

Writing Like an Economist

A short guide to the economic style

Econ 339: Behavioral Economics

Economists write to be understood quickly

Your reader is busy. They want to know **what you claim**, **what the evidence is**, and **why it matters**, in that order.

Good economic writing is:

- **Plain:** short words, short sentences
- **Direct:** active voice, a clear subject doing a clear thing
- **In your own words:** you digest papers; you do not transcribe them
- **Specific:** magnitudes, mechanisms, and evidence

Writing in other fields (literature, history, law) follows different rules. Those rules are not wrong; they are just not ours.

Three habits to break

“ Long quotations from papers

Paraphrase the idea. Quote almost never.

📄 Page numbers in citations

Cite the paper by author and year. Readers want the contribution, not the page.

✍ Passive, wordy sentences

Say who did what. Cut every word that does no work.

Habit 1: Paraphrase, don't quote

Why economists rarely quote

- In economics, the **idea** matters, not the author's exact wording.
- A paper's contribution is its question, method, and result. You can state all three in your own words.
- A long quote tells the reader you have **not yet digested** the paper.
- Quotes interrupt your argument. The reader must switch voices, then switch back.

Rule of thumb: if you could say it yourself, say it yourself.

Example: replace the quote with a summary

✗ Instead of

In their article “Saving Defaults and Workers,” Smith and Jones state that “the results of our analysis indicate that when employees are automatically enrolled into the retirement savings plan, as opposed to being required to actively choose to enroll, the proportion of employees who participate in the plan is substantially and persistently higher, a finding which suggests that inertia plays an important role in savings decisions” (Smith and Jones, 2021, p. 412).

✓ Write

Automatic enrollment raises retirement plan participation, and the effect persists (Smith and Jones 2021). Inertia, not preferences, appears to drive many savings decisions.

Smith and Jones (2021) is a made-up paper for illustration.

How to paraphrase a paper

Close the paper. Then write two or three sentences that answer:

1. What question do the authors ask?
2. What do they do? (data, experiment, model)
3. What do they find, and how big is it?

✓ Example

Johnson and Goldstein (2003) compare organ donor consent across European countries. Countries where donation is the default (opt-out) have consent rates near 100 percent; countries that require people to opt in have far lower rates. The default, not underlying preferences, explains most of the gap.

Notice: no quotation marks, no page numbers, and the finding comes with a magnitude.

When a quotation is fine

Quote only when the **exact words** are the object of study:

- The wording of a survey question or an experimental instruction
- The text of a law, policy, or contract
- A famous phrase you are going to analyze or dispute

Even then:

- Keep it short, ideally less than one line
- Work it into your own sentence
- Explain why the exact words matter

Habit 2: Cite by author and year

The economics citation style

Economics uses **author–year** citations (AEA / Chicago style).

Use	Form
Author is part of the sentence	Thaler (1980) argues that ...
Citation supports a claim	... endowment effect (Thaler 1980).
Two authors	Kahneman and Tversky (1979)
Three or more authors	Fehr et al. (1993)
Several sources	(Thaler 1980; Kahneman and Tversky 1979)

No page numbers. No first names. No paper titles in the text. No comma between name and year.

Why no page numbers?

- You are citing the paper's **contribution**: its finding or its method. That contribution belongs to the whole paper, not to page 1,338.
- Page numbers signal that you lifted a sentence rather than understood a result.
- The full reference in your bibliography tells the reader where to find it.

✗ Instead of

Defaults have large effects on behavior (Johnson & Goldstein, 2003, p. 1338).

✓ Write

Defaults have large effects on behavior (Johnson and Goldstein 2003).

Exception: if you use one of the rare direct quotes, include the page number.

Make the idea the subject, not the paper

✗ Instead of

In the article “Procrastination, Deadlines, and Performance: Self-Control by Precommitment,” written by Dan Ariely and Klaus Wertenbroch and published in 2002, a study was conducted in which it was found that deadlines helped students.

✓ Write

Students who set their own deadlines perform better than students with no deadlines, but worse than students given evenly spaced deadlines (Ariely and Wertenbroch 2002).

The good version is **one-third the length** and says more: it tells the reader *what* the study found.

The reference list

Put full references at the end, alphabetical by last name:

Ariely, Dan, and Klaus Wertenbroch. 2002. "Procrastination, Deadlines, and Performance: Self-Control by Precommitment." *Psychological Science* 13 (3): 219–24.

Johnson, Eric J., and Daniel Goldstein. 2003. "Do Defaults Save Lives?" *Science* 302 (5649): 1338–39.

