

What your research paper should, and should not, achieve

Edward Morey: revised Jan 10, 2018

Note that this document is a work in progress. Comments and questions please.

Your research will be a four-step process:

- (1) Develop and submit a proposal, including a description of the topic and its relevance for the course, an initial reading list, and an outline. Due by Feb 11th.
- (2) Your completed research paper is due March 18th.
- (3) Your revised final version is due May 1st based on my comments, your mentor's comments, and class comments from your presentation.
- (4) You will formally present your research to the class.

Each component will be graded separately.

Step 1 is the most difficult and you will likely have numerous false starts. You need to get past the false starts before Step 1 is due.

Who are you writing for?

You are writing for a *student-of-economics* in the broad sense of the term. This would include econ majors (undergraduate and graduate). The term includes academic economists, and lay readers, but does not include people who are only looking, at the airport, for something to read on the plane.

Your reader is interested in some subset of behavior, choice, and ethics: either someone who has already read my book, or someone you want to warn about what I wrote in Chapter X.

I hope to incorporate in the book research you uncover, research that either supports or contradicts what is already there. If I do, I will, with your permission, note your contribution.

I hope to post your research paper on the course web site as both an example of excellent research, and as a supplementary reading on your topic.

Choosing an appropriate topic:

In the past more than a few students struggled to find a topic. Some only got a topic when I, with their blessing, imposed a topic on them.

Your research will be an expansion on, or critique of, one of the topics in the book—not a big topic but a narrow topic.

The class discussions, the book, and the sources cited in the book are intended to make you think. I want to see that thinking reflected in your research. Your investigation should note relevant materials from the book and lectures, but that is only the start. The book includes many sources and you need to read and research those relevant to your research topic. Then you are ready to find new stuff on your topic.

Many of you will simply find recent research (a few journal articles) that expands on (or contradicts) what is said about a topic in the book and in the articles the book references.

Many of you will start too broadly and then struggle to narrow the topic.

Your research paper will survey academic literature.

Your topic could be a specific theory, a particular research finding, an aspect of particular moral philosophy, etc. Something of interest to you.

You might write, for example, on some aspect of the moral philosophy of David Hume or John Stuart Mill. For example, you might expand on what the book says about whether Mill was a utilitarian or a libertarian, and what the distinction means for the ethics of economics.

Or you might dig deeper into the research on how emotions affect choice.

Since you will need to propose a topic before many topics are discussed in class, you will need to read ahead the chapters that cover topics of potential interest to you. I recommend that you, as soon as possible, skim the book. Doing so might cause you to run from the class.

Repeating, your research will report research findings and critiques of existing research. You will be reviewing academic literature.

Think of yourself as a journalist (e.g. for the [New York Times Science Section](#), or some Science magazine) that is reporting on the state-of-the-art for the topic you chose.

Keep in mind that, for better or worse, no one cares about what you personally believe or think—unless you are a recognized expert on the topic

You essay will provoke critical thinking:

Your essay must cause you and others to learn and think critically about your topic. Others should find your essay a worthwhile read.

Your essay needs to question or inform on the philosophical or behavioral foundations of economics, or both. Think about the basic assumptions of economics.

For example, if your essay has a large neurological component (e.g. how the brain makes choices when excited), you will need to tell the reader what it all implies for economic choice theory.

Relate your topic to either economic choice or ethics. Fulfilling this objective can be difficult.

To think critically means to question assumptions, to consider the implications of alternative assumptions. Not everyone thinks like an economist or makes economist-type assumptions. I want to find out, from you, how non-economists think.

A large part of your researching, thinking, and writing will revolve on what different sets of assumptions logically imply. That is, what hypotheses follow from a set of assumptions?

The point of the essay is not to apply standard economic analysis to a topic; the intent is to make your classmates take a critical look at one aspect of standard economic thinking.

Keep in mind that you are presenting research and literature to an economics major in a critical-thinking course.

And that you are doing it in way that will make them think critically about one or more economic assumptions about behavior. You want your reader to question their beliefs.

You need to make the reader understand and question a standard economic paradigm. Consider, for example, what is the moral basis of one of our normative economic beliefs?

I will be looking for careful and reasoned thought on your topic—your presentation will have to be logical and internally consistent.

Most writers contradict themselves (say one thing and then say something else that is inconsistent with the first thing). We all do this, particularly in first drafts. It is especially common in answers to essay questions on exams.

Many of you will struggle with finding your inconsistencies. I, for example, might read three different drafts of your paper before it dawns on me that what you say in paragraph 4 is inconsistent with what you say in paragraph 2.

Some essays will:

Some research papers will be on ethics, maybe contrasting the ethics of economics with another ethic, or a discussion of what welfare economics would be like if it were based on a non-Utilitarian ethic.

But your essay needn't have an ethical component.

I suspect that several of you will research some aspect of happiness, and what is, and should be, its role in economics.

