

# The Craft of Writing Academic Papers

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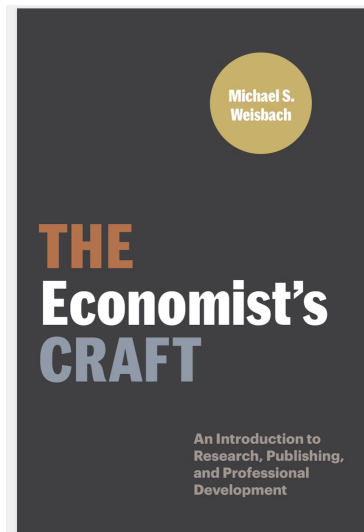
# Writing a Paper: Art or Craft?

- Art is the *"skillful, creative expression of ideas, emotions, or experiences, often involving personal creativity and intuition"*.
  - ▶ Art often emphasizes **personal creativity** and **interpretation**.
- Craft is the *"skillful production or performance of something"*.
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- Not everyone can be an artist.
- Yet, we can all strive and work hard to become **better craftspeople**.

# Giving Credit Where Credit Is Due



A must-read book for every PhD student (and faculty)!

# Roadmap

- 1 The Craft of Writing
- 2 The Goals of Writing
- 3 Get Your Foot in the Door
- 4 The Body of the Paper
- 5 Final Thoughts (in the AI age)

# The Goals of Writing

# What Makes a Paper Influential?

- It's the **sum** of **many small** elements executed with the **utmost care**:
  - ▶ The title
  - ▶ The abstract
  - ▶ The intro
  - ▶ The model
  - ▶ The empirics
  - ▶ The conclusions
  - ▶ The tables and figures
  - ▶ The prose
  - ▶ ~~The typos~~

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  - ▶ ~~The typos~~
- Think like an artist:
  - ▶ What is the proper framing for the picture?
  - ▶ Where and how is it hung?
  - ▶ What does a performer wear?
  - ▶ What goes in the music video?

# Who is Your Audience?

- We all write for:
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  - ▶ Referees
  - ▶ Conference organizers and reviewers
- All the actors in the process have their own incentives:
  - ▶ Making a journal more prestigious
  - ▶ Making a conference more established and reputable
- Editors and conference organizers rely on a “triage” approach:
  - ▶ Quickly assess (patients)
  - ▶ Decide who needs immediate attention
  - ▶ Skimming vs. reading papers
- “First impressions are key:
  - ▶ Abstract
  - ▶ Intro
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- Start with a “fake” introduction:
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  - ▶ Is the contribution relevant enough?
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- At the end, rewrite the introduction:
  - ▶ Are your claims consistent with your analyses?
  - ▶ Do you need additional/ different analyses to motivate your claims?

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- 5 Draw **appropriate conclusions**:
  - ▶ Don't over-interpret
  - ▶ Which of all the plausible interpretations is the most likely (and why)?

# Get Your Foot in the Door: Title, Abstract, and Intro

# The Title

- The goal is to convince the readers **to read more**:
  - ▶ The title should be as **descriptive** as possible
- Shall the title be **informative** or **cute**?
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- A few examples:
  - ▶ “*The Value of Non-alpha services*” or
  - ▶ “*Beyond Performance: Mutual funds, non-alpha service, and the value of financial advisors*”
  - ▶ “*Annuities and Endogenous Longevity*” or
  - ▶ “*The Effects of Annuities on Longevity*”

# The Abstract

- The abstract is just an **advertisement** for the paper:
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- An abstract should include:
  - ▶ **Motivation** and **question** in the paper
  - ▶ Present the **main results** (avoid robustness checks)
  - ▶ Spell out what the results mean and **why we should care** about them

# The Introduction (I)

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- An introduction should try to:
  - ▶ Grab the **reader's attention**
  - ▶ State the **research question**
  - ▶ Describe your **approach**
  - ▶ Report the **results**
  - ▶ Provide your **interpretation** of the results
  - ▶ Discuss the **implications** of the results

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- Read **many** introductions:
  - ▶ Choose an **influential author** in your literature
  - ▶ Read the **award-winning** / **most cited** / **recent** papers
  - ▶ Pay attention to the structure of these introductions
  - ▶ Crack **the code** for the top journals in our field

# The Body of the Paper: Literature Review, Theory, Empirics, and Conclusions

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- How does your paper **fit** into the literature?
  - ▶ Articulate your contribution in one clear sentence.
  - ▶ Avoid strategic citations.

# Theory

- Is the paper **mainly** a theory paper?
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  - ▶ Is the theory just a way to organize the empirical findings?
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  - ▶ There is a trend towards integrating more theory and empirics.
- Carefully organize the paper around the **main contribution**:
  - ▶ Start with real-world examples
  - ▶ Introduce the main idea in the model (less is more)
  - ▶ Then, add the complications
  - ▶ Are the proofs better suited in the appendix?

# Empirics

- Get to the main results as **quickly** as possible
  - ▶ If the data are new, it is worth spending more time on the descriptive statistics
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  - ▶ Read a few recent papers from top Economics journals.
- Provide enough details to **ensure replicability**:
  - ▶ You will need to share your code.
  - ▶ Learn to code and “comment” as computer scientists.

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  - ▶ Less is more
- Do you have a **broader message** to share?
  - ▶ What are the broader issues related to the paper?
  - ▶ It is okay to be **a bit speculative** about the interpretation of the results (with the appropriate caveats)
  - ▶ What **future research ideas** come directly from your findings?

# The Prose

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- Few must-read references to improve your prose:
  - ▶ Cochrane, "Writing Tips for PhD Students" (2005)
  - ▶ Zinsser, "On Writing Well" (2016)
  - ▶ Strunk and White, "The Elements of Style" (1999)
  - ▶ McCloskey, "The Rhetoric of Economics" (1998)

# Final Thoughts

# Writing in the Age of AI

- The cat is out of the bag:
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  - ▶ We are all **learning as we go**.
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  - ▶ You can build in your style/ voice.
  - ▶ Experiment using AI (and have fun!).
- **DON'T**: Don't outsource the **creative part of writing**.
  - ▶ Separate **free writing** from editing.
  - ▶ Allow yourself **enough** free/creative writing.

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- Know and mind your audience:
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- “A paper is the sum of many seemingly unimportant things”
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