The page range of the *article* goes here, in the reference list. That is the only place page numbers belong.

Habit 3: Active and concise

Say who did what

Passive voice hides the actor and adds words. Economists use active voice, and they use “I” and “we.”

✗ Instead of

It was found by the researchers that loss aversion was exhibited by subjects.

✓ Write

The researchers find that subjects are loss averse.

✗ Instead of

It can be seen in Figure 2 that consumption is decreased when income is reduced.

✓ Write

Consumption falls when income falls (Figure 2).

Passive voice is not banned. Use it when the actor is truly unknown or unimportant. Make active your default.

Cut words that do no work

Instead of	Write
due to the fact that	because
in order to	to
a large number of	many
has the ability to	can
at this point in time	now
in the event that	if
plays a role in determining	affects
utilize	use
it is important to note that	<i>(delete)</i>
it can be argued that	<i>(delete; just argue it)</i>

Use verbs, not “zombie nouns”

Many wordy sentences turn a verb into a noun, then add a weak verb to hold it.

✗ make a decision

✓ decide

✗ provide an explanation of

✓ explain

✗ have an effect on

✓ affect

✗ conduct an analysis of

✓ analyze

✗ show a preference for

✓ prefer

✗ Instead of

Subjects made the decision to engage in the selection of the safer lottery.

✓ Write

Subjects chose the safer lottery.

Lead with your point

- **Skip the warm-up.** No “Since the beginning of time, humans have made choices.”
- **First sentence of each paragraph = its claim.** The rest supports it.
- **Commit.** “This could perhaps suggest that it may be possible. . .” becomes “This suggests. . .”

✗ Instead of

Throughout history, people have always struggled with self-control, and this is something that many different researchers have looked at in many different ways.

✓ Write

People with present-biased preferences undersave, and commitment devices can help.

Use economic words precisely

- **“Significant”** means *statistically* significant. For size, say “large.”
- **“Proves”** is almost never right. Data *show, suggest, or are consistent with*.
- **“Causes” / “effect”** claim causation. If the evidence is a correlation, say “is associated with.”
- **“Rational,” “utility,” “preferences,” “bias”** have technical meanings in this course. Use them that way.
- **Give magnitudes.** “Raises participation from 40 to 85 percent” beats “greatly increases participation.”

Putting it together

A full rewrite

✗ Before: about 100 words

In the article “Do Defaults Save Lives?” by Eric J. Johnson and Daniel Goldstein, it is discussed how the rates of organ donation are affected by the default option that is utilized by different countries. It is important to note that the authors state that “defaults” can have “a large effect” (Johnson and Goldstein, 2003, p. 1338). Due to the fact that people have a tendency to stick with whatever option is chosen for them, it was found that countries that utilize an opt-out system are able to achieve a much higher number of donors. This could perhaps suggest that defaults are important.

✓ After: about 50 words

Defaults shape organ donation. Johnson and Goldstein (2003) compare European countries and find that consent is near universal where donation is the default but far lower where people must opt in. Because people tend to accept whatever option is chosen for them, the default largely determines the outcome.

Rewrite each sentence in the economic style.

1. It was shown by Kahneman and Tversky that losses are weighted more heavily than gains by individuals.
2. In the paper by Fehr and Gächter, on page 12, they say that “people are willing to incur costs to punish those who behave unfairly.”
3. Due to the fact that a large number of subjects made the decision to choose the default, it can be argued that the default had a significant effect.

1. People weight losses more heavily than gains (Kahneman and Tversky 1979).
2. People pay to punish unfair behavior (Fehr and Gächter 2000).
3. Most subjects kept the default, which suggests the default has a large effect on choice.

Note in (3): “significant” became “large,” because we have no statistical test.

Checklist before you submit

- ✓ Can I replace each quotation with my own words? (Almost always yes.)
- ✓ Every citation is *Author (Year)* or *(Author Year)*, with no page numbers.
- ✓ No paper titles or first names in the body text.
- ✓ Search for “was,” “were,” “it is,” and “there are.” Can I name the actor?
- ✓ Search for “due to the fact,” “in order to,” “utilize,” “important to note.”
- ✓ Each paragraph opens with its main claim.
- ✓ I report magnitudes, and I use “significant” only for statistical significance.

Further reading

- McCloskey, Deirdre N. *Economical Writing*. The classic, and short.
- Cochrane, John H. “Writing Tips for Ph.D. Students.” Free online; most of it applies to undergraduates too.
- Thomson, William. *A Guide for the Young Economist*.