

University of Notre Dame

Research & Writing Seminar I

ECON 73010

Time and Location:

Tuesdays, 3-5:30 pm
Corbett Family Hall E486

Instructor:

Eric Sims
3036 Jenkins Nanovic Hall
esims1@nd.edu
Personal [website](#)
Course website on [Sakai](#)
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, 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.

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. The final research proposal and plan (including the in-class presentation of the proposal at the end of the semester) will account for 50 percent of the course grade. The other 50 percent of the course grade will be loosely called "participation" and will be based on everything else – which includes mini-deliverables related to the final research plan scattered throughout different points in the semester, in-class comments, feedback that you give to the other students, and other in-class presentations over the course of the term.

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 seminar – 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 May, 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 to two paragraphs on three different (but potentially related) research ideas. Identify a question, state why it is important, think about how you might answer it. Due February 16
- Do a literature review on two of the three research ideas and type this up; 1-2 pages each. Due February 23.
- Write a mini-research proposal on the best of the remaining ideas. Identify a question, state why it is important, place it in the context of the literature, sketch out how you will answer the question. Due March 9.
- Provide written comments (on both substance and style) of another student's mini-research proposal. Due March 16.
- Write a referee report on a recent working paper from a reputable scholar. Due April 6.
- Prepare a ten-minute conference-style discussion (with slides) of a different recent working paper from a reputable scholar. Due April 13.
- Prepare a fifteen-minute teaching lecture on an undergraduate topic (with slides), to be presented in class. Due April 20.
- Write one-paragraph critiques/evaluations of other every other students' teaching demos. Due April 27 and May 4.
- Final research proposals (5-10 pages) and research plans (1 page) due May 4.

Course Outline:

We will have 13 class meetings, weekly on Tuesdays beginning February 9 (excluding March 2, which is a university-mandated "break day"). The rough agenda for the entire semester – emphasis on rough, and subject to change at my discretion – is laid out below. For each week, I include a lecture topic, a student activity, and a student assignment. 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.

- Week 1 (February 9 – note classes start on February 3 so we will not be meeting the first week)

- *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*: think of three research ideas to pursue; write one to two paragraphs on each to be turned in
- Week 2 (February 16)
 - *Lecture*: being a graduate student
 - Readings: Thompson Ch. 1; Weisbach Ch. 12; Jones and Sloan (2020)
 - *Student activity*: discuss your three research ideas out loud (no slides, just words) with class; brainstorm together on feasibility/potential of ideas and refine them
 - *Student assignment*: refine your research ideas based on feedback; do a literature review of the two most promising of your three ideas; write these up in one to two pages (each) to be turned in and discussed the next week
- Week 3 (February 23)
 - *Lecture*: writing economics part one
 - Readings: Weisbach Ch. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
 - *Student activity*: discuss the literature reviews of the two ideas from the previous class; brainstorm together and refine ideas
 - *Student assignment*: write out a mini-research proposal (three pages) to be turned in; the proposal should identify a question, why it is important, how you will address it, and what tools you will need to address it (model, data, etc.)
- Week 4 (March 9 – note March 2 is a “break day”)
 - *Lecture*: writing economics part two
 - Readings: Thompson Ch. 2; Cochrane (2005); Mankiw (2006); Goldin and Katz
 - *Student activity*: discuss mini-research proposal out loud in class; brainstorm for ideas and refinement
 - *Student assignment*: trade mini-research proposals with another member of the class interested in broadly the same area (the “partner”), provide detailed written comments on both the substance of the proposal as well as the writing
- Week 5 (March 16)
 - *Lecture*: presentations
 - Readings: Weisbach Ch. 9; Thompson Ch. 3; Piazzesi
 - *Student activity*: the “partner” student discusses another student’s research proposal, provides feedback and critique (no slides, just words); students brainstorm about potential advisors in the department
 - *Student assignment*: revise the mini-research proposal based on feedback from the instructor, the class, and the partner; identify a potential main advisor in the department; email that advisor to set up an appointment sometime in next two weeks; share the research proposal with him/her
- Week 6 (March 23)
 - *Lecture*: the publication process
 - Readings: Weisbach Ch. 10 and 11; Ellison (2002)
 - *Student activity*: discuss the revised research proposal in class and how you incorporated feedback. Discuss who the advisor is that you targeted and why.
 - *Student assignment*: make sure you have met (or are scheduled to meet) with potential advisor to discuss research proposal

- Week 7 (March 30)
 - *Lecture*: writing referee reports
 - Readings: Thompson Ch. 4; Berk, Harvey, and Hirshleifer (2017)
 - *Student activity*: report back on how meeting with potential advisor went, what suggestions you received, and how you plan to incorporate them/proceed
 - *Student assignment*: pick a working paper issued sometime in 2019-2021 to write a referee report on (should be from a serious scholar; e.g. NBER working paper series); your report should summarize the paper, make suggestions, and try to place it in the context of a larger literature; students should begin working on research proposal/plan
- Week 8 (April 6)
 - *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*: discuss your referee report out loud with the class; summarize the paper's strengths and weaknesses; speculate about where the paper ought to be published
 - *Student assignment*: prepare a 10-minute "discussion" of a different working paper issued sometime in 2019-2021 (again, should be from a serious scholar, e.g. NBER working paper series), with slides, to be presented in the next class; students should be working on research proposal/plan
- Week 9 (April 13)
 - *Lecture*: effective teaching
 - Readings: Allgood, Walstad, and Siegfried (2015)
 - *Student activity*: student discussions (with slides) of the paper you chose
 - *Student assignment*: prepare a fifteen 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/plan
- Week 10 (April 20):
 - *Lecture*: the job market
 - Readings: Cawley (2018); Guren (2015); Laibson; Buntrock
 - *Student activity*: half of students present their teaching lecture (which will be recorded)
 - *Student assignment*: each student should write a one paragraph critique/evaluation of the teaching lecture for each other student, to be shared with that other student. Students should watch their own recorded lecture and write a one to two paragraph self-critique. Students should be working on research proposals/plan.
- Week 11 (April 27)
 - *Lecture*: mental health and well-being
 - Readings: Barreira, Basilico, Bolotnyy (2018); Mueller-Smith and Brown; Weir (2013)
 - *Student activity*: the other half of students present their teaching lecture (which will be recorded)
 - *Student assignment*: each student should write a one paragraph critique/evaluation of the teaching lecture for each other student, to be shared with that other student.

Students should watch their own recorded lecture and write a one to two paragraph self-critique. Students should be working on research proposals/plan

- Week 12 (May 4)
 - *Due*: research proposals (5-10 pages) and research plans (1 page) due
 - *Student activity*: half of students make 20-minute presentation with slides on their proposal/plan. The presentation will be recorded and shared with the student
- Week 13 (May 11)
 - *Student activity*: the other half of students make 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 (2018). "Graduate Student Mental Health: Lessons from American Economics Departments." Harvard University working paper. 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.

Buntrock, Evan (undated). "Industry Job Finding Advice." Available [online](#).

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](#).

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 (2020). *The Economist’s Craft*. 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](#).