

University of Notre Dame
Research & Writing Seminar I
ECON 73010
Spring 2023

Time and Location:

Thursdays, 3:00-5:30 pm
DeBartolo Hall 347

Instructor:

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Personal [website](#)
Course website on Canvas
Office hours: by appointment

Course Overview:

The purpose of the PhD is to produce original scholarly research for dissemination to other scholars and practitioners. The beginning and end of a PhD program have very clear expectations and deliverables. At the start of the PhD, you take classes to bring you up to speed technically and give you a broad overview of the field of economics. You then venture into field-specific classes, which are designed to expose you to the state of knowledge in particular fields and make sure that you are acquainted with tools common in those fields. At the end of the PhD, you go on the job market, and you turn in a dissertation. A dissertation in economics is ordinarily three papers, more or less connected together by a common theme, often with the non-descript title of “Essays in X.”

The middle part of the PhD – where you transition from coursework to research – is murkier and less well defined. For many, it can be a lost couple of years. The purpose of this course is to help you navigate this middle part of the PhD. In other words, the goal of this course is to help you transition from student to professional economist. This course is not about particular techniques, ideas, or literatures. Rather, it is about the craft of being a professional economist. In addition to getting you started on research (more on this below), the course aims to expose you to a number of facts and features about the economics profession that are helpful to know well in advance of venturing out on your own. We will cover topics such as refereeing, journals and conferences, teaching, the job market, and mental health and well-being.

The principal aim of the course, however, is to get you started doing and writing economic research, and in particular to get you started on the third-year paper, which is an important milestone in our PhD program. How do you come up with research ideas? How do you whittle those ideas down into something doable? How do you present results? How do you best write an abstract and an introduction to a paper? How do you sell the paper to others? This course will try to help you as you begin to grapple with these questions.

As social scientists, economists often think that the writing and packaging of a research project should not matter much. For better or worse, such a belief is typically wrong. Economics is both an art and a science. With few exceptions, results will not simply stand on their own, as they might in the life and physical sciences. An author has to convince the reader that the question being asked is important and that the results are interesting and relevant. How the author of a paper pitches the results is often every bit as important as the results themselves. You are about to embark on being the author. This course aims to help you develop and sell your ideas.

It is useful to keep the following thought in mind. Whether you are making a presentation at a conference, submitting a paper to a journal, or doing your job market paper spiel in a crowded hotel room (or, these days, in a virtual Zoom room), you have a limited amount of time to make a good impression. Whether they admit to it or not, most academics are Bayesians. They form strong priors very quickly. You have to pique the reader's or listener's attention very quickly if you want them to see and fully understand what you have actually done. How you package and sell your work is critical.

You are in a PhD program because you are smart and technically sophisticated. This course is not going to make you smarter, and it certainly is not going to impart more technical skills than you already have. There are some innate differences in peoples' ability to write and their level of outgoing-ness, and hence their ability to present well. Regardless of these differences, I firmly believe that every one of you can become a better writer and a better presenter. Doing so will improve your career prospects. The aim of this course is to bring out the best version of yourself as a writer and a presenter and to equip you to succeed as a professional economist.

Deliverables:

As mentioned above, the ultimate deliverable is a research proposal and plan of action for the summer as you head into your third year. The hope is that this research proposal turns into your third-year paper, to be presented later in the fall semester. The final research proposal should be 5-10 pages. It should include an introduction that clearly states the question, discusses why the answer to the question is important, and outlines the methodologies that you plan to use to address the question. The proposal should also include a review of the literature. Do not mindlessly cite somewhat relevant papers. Do a deep dive on what others have done, and carve out explicitly how what you are doing is different, novel, and improves upon the existing literature. In addition, I expect the research proposals to at least have some sketch of what will ultimately be the rest of the paper – some preliminary data analysis, a sketch of a model, or a roadmap of the empirical tests and specifications you plan to use. More is always better, but it is okay if you do not have results yet. You are also expected to turn in a research plan. This should be a plan for the summer – e.g. you expect to get your model solved and running by July 1, or you will get access to your data and have preliminary regression analysis by July 15. As part of this process, you will be asked to identify an advisor in the department. You should discuss your research proposal and plan with the advisor in advance of turning it in for this class.

