

# The Ten Most Important Rules of Writing Your Job Market Paper

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Rule #1: *You will probably not have a Nobel Prize winning idea.*

Theorem #1: It is always possible to transform a good idea into a great paper and a superb presentation.

Theorem #2: Even if your idea is Nobel-worthy, you can always make it into a poorly written paper and a lousy presentation. This theorem will probably never be needed; see Rule #1.

Rule #2: *The insights of your paper will first be judged by how you present them.* If your paper is written in an unprofessional manner, your empirical work, mathematical proofs, and models will be viewed with initial skepticism.

Rule #3: *Your paper is an exercise in persuasion* (we mean in positive not normative economics). Your readers are your audience. They have better things to do than read your paper. Make them interested in your thesis and convinced of your argument.

Rule #4: *No great paper—no matter how well constructed, brilliant, and well written—first emerged from the author’s printer in that form.* It was rewritten at least 10 times. Rewriting is the true art of writing.

Rule #5: *No author—no matter how careful and humble—can see all (or even most) of his or her writing errors.* Trade papers with another student. Be tough; there will be some initial pain, but gratitude will follow.

Rule #6: *Most paragraphs have too many sentences and most sentences have too many words.* Repetition is boring. We repeat: repetition is boring. Cut, cut, and then cut again.

Rule #7: *The “foot-in-the-door” parts of your written work are the abstract and introduction.* Write them clearly and concisely. The abstract is not simply the first paragraph of your paper (or the last paragraph for that matter). Write them so that they are accessible by any intelligent economist, not just those in your field.

Rule #8: *Verbalizing your argument is more difficult than writing it.* Giving a presentation will reveal where your argument falls flat and will show you how to redraft the paper. Give many presentations before sending out your paper. Give them to a workshop, friends, a dog or cat, even the wall. The presentation will force you to confront inconsistencies in your argument.

Rule #9: *Be your own worst enemy.* If you won’t, someone else will.

Rule #10: *There are many other rules.* We cannot cover all of them. A few are:

- All tables and figures must have enough information to allow the reader to figure out how to replicate them, even if the “source” is “see Data Appendix.”
- Tables and figures should be placed *after* the text and not integrated. It is easier to read a working paper if the tabular and graphical material is grouped together.
- Do not use a font that is less than 11 point for text and do not use a font less than 10 point for footnotes and tabular materials. The preferred size is 12 point for text and tables and

11 point for footnotes. If your reader is older than 40 years, you will inflict pain if you use small fonts. A pained reader rarely looks favorably upon the author.

- Use Appendixes for descriptions of data sources, certain proofs, and other matters. For empirical work, make certain that your work can be replicated.
- No one wants to read a “literature review.” It is sophomoric. Integrate the literature with the rest of your paper.
- Do not tell your readers what you will be doing. Just do it.
- Do not use general headings such as: “Model,” “Data,” “Findings,” “Literature Review” (see above). You might as well use 1, 2, 3, and 4. Tell your readers what is in the section, e.g., A Model Demonstrating the Finiteness of the Universe.
- Use meaningful variable names. You may know ps102, plop49, and oink34 like the back of your hand, but they do not mean a thing to your reader.
- Do not present every result you have ever produced. Boring. Ask yourself what you need in the presentation and include that. Use an Appendix for other results.
- Check for typos, spelling errors, missing pages, incorrect table or figure numbers, missing references, and the like. These are the cockroaches of writing. Exterminate them.
- Use a style manual or a journal as a guide. Consistency is important.

If you want more hints (and we suspect you will), here are two books on economics writing: *Economical Writing* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Waveland Press) by Deirdre McCloskey (Economics, Rhetoric, Philosophy, University of Illinois, Chicago)

*A Guide for the Young Economist* (M.I.T. Press, 2001) by William Thomson (Economics, University of Rochester). See also, William Thomson, “The Young Person’s Guide to Writing Economic Theory,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 37 (March 1999): 157-83.