

MSc Dissertation Workshop

March 2015

Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Dissertation Structure
- 3 Content and Style
- 4 General Comments & Common Mistakes
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- 6 Plagiarism
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These notes draw heavily on:

- Cochrane, J. (2005). *Writing Tips for PhD Students*, mimeo, University of Chicago.
- Havranek, T. (2010). *Writing Economics: How to Avoid the Worst in Academic Writing*.
- Nikolov, P. (2013). *Writing Tips For Economics Research Papers*, mimeo, Harvard University.

Structure of a Dissertation

- 1 Abstract
- 2 Introduction
- 3 Literature Review
- 4 Data/ Methodology/ Model
- 5 Results
- 6 Discussion
- 7 Conclusion
- 8 References
- 9 (Appendix)

Table of Contents, Index of Figures & Tables

- The thesis must be accompanied by a table of contents.
- If your thesis contains figures and tables:
 - ▶ Index of figures and tables, in order of their appearance
 - ▶ All indexes and lists include the pages where the respective figures etc. appear in the text.
- Glossary of all symbols, variables and abbreviations (if necessary)
 - ▶ All abbreviations used in the text and the appendix

Figures and Tables

- Figures and tables have to be numbered consecutively and must be assigned a title and a source

Example (taken from Hale and Obstfeld 2014):

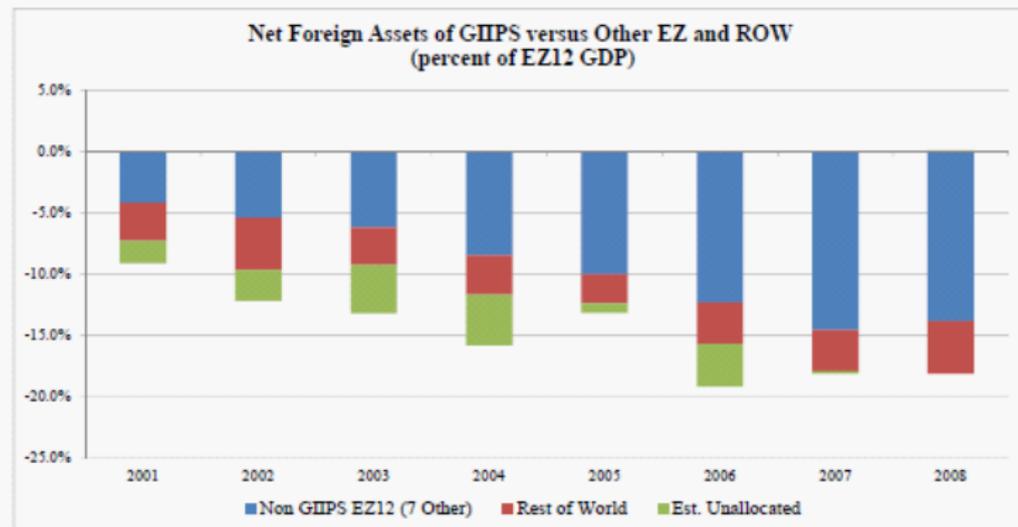
Table 1 Average spreads of sovereign ten-year yields versus Germany, from euro entry until Lehman Brothers failure, September 2008 (basis points)

	Belgium	France	Greece	Ireland	Italy	Portugal	Spain
Average	4.3	-5.0	17.6	1.0	13.6	5.7	0.4
St. dev.	11.7	6.7	14.5	12.2	12.2	12.1	11.7

Source: Weekly end-of-week data from Global Financial Data

Example

Figure 5: Evidence from position (not flow) data



Source: Waysand, Ross, and de Guzman (2010), following Chen, Milesi-Feretti, and Tressel (forthcoming)

Abstract

- Should be shorter than 200 words
 - ▶ If you had only 150 words to say about your dissertation, what would you say?
- Explain your topic, approach and results
- Should be clear, concise and concrete
- Written at the very end once you got all your results

Don't

- Use citations/ acronyms

Introduction

- What is the purpose of the paper? On what issue does the paper try to shed light on?
- What contribution does the paper make, and how does it relate to previous work on the topic?
 - ▶ Why should we care?
- State contribution and main results
- Explain briefly how your findings differ from previous work and what the implications of these findings are.
- Less than 10% of your thesis

Suggestions:

- Do not start your introduction with a long description of other literature (→ literature review). First, your readers want to know what you do.
- Should be written after your research is complete (you got your results and you have a good grasp of the literature).