Even though we like to envision it is such, the research process is not linear. Your proposal may not turn into your third-year paper – you may discover that someone else has done the same thing, or that you cannot get the data you need, or that you do not have the capacity to solve the model. Believe it or not, this is okay. Ideally, your first real crack at research will turn into a publishable paper. But it might well not. Projects and ideas not working out is okay – it is part of life as a researcher. The hope is that this class will position you for success. By having a proposal due in

April, if things do not work out, you still have time to pivot to something else. Even if your proposal does not work out, you will learn something along the way. In research, as in life, we often times learn the most on ventures that do not play out the way we originally envisioned.

There will be other deliverables turned in throughout the semester. Some of these are build-ups to the final research proposal, others are distinct. Some of the deliverables include:

- Write one page (each) on three different (but potentially related) research ideas. Identify a question, state why it is important, think about how you might answer it. Include a brief literature review for each idea. Due February 2.
- After refinement, write a mini-research proposal on the best of your ideas (or a completely different idea). Identify a question, state why it is important, place it in the context of the literature, sketch out how you will answer the question. This mini-proposal should be 3-5 pages. Due March 2.
- Provide written comments (on both substance and style) of all other students' mini-research proposals. These will be shared with the other students. These should be 1-2 pages each. Due March 9.
- Write a referee report on a recent working paper from a reputable scholar. Due March 23.
- Prepare a 15-minute teaching lecture on an undergraduate topic (with slides), to be presented in class. Due April 6.
- Final research proposals (5-10 pages) and research plans (one page). Due April 27.

Grading:

The objective of the class is to get you started with research. The ultimate deliverable is a formal research proposal and plan of action for the summer, to be turned in and presented in front of the class. While turned in individually, this final deliverable should really be thought of as a group effort, with constant feedback from each other over the course of the semester.

Final letter grades for the course will be determined as follows.

- In-semester deliverables: 30 percent of total course grade (all subcomponents weighted equally)
 - One-page research ideas
 - Mini-research proposal
 - Feedback on all other proposals
 - Referee report
 - Teaching lecture
- Final proposal and research plan: 50 percent of total course grade
- Participation: 20 percent of course grade

You will receive a letter grade on each assignment. Letter grades map into points as follows:

- A: 100
- A-: 93
- B+: 89
- B: 86

- B-: 83
- C: 76

Weighted points will determine the final grade for the semester, g , with the mapping between final points and the letter grade as follows:

- $g \geq 94$: A
- $90 \leq g < 94$: A-
- $87 \leq g < 90$: B+
- $84 \leq g < 87$: B
- $80 \leq g < 84$: B-
- $g < 80$: C

Course Outline:

We will have 12 class meetings, weekly on Thursdays beginning January 19. We will not be meeting on February 16 or April 20 (nor will we meet on March 16, which is during spring break). The rough agenda for the entire semester is laid out below. For each week, I include a lecture topic and a student assignment. In some weeks there is a student activity (e.g. a presentation of some sort). The readings for each week should be done *before* the class meeting. The student assignment listed each week is to be worked on *after* that class meeting. Many of the readings will come from Weisbach (2021). There are copies of this book on the bookshelf next to Birgit's office. A pre-publication version is also available online. I will provide you with a pdf. I am not sure how much the final version differs from what is online; the chapter numbers and titles are identical.

The course is scheduled to meet from 3:00-5:30 on Thursdays. We will almost never use the entire time; the course is designed for a healthy amount of student presentations, and there are only four of you this semester. In a couple of instances, I have a conflict and have moved the class meeting to a different time and date. I have already communicated these changes with you.

- Week 1 (January 18) – note different day (Wednesday)
 - Time & Location: JNH 3005, 3:30-5:30 pm
 - *Lecture*: course and professional overview; coming up with research ideas.
 - Readings: Weisbach Ch. 1, 2, and 3
 - *Student activity*: 5-10 minute discussion each on broad research interests.
 - *Student assignment*: begin to think of three different (although potentially related) research ideas. Formulate a question. Think about why the question is important. Review some existing literature. Think about how you might answer the question.
- Week 2 (January 24) – note different day (Tuesday)
 - Time & Location: JNH 3005, 3:30-5:30 pm
 - *Lecture*: being a graduate student.
 - Readings: Thompson Ch. 1; Weisbach Ch. 12; Jones and Sloan (2020)
 - Note, this week, we will meet from 5:00-6:00 instead of 3:00-5:30
 - *Student activity*: none.
 - *Student assignment*: continue thinking of research ideas. Prepare one-page summaries of each research idea, to be turned in February 2.
- Week 3 (February 2)

