

Writing an Essay and Preparing a Presentation

Some Advice for Students

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Presentation.

1. Be prepared:

- explain the main point of your talk to a non-economist (your mother)
- rehearse with a student friend (the mirror)
- maybe several times (timing!)

- have a pdf with slides (no ppt!) on a stick ready
- copy the slides to the Desktop *before* the presentation

- it is ok to be nervous
- passion is highly contagious.

2. General behavior: Free speech:

- If you want: prepare notes
- but use them only in emergency situations!
- it is ok to get lost (once or twice)
- the audience appreciates an occasional interruption

- allow clarifying questions (a good sign that people are following you)
- if you don't know the answer: admit it immediately
- delegate any comments (discussion) to "later"

- stand and face the audience (not *all the time* the professor)
- point to important stuff on the slides.

3. Structure of the presentation:

- A presentation is not a detective story
- Begin with the conclusion: what's the point (the takeaway)?
- Why is this research interesting/fascinating?
- What's new?

- newspaper style: explain the essence first (1-3 minutes)
- then elaborate...

If theory:

- 1 discussion of background, previous literature
- 2 the basic model
- 3 the intuition for the basic mechanism
- 4 if time allows: extensions
- 5 summary (place for criticism, your "opinion")

If empirics:

- 1 discussion of background, previous literature
- 2 the main specification (data & model & table) that makes the point.
- 3 what's special? (usually: method of identification)
- 4 if time allows: robustness checks
- 5 summary (place for criticism, your "opinion")

Explaining mechanisms:

- a simple formula beats a thousand words
- a simple graph (curve shift) beats a formula
- don't be vague when you need to be precise.

4. Your slides:

- generally there is always too much on a slide
- do as I say not as I do
- just keywords
- no whole sentences / paragraphs

- plan on average for 2-3 min per slide

- use sparingly color to **emphasize** stuff

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- use sparingly the “striptease method”
- revealing the contents one by one
- gets boring quickly.

Mathematics:

- Formulas are a GREAT device to explain stuff (R.E. Lucas)
- But don't get lost
- No derivations, no proofs etc
- Explain every symbol.
- Explain what the formula *means*.

- Generally, you should know much more than you show (there may be questions)
- You show only *the essence*.

Figures and Tables:

- it is ok to copy-paste them from original articles
- show only what you need to show
- no wall of numbers
- big tables (robustness checks) in “Backup-Slides”

- Tables and Figures are a good place to add some color

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- Like this:

Dependent variable:	Religious Diversity		Log of income '73		Ethnic Diversity	
	Coefficient	t-statistic	coefficient	t-statistic	coefficient	t-statistic
Importance of religion	-25,12	-2,16**	-10,21	-2,03**	34,70	2,18**
Important child quality	-20,93	-2,10**	-8,90	-2,04**	37,00	2,99***
Affiliation to denomination	-37,69	-4,13***	-1,76	-0,54	6,35	0,69
Attending religious service	-15,74	-1,71*	-10,56	-3,17***	33,89	2,65**
Self-assessment religious	-27,83	-3,79***	-3,47	-1,15	35,85	4,48***
Belief in God	-30,44	-2,84***	1,42	0,31	29,82	3,33***
Importance of God	-29,79	-2,96***	-7,58	-1,77*	49,87	3,69***
Private moments of prayer	-24,85	-1,93*	-8,73	-1,08	68,16	3,88***
Unbelieving politician unfit	-3,23	-0,35	14,81	-4,44***	35,72	2,22**
Appreciation of more believers	-6,41	-0,80	-10,72	-2,04**	85,14	6,48***

Source: Opfinger (2011).

- Show some tables!
- Interpret the most important results
- statistical and economic significance
- be prepared to say something on the “not so interesting results”

5. The End

- it is ok to finish a bit too early
- it is bad/impossible to run over time

- If you started with the POINT: don't care much about the end
- if not: this is your last chance to make the point (the takeaway, the conclusion)

- plan that you actually talk about 80-90 percent of the allotted time
- have backup-slides if you get more time.

6. The Audience

- ask if you don't understand something
- don't wait!
- others with the same problem will like you for that
- the rest enjoys a little break

- questions are a good signal for the presenter!
- only reaaally too many questions are bad.

- Afterwards ask yourself: why did you like/not like this presentation?
- why did you like/not like these slides?

As a discussant you

- comment on problems/interesting/crucial stuff of the research (paper)
- do not comment on the presentation style, quality of the slides etc
- provide scientific arguments not opinions

The Essay (Thesis, Hausarbeit)

Prepare:

- study the available topics / papers on the list **before** you sign in
- try to get the topic that you like most
- if you don't succeed: something is interesting in everything: find it.

- try to fully understand your paper(s) / background literature
- if you fail: try harder! (dig out the math book from school)
- if you still fail: visit the teaching assistant / PostDoc
- Really. They get paid for helping you.