Literature Review

- Demonstrate familiarity with scholarly work on your topic/ provide survey of what you have read/ show problems of prior research
 - ▶ Only write about papers you understood/ related to your question
 - ▶ Cite mostly economics papers (AER, QJE, JEL etc.) and avoid other material if possible.
 - ▶ Don't cite Wikipedia
- Lay the foundations for your paper/ motivation
 - ▶ A literature review is **not** just a description of a series of papers, but is an account of previous research that is carefully constructed to tell a particular story
 - ▶ Story: Here is what previous researchers have done on my subject; here is something unsatisfactory or incomplete or troubling about that research; here is how I am going to readdress what is unsatisfactory or incomplete or troubling about that research

Literature Review

- It is not necessary to cite every single paper in the literature. The main point should be to set your dissertation of against the 4 or 5 closest current papers in the literature. Avoid long passages of text summarizing, rather take several studies and compare them.
 - ▶ Always ask: What is the main point of the article, and how does it relate to my topic?

Summary:

- ① Demonstrate familiarity with scholarly work on your topic
- ② Analyze critically, and organize, a body of research
- ③ Put your own study in the context of other studies
- ④ Highlight your study's contribution

Methodology

- Formulate precisely your hypotheses and, based on the literature review, state which methods you are going to use.
- Notation should either
 - ▶ follow the standard notation in the literature or
 - ▶ be very self-explanatory
- Empirical thesis: Describe your data and econometric techniques
 - ▶ Name and source of the data, discuss limitations of the data (e.g. small number of observations, missing variables etc.)
 - ▶ Present relevant descriptive statistics
- Theory: Explain/ Lay out the model

Results

- Apply the methods described in the methodology chapter to your problem.
- How many (empirical) results should be presented?
 - ▶ Focus only on what is important and be as clear as possible, e.g. don't show hundreds of IRFs of irrelevant variables
- How should results be described in the text?
 - ▶ Guide the reader and focus his or her attention on the important parts
 - ▶ Have a look at how the results are presented in other papers

Discussion

- Most important part of your work
- Compare your results (and interpretation) with the previous literature
 - ▶ Do they support or contradict the relevant economic theory?
- Point out the limitations of your research
 - ▶ Don't condemn your work, but show that you understand the limits of your method/ techniques/ model
- When you find some policy implications, discuss them (But be careful with recommendations. Avoid making value judgments and rely instead on economic facts and analyses.)

Conclusion

- Less than 10% of the thesis
- Conclusion should briefly summarize the problem statement and emphasize the main contribution of the thesis.
 - ▶ If you did a good job in your thesis this section shouldn't be necessary
- Readers should be able to understand your conclusion without having to read the whole thesis.
- Policy brief of your study:
 - ▶ What were main findings
 - ▶ Why important
 - ▶ What does this imply e.g. for policy

References

- List exactly all sources you actually cite in the thesis; nothing more, nothing less.
 - ▶ A bibliography of 20 pages is not necessary a good signal
- Sort the list of references alphabetically
- Most important: Never mix two citation styles

References: Harvard Style

Books:

Woodford, M. (2003). *Interest and Prices*. Princeton University Press.

- Woodford (2003) argues that. . .
- “The ability to successfully steer private sector expectations is favored by a decision procedure that...” (Woodford, 2003, p. 465)

Chapters/ Contributions to collective volumes/ books:

Canzoneri, M., Cumby, R. and Diba, B. (2010). The Interaction Between Monetary and Fiscal Policy. *In*: Friedman, B. and M. Woodford (eds), *Handbook of Monetary Economics, Vol. III*, North-Holland: Amsterdam, p. 935-999.