For example, the book briefly discusses the hypothesis and research on whether you have a fixed level of happiness from which it is difficult to deviate, for long. You could research this hypothesis in greater detail, surveying, in detail recent research findings and theories on the topic. Your paper would include evidence for and against the hypothesis, and the implications for choice theory and maximizing happiness.

I suspect a few of you will research how behavior is influenced by an emotion or a drive state, such as curious or aroused.

A lot of research on behavior and emotions revolves around sexual decision-making. (It is easy to get 18-year-college-males sexually aroused in a psych lab.)

An essay could have an environmental slant; that is, consider the implications of a topic in the book for environmental economics. I mention this possibility because I am a student of environmental economics, so know a bit about the topic.

One slant for an environmental essay might deal with economic ethics as it applies to the environment vs. another specific environmental ethic.¹

Another possibility would be the implications of choice errors on estimates of wtp for environmental cleanups. (You would not want to tackle this topic unless you already knew something about non-market environmental valuation.

An essay could have a health-economics slant. For example, surveying research on how sick people choose between treatment options and whether they make choice errors.

¹ Most environmental-studies students and most environmental philosophers reject the ethics of economics as a guide for environmental policy.

Some essays will critique fundamental economic questions and assumptions like “Do people have preferences in the economist’s sense of the word? Research on this topic would include articles and theories from psychology.

Your research will not:

Your research paper will **not** be an economic argument for or against some specific policy or project (e.g. should trade be restricted? Should smoking be banned? Should we build some bridge? Should mountain bikers have access to all trails?).

Do **not** write an editorial.

I don’t want to read a paper on why we **should** save the wolves, or feed starving children, or feed starving children to wolves, to save the wolves.

Be specific. I will go crazy if you write stuff like “Philosophers think ...” or “Psychologists believe ...” Cite and discuss the views of specific individuals and schools of thought, not nebulous groups.

Simply listing a bunch of facts is not enough. And, simply stating something is right or wrong will not cut it.

If you can present research findings and arguments that convince me that I have it wrong, that is great, but you will need to do it either by attacking my logic and reasoning, or by finding and explaining contradictory research, not simply by saying “Edward is wrong” or “I disagree with Edward”.

Your job is *not* to tell the reader what to believe, rather it is to objectively present the evidence, so your reader has the information they need to make an informed decision.

For example, it is not the job of a NYT reporter to tell her reader what they should believe about global warming. Her job is to report the findings, so the reader can decide on their own. It is important to be as objective as possible.

What you personally believe should not be apparent. When you read a science article in the Science section of in the New York Times, the writer is reporting, not editorializing; editorials are in another section of the NYT.

If your research has an ethical component, don’t be telling your reader what rule they should use to determine good from evil, unless you are a noted ethicist.

You could choose a activity (flag burning, certain sex acts, sex with the “wrong” individual, lying, harassment, etc.) and consider how different ethical systems (or specific philosophers) would judge the activity. (Note that welfare economists are all for whatever turns your crank if others are not made worse off, but most philosophers, and most normal people, do not subscribe to this ethic.)

You could also research how normal people judge good from bad depending, for example, on their political orientation. Research indicates significant difference between liberals and conservatives. Of course, you would have to contrast the ethics of normal people with the ethics of economics.

You could also research the whether an individual views an act as right or wrong depends on how the act is described and framed.

Whatever your topic, you need to identify those, in addition to economists, who have studied and researched it.

Then you need to find out what these other types (psychologist, philosophers, neuroscientist, etc.) think and why.

For example, if your topic has an environmental-ethical component you will need to investigate the field of environmental ethics, investigate the standard economic models on this aspect of the environment, investigate how different types of environmentalists (there are many types) think about the issue and why (the foundations of their views), and investigate how different types of ecologists and philosophers would approach the issue.

Consider, for example, the ethical treatment of animals. There are hundreds if not thousands of articles on this topic. You would pick some tiny sub-topic.

You do not have the time to do original research:

Original research typically takes years and large amounts of money.

Your essay, could be a research proposal. That is, you could propose a study to address a specific question or hypothesis. Such a proposal would include review of the relevant literature.

Some good past papers have been proposals.

A dangerous path:

Many of you will be tempted to write about something you like (e.g. snowboarding), a specific happening (e.g. the appeal of Donald Trump), or a specific policy (the legalization of MJ). Taking this path leads many, but not all, to disaster.

You will, for example, be looking for published scientific articles on some topic in the book that specifically studies or discusses snowboard, or whatever it is you want to write about. And, there not be any.

For example, Edward was interested in how choice of mountain bike trail and companion varies across mountain bikers as a function of their measurable psychological traits. But there was no literature on personality traits and mountain biking. So, he could not have written a research paper on this topic for this class

Instead, building on earlier research he did on how mountain bikers trade-off different trail characteristics, he spent years and thousands of hours designing a survey, collecting data, and estimating statistical models.

You do not have to time to do years of original research before the end of the semester.

However, it might be ok to use snowboarding, or technical climbing, or whatever, as an example of something. For example, there is research on what personality types are more likely to choose risky activities (risky sports, unprotected sex, etc.), and you could use climbing as an example of a risky activity.