Structure:

- Cover Sheet (Name, Course Name, Title, Date of Presentation)
- Introduction
- The basic model / main empirical exercise
- Extensions (0 - several)
- Conclusion
- References (Literaturverzeichnis)
- (Appendix)

No Table of Content, Abkürzungsverzeichnis, Abbildungsverzeichnis,...

Format: We have relatively little formal requirement:

- 15 pages (BA essay)
- 2 line spacing
- 2.5 cm margins left and right
- word users: times new roman fonts (12pt).

Footnotes:

- try to avoid them
- if important → put it in the text
- if unimportant → drop it.
- maybe consider placing long list of references there: Mueller (1980), Meier (1990) and Schultze (2010) have shown that...

References:

- references in the text with Name (Year)
- Jagger and Richards (1966) developed a theory that...
- List of references at the end: imitate any international journal

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- for example, like this

Jagger, M. and Richards, K., 1986, Increasing returns and long-run growth, *Journal of Political Economy* 94, 1002-1037.

Sombart, W., 1915, *The Quintessence of Capitalism*, E.P. Dutton, New York.

Galor, O., 2005, From stagnation to growth: unified growth theory, in: P. Aghion and S. Durlauf, *Handbook of Economic Growth* Vol 1A, Elsevier, Amsterdam.

Most of what I tell you is advice not rules. Here is one rule:

Don't never ever copy paste text from others into your work without giving the reference.

The plagiarism police will catch you.

Figures and Tables:

- it is ok to copy-paste them from original articles
- provide the source
- Don't do this if you ever publish some of your work!

- Figures are a great device to explain something
- Yet your essay is no picture book
- Need more tables to support your story? → *Appendix*

Models:

- They are the economist's main tool
- They make us think straight and consistent

- Explain the basic model of your research question
- Explain every formal notation that you use (every symbol, every equation)
- How does it work? what's the mechanism?

- Derivations/Proofs/Extensions/Modifications → *Appendix*

Some Advice on Writing Well:

- Think: Section – Paragraph – Sentence – Word
- 1 Paragraph is about 1 thing
- Imagine a heading for every paragraph
- Sometimes it's a great idea to have the slides before the thesis.

- Try to write short sentences
- But not one really short sentence after another
- Use active voice (Not: It has been shown by Wu.... But: Wu has shown...)
- Are all sentences in a paragraph about the same thing?
- Does one paragraph lead to the next?
- Cool. Your essay is coherent and fluent.

- Whenever there is a short word and long one for the same thing: use the short one
- You may consider naming the guy the consumer, the agent, the individual, the person,...
- But ALWAYS use the same word for the same thing.
- No “elegant variation”.

- explain unfamiliar *economic* terms (i.e. everything you don't know from your lectures).

- Once it's clear that income means GDP per capita (in Guatemala in 1985): use income
- prefer income over y
- or write income (y)

- It is ok to use sparingly jargon on the slides (and to be funny in the presentation)
- Don't do this in your written work
- For example, don't write don't in your essay.

Who is your (imagined) reader?

- a smart economist who doesn't know a thing about the topic of your essay
- ideally, a fellow student

- If you can't avoid: imagine your professor / supervisor
- BUT: try to imagine that he doesn't know a thing about the topic of your essay.

The Introduction (1-2 pages for a 15 pages essay):

- Write one paragraph about the POINT (the takeaway)
- What new / fascinating phenomenon will be explained / scrutinized in your essay?
- why is this important?
- your sentences introduce the key words (subjects, verbs) of your essay.
- this is the probably the hardest writing task
- be prepared to spend a lot of time to say it right.
- good news: from then on, it gets easier and easier...

Then (perhaps) elaborate:

- what are the basic ideas on which this research is built upon?
- who has contributed fundamentally to the literature and why?
- how is this topic related to other fields?
-

After the Introduction:

- develop the essay in linear form
- one step after another leads to the point (the takeaway)
- in theory: the basic model, the key equations, the key proposition, the intuition
- in empirics: the data, the empirical model, the estimation technique, the result.

The Conclusion:

- If you excelled in the Intro there is actually no need of a conclusion
- However, the profession likes it
- So, briefly re-state the point (the takeaway)
- If you wish you can add limitations of this research, outlook for the future, your “opinion” .

The Appendix:

- a place for stuff that supports / complements your story
- but is not *essential* to understand the point.

What's a point (a takeaway)? Here is one example:

The conventional view in development economics is that a country's richness with natural resources is a curse rather than a blessing. In my essay I present recent evidence – based on a sample of 64 developing countries – that this is only so in dictatorships. I present a theory that shows that dictators, being afraid of expulsion, have a shorter time horizon than ordinary citizens. This is why they exploit natural resource too fast and use the royalties inefficiently, that is not for the benefit of the citizens of their country.