

The University of Lethbridge

Department of Economics

Economics 3710

Term Paper Guidelines

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The term paper is a major component of your final course grade (30%), but students are often unfamiliar with the proper preparation of term papers. The following guidelines are intended to help you prepare an acceptable term paper. Not only will the hints help you for the immediate purposes of achieving a good grade in this class, but also the development of writing skills at this stage of your careers will ultimately help you in future courses and in the labour market once you graduate. Employers constantly complain that university graduates have substandard writing skills. Learning and adhering to some simple writing rules now will pay large dividends later.

In addition to writing skills, research skills are another important part of writing a convincing and competent term paper. Yet most students do not know where to turn for research assistance. The following hints are intended to help you overcome the seemingly insurmountable amount of information that is available. Remember, the trick to writing a term paper is not to include all available information, it is to make sense of the large amount of information available.

Research Hints

1. The place to start is at the library's homepage (<http://home.uleth.ca/lib/>). Learn to use the library databases. These databases allow you to do searches of articles in most major publications by author, subject, keywords, etc. It also allows you to narrow searches, limit dates, etc. This is a valuable research tool and you should learn to use it. Better yet, talk to a real live librarian.
2. Look at the most recent literature first. It usually cites the most important papers that are also of relevance to your topic. Such citations also contain brief descriptions of the papers. This may help you narrow your search.
3. Review articles and book reviews are excellent sources of information.
4. The Web can be a useful source of information. But be advised that there still exist few controls over the quality of information on a number of sites. Generally, if you can find information that has been published in a journal, book, etc., and not just on the website, it is a reliable source of information (since it has gone through the rigorous publication process). A good place to start is the library's homepage

which has links to a number of good internet search engines.

5. The University has a small library, but it is still able to get almost anything you want from other libraries in the country. However, interlibrary loans do take some time, so do plan ahead if you need outside sources. Interlibrary loans can be done online by going to:
http://eureka.uleth.ca/screens/illreq_s1.html.

Grade Determination

When grading your paper, I will be looking for the following:

1. Use of economic theory. You should begin your paper with an appeal to the economic theory. What does the theory have to say about the questions you are trying to ask? Theory doesn't have to be formal (i.e., mathematical), but it should be used.
2. Use of data. Often theory cannot give us unambiguous answers to our questions. You should look at what the empirical evidence has to say to supplement the theory that you present. There is plenty of published economic data and increasing amounts of raw data available. You can use data published without interpretation (StatsCan data, for example), or data derived from any of the papers that you read.
3. Critical Thinking. Don't be afraid to critique any piece of work. There is a lot of questionable research out there and you shouldn't be afraid to criticize it. Just be sure to support your arguments.
4. Policy Implications. This is a course on policy. What implications does your research have for policy? These are often clear once the research has been completed, but they are almost always worth outlining.
5. Writing style. You should structure your arguments concisely and clearly. You are writing an essay. This means that you must try to support your particular point of view. You do this first by introducing your topic. Come up with some narrow economic idea that you would like to test. This is called a *researchable question*. Second, tell the reader why you think it is important. This is called *motivating the topic*. Third, review the points for and against your question in the existing literature (i.e., a *literature review*). Fourth, appeal to the available economic theory and empirical evidence and let the reader know what it has to say (or does not say) about your particular topic. How does it support your assertions? Maybe it does not, or perhaps the empirical evidence is ambiguous. This does not mean that you have to go back and rewrite your paper. Not being able to support a particular point of view is perfectly acceptable. Not finding what you expect is itself a result. Tell the reader why the data did not support your initial hypotheses or why these may have to be reworked. Finally, conclude the paper by restating what you have already told the reader and offering some ideas for policy.

For example, you might be interested in whether increased tuition at Canadian universities leads to a large decrease in the number of students enrolled at Canadian universities. This is the research question. This is certain (according to economic theory), but how big is the decline? A secondary (and more interesting) question might be: Are individuals from poorer households more likely to be harmed than those from higher income households? Again, this is what the theory would tell us (assuming education is a normal good). This is an important question since the policy prescriptions will be quite different if only low-income individuals are affected, versus all individuals. You would then outline the research that has been done (both pro and con). You would next present data and arguments supporting your position. For example, you might find evidence that during period of large tuition increases, there are indeed fewer students from lower-income households that are attending university. Or, perhaps you find indirect evidence that higher housing prices around universities lead to the same result (this too would make sense in terms of your argument). You would then use this and other information to argue that tuition increases are likely to have the greatest impact on low-income households. You next conclude by restating your research question and summarizing what you have done, followed by the policy implications of your results (e.g., raising tuition may have to be offset by increased financial aid for low-income individuals to ensure that higher education remains accessible to all socio-economic groups). Remember, you are trying to convince the reader through thoughtful and critical analysis that your opinion is correct.

Although this is not an English class, grammar and spelling are important. Even the best ideas come across poorly unless they are presented well. This means you should consult one of many style guides available. Also, all word processors come with a spell check and a thesaurus. Set your computer to check for "Canadian English." Many computerized grammar programs are also part of word processing packages and these can be useful to help you improve your writing style. However, be warned that use of these does not substitute for a careful proofreading of your paper. (Note: It is a good idea is to give it to someone else to read).

References in the text should be written as (Author, date). For example, a work by Smith would be cited as (Smith, 2002). If you use a direct quote, use the style (Smith, 2002:100) where "100" is the page number. If the same author has multiple publications in any one calendar year, it would be referenced as (Smith, 2002a), (Smith, 2002b), etc. You must reference any ideas, direct quotes, statistics or significant findings of other authors that you cite in the text. Do not cite items that are considered common knowledge. Remember, **plagiarism is a serious academic offense**. See the Student Discipline Policy in the University of Lethbridge Calendar for more details.

All references cited in the text (including tables, etc.) must be included in a bibliography at the end of the paper. For the proper way to format a bibliography, consult any of the chapters in your textbook. If you do not cite a work in the text, do not cite it in the bibliography. Many examples of proper bibliographical entries can be found in your textbook.

5. Paper Length. The appropriate length of the paper for this course is approximately 10 pages,

exclusive of graphs, tables, bibliography, etc. It is not likely that you can express yourself competently in fewer pages. Papers longer than 10 pages can likely be edited for length.

6. Due Date. The final draft of your paper is due at the beginning of the final day of lectures (December 6th). You are encouraged to hand in your papers as early as possible as they will be graded in the order that they are received. Late papers will be assessed a penalty of one-half letter grade) for each day (or portion of a day) the paper is overdue.

Term Paper Topics

You can choose to write on whatever interests you, as long the topic is consistent with the theme of the course. You are, however, encouraged to expand on the material covered in your first presentation to class. Read this material with an eye to other researchable questions that have not been addressed adequately in the paper.

Presentation

Presentations will take place at the end of the semester. There is a first-mover advantage for students (i.e., earlier presentations will be marked easier and will set the standard for the other presentations that follow). I will handout a schedule in advance so you know when you will be presenting. It is not necessary to have a completed term paper for your presentation, but you should have a well-defined topic and be able to express the problem you are trying to solve, what the economic theory has to say about it, what the data show, and what your conclusions and policy recommendations are. Plan on spending about 15-20 minutes on your talk, and allowing an additional 5-10 minutes for questions from the class.
