

Four Steps to an Applied Micro Paper

Jesse M. Shapiro*
Brown University and NBER

Step 1: Aspirational introduction.

Write an introduction for the paper you aspire to write. Feel free to make up your results, within reason.

When you think you are done, ask yourself: if I write the paper outlined in this introduction, will I be happy with it?

If so, move to step 2. If not, stay on this step. Chances are that if imaginary results don't excite you, neither will real ones.

Step 2: Research.

Do your research.

You will be tempted to work first on the most straightforward aspects of the project. Instead, start by working on whatever aspect is least clear to you, or seems most likely to prevent you from achieving your goals.

Return frequently to the introduction. It is your compass.

When you think you have your main findings in place, move to step 3.

Step 3: Robot.

Write the body of your paper as if you were writing it for a robot. Don't try to convince the robot you are right. Just state your assumptions, methods, and findings.

Be linear: If the robot encounters concepts that have not yet been defined, it breaks.

Be clear: If the robot encounters concepts that do not make sense, it breaks.

Be plain: The robot does not understand fancy talk and is not impressed by it.

Be formal: The robot has no problem with mathematics as long as it is correct.

As you write, you will find gaps in your analysis. These will require you to occasionally return to step 2. When these gaps are closed and the robot is happy, move to step 4.

Step 4: Contractual introduction.

Rewrite the introduction. Now it is a contract between you and the reader. The reader agrees to be excited about your paper, provided the paper delivers what the introduction promises.

As you write, you will find you want claim some things that your research does not really deliver. When this happens, return to steps 2-3.

When the paper delivers on a contract you are happy with, stop. This is your first draft.

*I am grateful to my coauthors, especially Matt Gentzkow, with whom I learned (and am still learning) how to do this.

Helpful Resources

Dierdre McCloskey. 1999. Economical writing.

John Cochrane. 2005. Writing tips for PhD students.