

Advice from Gary King

Unlike almost all previous papers you may have written, do not allocate space in your paper in proportion to how much work you put in accomplishing each task. The point of this paper is to make your scholarly point, not to show how smart you are. This paper should not be about you or a report of what you did; it should be about what you contribute to our collective knowledge about the world. For example, a large fraction of your effort will probably go into replicating a prior result (and thus getting up to the cutting edge of the field), but only in rare cases will that take more than a page or two of your paper. Space in your paper should be allocated in proportion to how much of a contribution it makes to changing the minds of someone in the literature about something important. Thus, for example, if at the end of a hard week of data analysis you have one important finding that would add to or change the conventional wisdom about a subject, then you should change the title, subject, and organization of your paper to highlight this finding. All your other efforts that, despite your best efforts, led to dead ends should be excluded from your paper unless they help you demonstrate this one key point. Resist the temptation to include all this just to demonstrate to your professor how much work you did; that's not the criterion on which you will be judged in this class (or afterwards). This task is a crucial aspect of your socialization into the profession, and your success requires that you learn it at some point. It might as well be now.

Your paper should be rigorously structured and organized into numbered sections and subsections. (Heading titles should be clear, contain no acronyms, and should summarize the key point you are making in the section. They may be numbered, but the numbers should be in addition to a substantive title.) The best way to understand how to organize a paper is to imagine that your readers will randomly fall asleep at any time for 5 minutes and yet keep turning pages; when they wake up, they should know exactly where they are from your subheadings alone.

You are writing for anonymous referees. Referees are busy people looking for a way to finish the thankless task of reviewing your paper as quickly as possible. Since you're not likely to have as much time from them as you think, you need to make reading your paper as easy as possible. And a tie doesn't go to the runner: if a referee didn't read carefully, pay attention, or understand you, or missed or misunderstand something important in your paper, it's your fault. And since it is your paper and not you that matters, anonymous referees will not (and for the sake of the literature normally should not) give an anonymous paper writer the benefit of the doubt. Referees are not prone to spontaneous niceness and do not generally impute favorable motives to authors who are not clear or appropriate assumptions when left unstated. (Human beings acting anonymously in other circumstances tend not to be especially nice either. You may have noticed that cars with anonymous drivers cut each other off all the time, but this always never happens walking down the same streets.)

The overall structure of the paper, and all the key points you want to make, should make sense in terms of accomplishing your goal. If you include many section breaks it

is easier for your readers to skip over things they are not interested in while still getting your point; if you include too few, they will get lost. (While writing, keep looking at and revising the list of subheadings until it looks like a table of contents that conveys your key point without reading the paper.)

Do not try to hide weaknesses in your paper. If you know of a problem with your analysis that you have not solved, clearly delineate the problem. If you think the problem is not that bad, explain why, but do so honestly. If you have an idea of how to solve it, but haven't done so, offer it as a suggestion for future researchers. If you don't know how to solve it, suggest that future researchers try to tackle it.

Why do you need to be so forthright with potential problems? If a reader sees a problem you didn't mention, they can say "not only didn't the author correct this problem, but he or she didn't even realize it!" If all you do is to note the problem, you can take the edge off the criticism. This is of course as it should be, since your paper will also be a more scientific statement of the problem.

Frontmatter

1. Your title should convey your key point by summarizing clearly your argument or angle. An appropriate title is not a list of topics or "the effect of A on B".

2. Include a footnote on the title page to the title, and put the text of the footnote at the bottom of the first page. In it, put your contact information, where others can get your replication data set, and acknowledgments to everyone who helped you with this paper. There is no cost to being generous with acknowledgments. Be sure to thank anyone who read the paper for you, including students who read it for a class assignment, anyone who you discussed it with, who helped you solve computer or methodological problems, or who provided you data. If you had any contact with the authors of the article you're replicating, be sure to acknowledge them too.

3. Include a one paragraph abstract, no longer than 150 words, on the page following the title page. By at least three weeks before the paper is due, send a copy of the title and this abstract to the class mailing list to get comments from me and others. You may send more than one version, and I may ask for revisions. This step improves the paper substantially by helping you to clarify the paper's primary contribution and to focus the paper on it. Once the title and the abstract are set, the entire rest of the paper is likely to be affected. Be sure to read all the abstracts and comments; this process is often extremely informative about how to write papers, about what is important, and about how to make the findings in your paper important.

Appearance

1. Prepare this paper as if it were to be submitted for formal review at a professional journal. Go to the reading room in the library or JStor and have a look for examples. (Why? Quality may be everything, but it is hard to measure and so style provides

important signals. For example, as a purely predictive matter, papers formatted with LATEX are much less likely to contain egregious methodological flaws. Use this to your advantage.)

2. Follow the same rules used for preparing convention papers: Use 12pt double-spaced black text on white 8.5 x 11 inch paper with a staple in the upper left corner - no polywhatever colored plastic covers. The paper should have a title, your name, affiliation, and the class number. See the papers under preprints at my web page for examples: <http://gking.harvard.edu/preprints.shtml>.

3. Follow the style for references "(Smith, 1935)," etc., of the American Political Science Review. (Why? This is the most common style in the discipline and is quite common in other disciplines as well.) If you want details, see the instructions to contributors inside the front cover of the journal.

4. Avoid gratuitous citations to your professors (or anyone else). Cite only those whose research you use or build on in some way. You are welcome to tell others how wonderful they are in person, but keep this out of your papers.

5. The paper should be a formal presentation, not a personal letter. Occasional humor is fine, but inside jokes or questions are best left out. Raw computer output should not be in your paper.

In the text, identify the specific empirical question you are interested in immediately and get to it. Beginnings such as "In this paper, we demonstrate that..." are best. If it is not clear to a reader what you are planning to accomplish with some specificity (including what your dependent variable is) after a few pages, something is wrong. As someone once said, if the first bite of an apple tastes bad, you don't keep taking bites to see whether some other part of it might be better.

In almost all cases, do not include a section titled "literature review," and any literature review you include should be short and directed toward your point only. Other people don't deserve to be cited in your paper unless they help you make your point; they already have their own papers. If you have long technical lists of coding rules, or anything else that seems essential but distracts from the your point, put it in an appendix.

Be nice

1. Treat authors you are replicating as you would want to be treated. Your goal is to stand on the shoulders of the scholars whose article you are replicating, not to step on their faces. In all likelihood, there is a good reason why these people did whatever they did.

2. Talk about the article you are replicating, not about the authors. So you should write "Jones and Smith (2003) is mistaken" rather than "Jones and Smith are

mistaken."

3. Do not be personal and be careful of the language you use to describe your work. Remember that it doesn't matter whether you ``agree" with the author you are replicating; no one cares what you ``think"; no one is interested in your ``opinion"; and readers don't want to know what you ``believe". The scientific community only cares what you can demonstrate.

Use active (``We ran a least squares regression.") rather than passive (``A least squares regression was run.") tense. (Why? This is not only good grammar; its a matter of standing behind what you're doing and sounding like it.