- Canzoneri et al. (2010) argue that. . .
- “Quotation” (Canzoneri et al., 2013, p. xxx)

References: Harvard Style

Articles in Journals:

Kydland, F. and Prescott, E. (1977). Rules Rather than Discretion: The Inconsistency of Optimal Plans. *Journal of Political Economy* 85, p. 473-491.

- As noted by Kydland and Prescott (1977)...
- “Quotation” (Kydland and Prescott, 1977, p. xxx)

Unpublished Work:

Gali, J. and Monacelli, T. (2014). *Understanding the Gains from Wage Flexibility: The Exchange Rate Connection*, mimeo, Universitat Pompeu Fabra.

More examples are available on the [dissertation workshop webpage](#).

Content and Style

- Use an appropriate academic style, avoiding colloquialisms, contractions, phrasal verbs and vagueness.
 - ▶ Don't write journalistic (lack of analytical tone)
 - ★ Avoid jargon - any word you don't read regularly in a newspaper is suspect.
 - ★ Avoid adjectives and verbs that are overly dramatic
 - ▶ Use adverbs sparingly.
 - ▶ Never make up your own acronyms.
- Don't use long, over-formal vocabulary and sentences
- You should aim at all times for clear and concise expression.

Footnotes

- As a general rule, footnotes should be placed on the same page as the respective text they belong to. They have to be numbered consecutively.
 - ▶ Put details and digressions in footnotes.¹

- Equations, Tables and Figures should be numbered consecutively.

¹Footnotes always come after punctuation marks.

Style

- Formulate your text with care. Be precise and use correct spelling and punctuation.
- Your work must be written in a clear and understandable style. The reader must be able to follow the development of your thoughts without the need to consult the relevant sources.
- Favor the present tense/ Favor the active tense
- Terms such as "possibly", "maybe" and "somehow" suggest uncertainty and should be used as seldom as possible. Likewise, pretentious phrases should be avoided.

Style

- Keep it as short as possible
 - ▶ Don't repeat things. If you've said it once, you don't have to say it again.
 - ▶ Avoid unnecessary words
 - ★ Avoid words like "of course", "clearly", and "obviously". Clearly, if something is obvious, that fact will, of course, be obvious to the reader.
 - ★ The word very is very often very unnecessary
- Do not cover your lack of understanding by using fancy technical language
- Get to the point quickly and explain it clearly, don't ramble

Coherence

- Your sentences and paragraphs should tie together logically.
- Paragraphs may start with an introductory sentence summarizing the topic of the paragraph.
- Keep your writing self-contained. Frequent references to other works, or to things that have come before or will come later, can be distracting.
- Avoid variations: Once you label the European periphery as “GIIPS” countries, do not call them “PIIGS” in the next sentence.
- Do not use contractions or abbreviations such as: e.g., i.e., etc.. Write out the equivalent words.

Common Mistakes

- Excessive description
 - ▶ The dissertation should offer an analytical treatment of the subject under investigation.
- Poor integration of theoretical and empirical material
 - ▶ Many dissertations contain theoretical discussions that are meant to inform the analysis of the material under study but that are never rigorously and clearly applied to it. All too often, the theoretical section simply stands isolated from the rest of the text. Its inclusion reflects an awareness that it is somehow relevant but it is never brought to bear on the case or cases under discussion.
- Poor contextualisation
 - ▶ Demonstrate that you understand how your topic relates to the work others have done in the same field. Do not make an argument in a vacuum.
- Typographic spelling and other technical errors → leave sufficient time for proof-reading the final draft (especially if English is not your first language)

General Comments

- Use phrases like "The results show...", "The estimated coefficient on..." or use something equally clear. When reading your Results section, readers are trying to keep track of things, so they will tolerate a less than scintillating delivery in the interest of clarity.
- Dissertation should be broken up into sections and sub-sections, but excessive fragmentation should be avoided. Breaking up the text into too many very short sub-sections prevents coherent presentation and can encourage a superficial treatment of a wide range of material rather than a detailed and well-substantiated account of a tightly defined area. Organise the discussion into paragraphs and avoid bullet points.
- Write scientific: Keep non-economics comments for your first paragraphs and your conclusion.

