Outline for “typical” empirical paper

1. Introduction
2. Literature Review
3. Economic Theory related to project
4. Empirical Methodology
5. Data
6. Warm-up Data Analysis
7. Main results
8. Extensions
9. Robustness checks
10. Limitations
11. Conclusion

To do: as you read papers, see about how this outline matches that of the paper. What parts are merged together or omitted? Also, see how you like their structure.

Check out the Lipson book chapter 8 on “Planning and Prewriting”

Literature review

You have 3 goals for your literature review, with 3 distinct audiences in mind. From most ideal to most practical:

1. “Idealized reader”
2. Me (as Thesis advisor)
3. You (as Author)

(1) Idealized reader – This is the scholar who is reading your paper because they want to learn something about the subject. For this person you want to have them be able to read the Lit review section and learn from it the “lay of the land” in terms of knowledge in the area of the topic.

- The first level of this involves knowing who did what, and what did they find.
- Second, how do the pieces of literature fit together? What are the key differences in terms of methodology? Of results? What papers are more convincing and why?

W. Norton Grubb’s essay “On Writing Papers” puts it well:

I prefer to see reviews that try to formulate arguments about a literature, or which evaluate and criticize the literature you review, rather than merely report what has been
written. Rather than reporting one after another what different authors have said, it’s usually amore instructive to the reader to determine what the different points of contention within a literature are, and what the views pro and con are.

- There are often several distinct literatures that speak to your project – it’s okay to have distinct sections for them.
- Have the literature review build toward the value and importance of your paper. The highest impact literature reviews leave me feeling: “if only someone would solve this puzzle by doing X!” Where X is just what the paper does.

(2) Thesis advisor as reader – For me, in addition to the points in (1), you want to demonstrate that you have really dug deep into the literature, that you have mastered what’s out there. This argues for having more in an Honors Thesis than you would if you were writing for a journal publication.

(3) You as the Author as a reader – You are also writing for yourself. You’ll probably read this material more than anyone else, including me. You can use this section to help to organize your thoughts about the literature.

Some things you should be doing now

1. Create a working bibliography. For each paper you read, add the right reference into your references section.
2. For each paper, write 2-6 sentences on what you’ve learned from it.
3. Group these together in what may become your literature review section
4. Aim to be digesting 1-2 papers per day