- *Lecture*: writing economics part one.
 - Readings: Weisbach Ch. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
- *Student activity*: present, without use of slides, each of your three research ideas.
- *Student assignment*: based on feedback, begin to think of which research idea you would like to push forward.
- Week 4 (February 8) – note different day (Wednesday)
 - Time & Location: JNH 3005, 3:30-5:30 pm
 - *Lecture*: writing economics part two.
 - Readings: Thompson Ch. 2; Cochrane (2005); Mankiw (2006); Goldin and Katz
 - *Student activity*: none.
 - *Student assignment*: continue working on further developing one research idea.
- Week 5 (February 16)
 - No meeting
- Week 6 (February 23)
 - *Lecture*: presentations.
 - Readings: Weisbach Ch. 9; Thompson Ch. 3; Piazzesi
 - *Student activity*: none.
 - *Student assignment*: prepare a mini-research proposal, 3-5 pages, on one research idea. The proposal should state and motivate a question, state why it is important, place it in the context of the existing literature, and include a discussion of how you plan to address the question.
- Week 7 (March 2)
 - *Lecture*: the publication process.
 - Readings: Weisbach Ch. 10 and 11; Ellison (2002)
 - *Student activity*: non
 - *Student assignment*: identify a potential adviser for your proposal, and schedule a meeting with that adviser. The meeting should occur prior to Spring Break. Provide written feedback (on both substance and style) on all other students' proposals. These should be 1-2 pages each, and uploaded separately.
- Week 8 (March 9)
 - *Lecture*: writing referee reports.
 - Readings: Thompson Ch. 4; Berk, Harvey, and Hirshleifer (2017)
 - *Student activity*: present your mini-research proposal with a brief slide deck; provide brief oral feedback on the other students' proposals in class.
 - *Student assignment*: pick a working paper issued sometime in 2018-2022 to write a referee report on (should be from a serious scholar; e.g. NBER working paper series) and close to your own research proposal; your report should summarize the paper, make suggestions, and try to place it in the context of a larger literature. The referee report will be turned in the next week.
- Week 9 (March 16)
 - No meeting (spring break)
- Week 10 (March 23)
 - *Lecture*: journals, conferences, grants, citations.
 - Readings: Attema, Brouwer, and Van Exel (2014); Heckman and Moktan (2020); Card and DellaVigna (2013); Engemann and Wall (2009); Kodrzycki

- and Yu (2006); Hammermesh (2018); Moffit (2016); Cowen and Tabarrok (2016)
 - *Student activity*: comment aloud on how your meeting with a potential adviser went and summarize the referee report that you wrote.
 - *Student assignment*: continue to refine your research proposal, with an eye towards the final deliverable.
- Week 11 (March 30)
 - *Lecture*: effective teaching.
 - Readings: Allgood, Walstad, and Siegfried (2015)
 - *Student activity*: none.
 - *Student assignment*: prepare a 15-minute teaching lecture (with slides) on an undergraduate topic of your choosing (principles or intermediate level – review textbooks for topic ideas); students should be working on research proposals.
- Week 12 (April 6):
 - *Lecture*: the job market.
 - Readings: Cawley (2018); Guren (2015); Laibson
 - *Student activity*: students present their teaching lecture (which will be recorded).
 - *Student assignment*: continue working on research proposals.
- Week 12 (April 13)
 - *Lecture*: mental health and well-being.
 - Readings: Barreira, Basilico, Bolotnyy (2022); Mueller-Smith and Brown; Weir (2013)
 - *Student activity*: none
 - *Student assignment*: continue working on research proposals and research plans, which should be 5-10 pages for the proposal, and one page for the plan, due April 27.
- Week 13 (April 20)
 - No meeting
- Week 14 (April 27)
 - *Due*: research proposals (5-10 pages) and research plans (1 page) due.
 - *Student activity*: students make 15-20 minute presentation with slides on their proposal/plan. The presentation will be recorded and shared with the student.

Readings:

Allgood, Sam, William B. Walstad, and John J. Siegfried (2015). “Research on Teaching Economics to Undergraduates.” *Journal of Economic Literature* 53(2): 285-325. Available [online](#).