Revision

- Allow yourself enough time to rework your text if necessary. Editing is more than just “Proofreading.” Remember that writing takes a long time, far longer than you may anticipate, so plan carefully and leave plenty of time for re-drafting and a final proof-reading before the submission deadline.
- Check for typos, spelling errors, missing pages, incorrect table or figure numbers, missing references and the like.
- Correct awkward and/or repetitive phrases, and reorganize your sentences and paragraphs to improve the flow of the paper and eliminate redundancies.
 - ▶ Think about each sentence and each word: How could I write it better?
 - ▶ Eliminate all redundant material/ words (do it constantly!)

Proofreading

- Use the spell-check feature of your word processing software, but do not use it as your sole proofreading measure!

Recommendation: Have another person proofread your dissertation

- Remember that it will take some time to format your thesis!
 - ▶ MS Word or L^AT_EX?

L^AT_EX

- Freeware typesetting system which separates the content from the form.
- Editors similar to MS Word are available for L^AT_EX (e.g. LyX).
- Documents typeset in L^AT_EX look much better (especially if you are using many equations)
- Handling/ organisation of references is easier (e.g. JabRef)

There is no need to use L^AT_EX if you don't want to (You are not obliged to use it!). The quality of a dissertation (and the final mark) is not correlated with the typesetting system you are using.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the theft or use of someone else's work without proper acknowledgement, presenting the material as if it were one's own. Plagiarism is a serious academic offence and the consequences are severe. It will always result in imposition of a penalty.

It is essential to make clear in your dissertation the distinction between: the ideas and work of other people that you may have quite legitimately exploited and developed, and the ideas or material that you have personally contributed.

Read: http://www.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/studyskills/essentials/writing/avoiding_plagiarism.html

Plagiarism

- Coursework, dissertations and essays submitted for assessment must be the student's own work (submission of material from "essay bank" is plagiarism even if the authors of such material appear to be giving you permission to use it)
- Unacknowledged direct copying from the work of another person, or the close paraphrasing of somebody else's work, is plagiarism and is a serious offence, equivalent to cheating in examinations. This applies to copying both from other students' work or the work of staff as well as from published sources such as books, reports or journal articles. Plagiarised material may originate from *any* source (World Wide Web, computer based encyclopaedia etc.).

Plagiarism

- Use of quotations or data from the work of others is entirely acceptable, and is often valuable, provided that the source of the quotation or data is given. Failure to provide a source or put quotation marks around material that is taken from elsewhere gives the appearance that the comments are ostensibly one's own. When quoting word-for-word from the work of another person, quotation marks or indenting (setting the quotation in from the margin) must be used and the source of the quoted material must be acknowledged.
- Paraphrasing, when the original statement is still identifiable and has no acknowledgement, is plagiarism. Taking any piece of text, from whatever source, and substituting words or phrases with other words or phrases, is plagiarism. Any paraphrase of another person's work must have an acknowledgement to the source.

Plagiarism

- It is not acceptable to put together unacknowledged passages from the same or from different sources, linking them together with a few words or sentences of your own and changing a few words from the original text: this is regarded as over-dependence on other sources, which is a form of plagiarism.
- Direct quotations from an earlier piece of your own work , if unattributed, suggests that the work is original, when in fact it is not. The direct copying of one's own writings qualifies as plagiarism if the fact that the work has been or will be presented elsewhere (for example, an essay submitted as part of the formal assessment for a previous taught course unit) is not acknowledged.
- Sources of quotations used should be listed in full in a bibliography/references at the end of the piece of work and in a style required by the student's department.

Further Reading

- Dudenhefer, P. (2009) A Guide to Writing in Economic, mimeo, Duke University.
- McCloskey, D. (1999) Economical Writing, Waveland, 2nd edition.
- Strunk, W. and White, E.B. (2000) The Elements of Style. Longman, 4th edition.

More information is also available on the [Dissertation Workshop page](#).