graphic is like a paragraph that has no link to the paragraphs before and after it. Put tables and figures in the text, not at the end of the paper. Journals often ask authors to put tables and figures at the end for ease in processing manuscripts but don’t do it till the paper is accepted. The common practice of putting them at the end in working papers is a good example of the author being lazy at the expense of his readers.
9. Give useful titles to every table and every diagram. Do not label a table as “Table 3.” Say, “Table 3: Growth in Output Relative to Government Expenditure.” (When you refer to the table in the text, though, you can just refer to “Table 3,” since it will be apparent from the context what

the table is about.) Also don't title a table "Regression Results" or "Summary Statistics." Those are useless names— anybody can look at a table and tell it is regression results or summary statistics. "Executive Pay Regressions" and "Executive Pay Summary Statistics" are better names.

10. If you report the F-statistic, the Aikake Information Criterion, or anything else, do it for a reason. Don't report it just because your fancy regression program spewed it out. A common example of a useless statistic is the F-statistic for the test that all the coefficients in a regression equal zero. The reader can deduce for himself that if you bothered to report the estimated coefficients in your paper, it must be that the results were not complete garbage.