
☞ Harvard University • Economics 980m Junior Seminar ☞

MARKET DESIGN

Fall 2007 • Wednesday 4-6 pm • Littauer 219

Professor Susan Athey

THE RESEARCH PAPER HANDOUT

Thanks to Claudia Goldin for sharing her handout with me.

1. *The Paper*

An important part of Ec980m is the writing of a creative and original research paper. The project will require that you “create” knowledge by using primary sources. You must begin work on the paper *early* in the semester. The hardest part of writing a paper is finding a suitable topic and question. The final research paper is to be about 25 pages (including tables, figures, footnotes, appendices, and references, typed double-spaced using one-inch margins and 12 point type). Remember that the length of the paper does not determine its excellence.

You will be guided by us through the writing of a prospectus and a draft. The prospectus is a brief (page or more) statement of the question and the sources you plan to use. It should contain information gathered from secondary sources (the “literature”) on the subject and the issues and questions that you would like to pursue. Relevant sources must be listed in a bibliography. The draft is a version of your paper due before Reading Period that we will use to give you comments.

2. *Deadlines*

The final paper must be delivered to the office of my assistant Jessica Tatlock or e-mailed to the TF and me no later than 5pm on **Wednesday, May 16** (date/time on e-mail will be used). Do not plan to hand in a late paper; back-up all computer files. Late papers must be submitted or e-mailed directly to the TF. Late papers will receive penalties.

Summary of Deadlines:

October 17 Prospectus due in class

December 12 or before Draft of Research Paper due in class

January 16 Research Paper due by 5pm to Jessica Tatlock (or by e-mail)

3. *Primary Sources*

Primary source(s) must be an important and integral part of your research paper (generally more than one primary source will be used). It is important that you understand what a primary source is and why you must use one or more. The paper is *not* a literature review, but must contain an original and creative idea of your own. That is why you are using “primary sources.”

A primary source (according to the Harvard University guide to writing) is one that has “not been interpreted.” Although it would be difficult to construct an exhaustive list of primary sources, it is easy to state what a primary source is *not*. Textbooks and most secondary references, even if they contain data from a primary source, are *not* primary sources. You must consult the actual primary

source and you must *note the primary source(s) in the bibliography* to your paper.

There are a wide variety of primary sources. The most obvious are those containing data. Examples include data “scraped” from eBay, Google, or other online sources; data from Forest Service timber auctions; data from experiments; data about patient care or hospital technology choices. Many primary sources (e.g., descriptions of auction rules and institutional details) can be used for qualitative and factual evidence. Many data sources are available on the web.

4. *Some General Guidelines on Writing a Paper*

Your first task is to select a topic. Next, read the secondary literature on the topic. Only then will you know what your question is and which primary sources will help you answer it. A mistake that many students make is not to consult secondary sources to narrow their topic and to see what has already been done. Secondary sources, in addition, will guide you to the most relevant primary sources.

Whatever topic you choose and whatever your methodology, the paper must be written well and must use a research-paper style and format. You should consult one of the many style handbooks (the University of Chicago’s *Manual of Style* is an obvious choice). Remember that you must write and rewrite, and then rewrite again. You will not get a good grade on a paper that has just emerged from your word processor. If you are uncertain concerning what constitutes plagiarism, please consult the Harvard University guide to writing. Plagiarism is often unintentional. Footnote and reference your sources properly.

The following procedure will guarantee a doable project:

- *Pick a subject* of interest to you and of relevance to Ec980m (e.g., eBay auction design; online advertising market design; school choice; health care reform);
- *Read the most relevant of the secondary literature* (and compile a bibliography) by searching HOLLIS, JSTOR, and EconLit (or other search engines) using keywords;
- *Narrow the topic or question* so that it is more manageable (e.g., eBay auction ending rules and how they affect efficiency of competing auctions for substitute products; a design for a new advertising exchange or network; comparing the alternative health care reform proposals from the leading presidential candidates);
- *Frame the topic as a question and narrow the question* (e.g., which health care reform proposals will lead to the best incentives for efficient investment by hospitals?);
- *Find relevant primary source(s)* (e.g., data on hospital technology investment)

You *must* include the following (failure to do so will result in an unacceptable paper):

- bibliography of all cited sources;
- identify your primary source(s) in the bibliography by noting underneath the citation(s) “Primary Source”;
- all tables, graphs, and so on must be properly documented and capable of being replicated. The sources and notes must be on the same page (or the following one) as the table or graph and must enable the reader to locate all necessary information for replication, if need be.