

## Research and Paper Writing Tips

### Contents

- 1) The beginnings of research
  - a) UM and research
  - b) The beginning of every econ paper
    - i)-iii) Three steps to finding a source
  - c) Education research
  - d) Using the web
- 2) Citations
- 3) Structure and Style

### 1. The Beginnings of Research

#### a. UM and research

At UM, the first place to start your research (yes, *before* the rest of the internet) is the [Library](#). The two most useful places on the Library website are [MIRLYN](#) (the main search page) and [Articles Plus](#), which limits searches to academic articles. UM also has an economics-specific [research guide](#), which provides links to many useful websites and resources that I won't directly discuss here. In terms of academic research (regardless of field/discipline), these sources should almost always be the first place you turn.

#### b. The beginning of every econ paper

For every economic researcher, whether they have zero or 100 years experience, the first place to look when you begin studying an economic topic that you're not intimately familiar with is [EconLit](#)<sup>1</sup>. It's an almost exhaustive listing of published academic work in the field of economics. To repeat: ALWAYS go here first for serious economic research!

[EconLit](#) only gives you citations - it's an econ-only search engine. Once you find a paper that you want to read (or view in more detail), you must find it. We have one of the best academic libraries on the continent, so if we don't have the source in some form, there's a good chance that no one does.

It's a good idea to copy down (copy and paste to a .doc or .txt file) all citations that look reasonably related to your topic. That way, you'll be able to recall what you've seen, and what sort of things you've searched for already. Having a list also makes it easier to track down the articles you want.

To find your article, there are basically 3 possible steps to go through. Consider a search for the second journal-published article in our syllabus, "Subsidies, Hierarchy and Peers: The Awkward Economics of Higher Education"<sup>2</sup>

- i) "**M get it**". If you're lucky (and for most recent articles, you should be "lucky"), when you find a citation in [EconLit](#), there will be a blue "M get it" icon under the article's details. Click that link and you'll be taken to a page that re-routes you to a list of places where you can find a pdf for this article. I believe that this is equivalent to (but shorter than) going back to [Articles Plus](#) to find the article. I believe this is also equivalent to doing a [MIRLYN](#) search for the journal in which the article is published (which is hard way to find all electronic journal holdings of the library).

Our article "Subsidies..." has two instances in EconLit (it was re-published in a book), both of which have an "M get it" link. Click one of the "Full text" options, and then open the pdf. We have our article! Note that a MIRLYN search for the article title turns up nothing useful, but we

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<sup>1</sup> [EconLit](#) is restricted-access, and so must be accessed via a University computer connection. You can also find it by simply searching "EconLit" in the [MIRLYN](#) search box and looking under the databases listed.

<sup>2</sup> Full citation: Winston, Gordon, 1999. "Subsidies, Hierarchy and Peers: The Awkward Economics of Higher Education," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 13(1), pp. 13-36.

can do a MIRLYN search for the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, and hunt down the article on the journal's website (by its date of publication). Alternately, searching "Subsidies, hierarchy, and peers" in ArticlesPlus returns our article as its first hit, with an "M get it" link.

- ii) **Google scholar.** On occasion, articles unavailable via the electronic UM system will be available on the wider internet. [Google scholar](#) is the place to go for this option. Just type in (some portion of) the relevant citation, and see what you get. Some hits will be behind paywalls, and some will be publicly posted.

For "Subsidies...", again the article we want is the first hit (click the "all 12 versions" to see from where you can try to download it). Using Google Scholar as a member of the UM community (from a UM computer, at least) has a big benefit. Notice that a lot of the search hits have an "Availability at UMichigan" link to the right. Click that, and it's yet another way to access the "M get it" system. This is a pretty sweet functionality, and not available at many other institutions.

- iii) Of course, not every journal article is in pdf form. Articles from more than about ten years ago are often not in electronic form, especially if they were not published in major journals. And books, of course, are rarely available in electronic form. Now is the time to haul yourself out of your chair, charge up your copy card, and find the source in [the stacks](#). If you are unsure where to find certain materials, or how to go about looking, your friendly neighborhood librarian is there to help, and UM has a [wealth of ways](#) to ask them questions.

MIRLYN tells us that our *Journal of Economic Perspectives* has call number HB 1.J795, found in [Basement-A North](#) of Hatcher which is, admittedly, a bit of an adventure to find.

#### c. Education research.

Again, this is an economics paper, and most of your citations need to be of an economic nature. But many other fields have many powerful tools and insights for the purposes of studying education. You may use writings from other fields to bolster your economic research, contradict it, or provide background and alternate perspectives.

As with economics, the UM library has a [resources page for education research](#). The primary search engine for education research is [ERIC](#) (Education Resources Information Center). The interface looks just like EconLit, and in fact you can search [both simultaneously](#) by selecting the appropriate databases. ERIC will typically turn up many more search hits since so many disciplines study education. This can be both helpful and overwhelming. Again, focus on economics articles for your research, and spread out to the field of education more generally if you believe that you're missing the "big picture", or if your economics searches aren't sufficiently fruitful, or if your topic leans particularly noticeably towards psychology, political science, etc.