Attema, Arthur E., Werner B.F. Brouwer, and Job Van Exel (2014). “Your Right Arm for a Publication in AER?” *Economic Inquiry* 52(1): 495-502. Available [online](#).

Barreira, Paul, Matthew Basilico, and Valentin Bolotnyy (2022). “Graduate Student Mental Health: Lessons from American Economics Departments.” *Journal of Economic Literature* 60(4): 1188-1222. Available [online](#).

Berk, Jonathan B., Campbell R. Harvey, and David Hirshleifer (2017). “How to Write an Effective Referee Report and Improve the Scientific Review Process.” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31(1): 231-244.

Card, David and Stefano DellaVigna (2013). “Nine Facts about Top Journals in Economics.” *Journal of Economic Literature* 51(1): 144-161.

Cawley, John (2018). “A Guide and Advice for Economists on the US Junior Academic Job Market.” Available online via the [AEA](#).

Cochrane, John H. (2005). “Writing Tips for PhD Students.” University of Chicago working paper. Available [online](#).

Cowen, Tyler and Alex Tabarrok (2016). “A Skeptical View of the National Science Foundation’s Role in Economic Research.” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 30(3): 235-248. Available [online](#).

Ellison, Glenn (2002). “The Slowdown of the Economics Publishing Process.” *Journal of Political Economy* 110(5): 947-993. Available [online](#).

Engemann, Kristi M and Howard J. Wall (2009). “A Journal Ranking for the Ambitious Economist.” *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Review* 91(3): 127-139. Available [online](#).

Goldin, Claudi and Lawrence Katz (undated). “The Ten Most Important Rules of Writing Your Job Market Paper.” Available [online](#).

Guren, Adam (2015). “Job Market Advice.” Available [online](#).

Hammermesh, Daniel S. (2018). “Citations in Economics: Measurement, Uses, and Impacts.” *Journal of Economic Literature* 56(1): 115-156. Available [online](#).

Heckman, James J. and Sidharth Moktan (2020). “Publishing and Promotion in Economics: The Tyranny of the Top Five.” *Journal of Economic Literature* 58(2): 419-470. Available [online](#).

Jones, Todd R. and Arielle Sloan (2020). “Staying at the Top: The PhD Origins of Economics Faculty.” EdWorkingPaper 20-324. Available [online](#).

Kodrzycki, Yolanda K. and Pingkang Yu (2006). “New Approaches to Ranking Economics Journals.” Federal Reserve Bank of Boston Working Paper 05-12. Available [online](#).

Laibson, David (undated). “Tips for Job Market.” Available [online](#).

Mankiw, N. Gregory (2006). “How to Write Well.” Blog post, available [online](#).

Moffit, Robert A. (2016). “In Defense of the NSF Economics Program.” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 30(3): 213-234. Available [online](#).

Mueller-Smith, Mike and Charlie Brown (undated). “On Mental Health and the Economics Profession.” Available [online](#).

Piazzesi, Monika (undated). “Tips on How to Avoid Disaster in Presentations.” Available [online](#).

Thompson, William (2011). *A Guide for the Young Economist*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. Available online via [JSTOR](#).

Weir, Kirsten (2013). “Feel Like a Fraud?” Available online via [American Psychological Association](#).

Weisbach, Michael (2021). *The Economist’s Craft: An Introduction to Research, Publishing, and Professional Development*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Also available [online](#).

Additional readings that could be of interest (not required):

Bowmaker, Simon W. (2010). *The Heart of Teaching Economics*. Edward Elgar Publishing. Amazon [link](#).

Bowmaker, Simon W. (2012). *The Art and Practice of Economics Research*. Edward Elgar Publishing. Amazon [link](#). Bowmaker periodically [tweets](#) out chapters for free.

Dudenhefer, Paul (2014). *A Guide to Writing in Economics*. Available [online](#).

McCloskey, Deirdre (2019). *Economical Writing*. University Chicago Press. Buy [here](#).

Nikolov, Plamen (2013). “Writing Tips for Economics Research Papers.” Working paper. Available [online](#).

Nuegeboren, Robert and Mireille Jacobson. “Writing Economics.” Available [online](#).

Varian, Hal (undated). “How to Build an Economic Model in Your Spare Time.” Available [online](#).

Zwick, Eric (undated). “The 12 Step Program for Grad School.” Available [online](#).