#### d. Using the web (non-Google-Scholar sources)

For real academic economic research (such as THIS PAPER) you should only use the internet as a reference skeptically and sparingly. That said, it is incredibly convenient and can be very fruitful if used properly.

DON'T cite Wikipedia, Yahoo News, MSN news, or any blog whatsoever! I'm not saying these sources are useless. They can be very handy as starting points, for inspiration, for broad background knowledge, for motivation and for direction. Use them as such and then leave them behind. Citing Wikipedia is the intellectual equivalent of citing the Encyclopedia Britannica, something that we hopefully put behind us in 4th grade. If these types of sources make a claim that you want to cite, track down the original source

of the claim. If there is no original source, then this is a strong indication that the claim is not one we should make in the context of academic writing.

Online versions of major print media ([NYT](#), [WSJ](#), [Chicago Tribune](#), [Washington Post](#), etc.) can be useful for current events and “policy debate” research. These may be cited, but only rarely should they be used as a source for “factual” material (i.e., claims for which evidence should be presented).

The general rule in operation here is that if a source is published in a peer-reviewed document, or is from a standard print publishing house (private, academic, or governmental), it is an acceptable source. This is not to say it's a "good" source (ie, applicable and/or high-quality) – you, as an informed reader, need to be the judge of that. But if the information is strictly electronic in format, you need to be *highly* skeptical of its content, and the burden of proof is on *you* to show me that it is an appropriate reference for academic work.

## 2. Citations

Once you have your references, they need to be formally integrated into your paper.

We provide citations in academic writing for a number of reasons. At base, we cite to *give intellectual credit*. This could mean that citations refer to background information, or additional information that does not fit well into the paper. Or, in making a claim, we can cite previous work that has looked at the issue in depth and has provided rigorous proof or argumentation in support of the claim.

Since academic writing is all about creating new knowledge, *citation helps readers determine what is “new” and what is not*. If you make a statement in your paper and do not provide a citation for it, then the reader concludes that the statement is in some way “original” to you, and “new” to the literature. Thus, if you make a statement because of evidence or arguments you’ve read elsewhere, you **MUST** cite that source! To fail to cite the source is plagiarism – it is claiming “originality” on your part for an idea that you’ve taken from someone else, and that has already been developed and published.

We cite things to make sure that others can easily find the basis for our claims. The broad consensus among economists is to use the "author-date" version of the [Chicago Manual of Style](#). In this style, footnotes are not used to cite references, but should be strictly informative (as with footnote 1 above). You should give a full formal description of references in a separate Works Cited section at the end of your paper. My syllabus and most papers we read provide ample examples of the proper formatting of how to format citations in the Works Cited. When in doubt about how to format a citation, make the origins of the source as clear as possible to the reader.

As a quick reference, the style goes as follows. A quote or reference within the body of your paper should look like this:

A significant portion of the economic profession disagrees. For example, it has been argued that children should be taught to do back flips before they begin simple arithmetic (Schlub 1998).

or

There are contrary opinions. Schlub (1998) advocates a rigorous coursework in professional-quality circus performance skills before children begin a more traditional academic coursework.

You would then include in your works cited the full information on the source:

Schlub, Francis. 1998. "Tumbling Towards Achievement," *Journal of Acrobatic Education* 127(3), pp. 976-989.

or, if from a book:

Schlub, Francis. 1998. *Our Upside-Down Educational System: A Critique of Neo-liberal Education Policy*. The Princeton Press. Princeton, NJ.

### 3. Structure and Style

Readers like a clear, useful, and obvious structure in papers. At a bare minimum, your paper must have an introduction, a body, a conclusion, and a works cited section. A common adage is that you should "tell me what you're going to say, say what you mean to say, and tell me what you just said" should be kept in mind. That is, introduce your topic, explain your topic, and then summarize your explanation. It's very difficult to overuse section and subsection headings in your paper (see the structure of document). They are a way to both organize your thoughts and to make clear the method with which you are presenting them.

Your introduction *must* have a thesis statement or some other clear message about the point of your paper! Every good paper has a point, and every great paper convinces the reader of that point. Be sure to present a reasonable history and/or all sides of the topic. Feel free to say that you think that one side is better than the other (assuming you have good reasons for thinking so, and you explain the reasons). On the other hand, admit when shades of gray exist. Acknowledge them, don't hide them.

~~It is always a good idea to be as concise as possible!~~ You're in college. I know that you know big words, so I'm not particularly impressed when you use them. Say what you need to say in the fewest, clearest words possible. This isn't English class, so I won't grade you on spelling and sentence structure. But stupid mistakes (like confusion between there/their/they're or it's/its or higher/hire) are frustrating to read and detract from your message. In business, such mistakes can cost you a sale, a raise, or a job. In academia, they are embarrassing and make it hard to take your argument seriously. Do your best to avoid them.

If you need guidance in basic issues of commonly mistaken words and concise, efficient writing, [Strunk and White's \*The Elements of Style\*](#) should become your bible! It's a classic work. An econ prof did me the favor of beating me over the head with it my senior year of college, and afterwards I wished he'd done so the second I graduated from high school. It's short, sweet, and powerful.