Two years ago, one student wrote about why people enjoy music. This was, in principle, a great topic but initially he had great difficulty finding research and theories to survey. There is stuff out there, but he did not know where to look—neither did I. When he finally found research, he was overwhelmed with the amount, and it was late in the game.

If you, instead, start with topic in the book for which Edward has already found and discussed some of the literature, it is easy to find additional articles and books.

Before you propose a topic, you need to research your topic.

Your research will take you the whole term (the rest of your life, if you want), but a lot of it must happen before you turn in your proposal. At the end of the term, you will feel your research is incomplete. **You research starts with what's in the book, but the whole point is to go further.** Your research essay is not something you will simply sit down and write from your wealth of personal knowledge about the world.

Journalists for the NYT do the research before they write the article, **and do much of the research before they pitch the idea to their editor.** Your proposal is your pitch to me—make it a good one.

The place to start your research is the book and our discussions; then the works cited in the book. A research paper requires a bibliography and references to factoids and findings. You will be collecting, condensing, and synthesizing the work of others. You are not the first to write on your topic, and your reader needs to know this.

My problem with some of the proposals will be that there will be no indication that you have researched/learned about your topic—there will be no details in the proposal. Your research on your topic needs to be well underway before you turn in your proposal, and your proposal needs to reflect this.

I would not be surprised if you had to draft of you essay when you hand in your proposal

In your topic proposal, I will be frustrated by a lack of specifics. If there are no specifics there is nothing for me to comment on. There is no way for me to judge your topic without a good sense of the literature you will be discussing.

A proposal that only says, “I will analyze x”, positions me so there is nothing I can do to help you. All I can do is frustratingly say, “So, why didn't you analyze it before you turned in your proposal” And then I give you a lousy grade on step 1.

A research proposal for which you receive no objective feedback will likely be deficient on one or more dimensions, and will receive a poor grade.

I strongly discourage changing topics midstream.

After enough research you will discover that your topic is way more complicated than you thought it was. This will want you want to change topics--you will imagine another topic is simpler, but you will be wrong.

A good essay requires clear and correct writing

I write a lot, but the product is rarely well-written—well written takes many iterations and a lot of critical feedback. And, time to pause between iterations.

When I use the word “research paper”, I don’t mean 30 pages; rather something more in the five to fifteen-page range.

Repeating, imagine yourself a reporter for the New York Times (or some other newspaper or magazine but not the Daily Camera) who is writing an article that will be published on the newspaper’s web page, which means it can be longer than what appears in print.

Study some of the science articles in the NYT wrt to how they are written and organized. I will try to put some of them on the course web page. Try to emulate them. Note that articles in high-brow newspapers and magazines often start with something very specific (often an example).

Include links in your essay that provide more detail and related material (make sure you are not linking to pages that have since disappeared)

Given the amount of effort I will devote to your research project, I would prefer to read, at every step, well-written stuff.

Organization, exposition, grammar and punctuation are all important.

You, hopefully, know what you mean when you write or say something; that does not mean other people will know what you mean.

Have others read what you write and have them give you feedback. Make sure what they understand is what you wanted to say. I should not be the first person to read it.

For some of you, exposition and grammar will be an issue. Get someone to help you with this. Have a friend and you mentor read it before I see it. Have them explain to you what they think it says, without continuous feedback from you on what you were trying to say. This is an enlightening process.

Carefully check every sentence for consistency with all of the others – often we contradict ourselves without realizing it.

Writing is a difficult thing, especially if you don’t do often. Assume what you initially write is a start but needs improvement.

The University has resources to help you improve your essay, but you need to make appointments well in advance.

It is always nice to start a paper with an abstract of 100 words or less, telling the reader what your paper is about. That way, they can quickly see if the topic is something they are interested in.

More Stuff to worry about:

Remember that any estimates or statements of fact need to be referenced when they asserted. (The exception would be stuff everyone knows and agrees with.)

When you turn in the first version of your paper, treat it as the paper on which your final grade will be based. I will grade it that way.

Think about admissible evidence. For example, the difference between a coroner, who is a medical doctor, testifying that Bill died of a heart attack and the reporter for the local newspaper testifying that Bill died of a heart attack. You are not a coroner or a medical doctor, but you can discuss what they have found in terms a student-of-economics would understand.

Some additional thoughts:

A research paper has a *topic* and a *point*. The topic is what the paper is about (the subject), and your point is the point that you want to make.

For example, the topic of my Chapter 1 is economic choice theory (CT). The point is to make the reader understand CT in terms of its assumptions, understand the implications of those assumptions, and start to critically look at those assumptions.

Often it takes a first draft to determine what the subject is and what the point is. That is, you often figure it out as you write.

I do not want to read the roadmap of your figuring it out; that is, I do not want to read a description of your train of thought towards your topic.

If your topic is explaining how neurons affect your behavior, the reader does not want to read about how you figured it out (your journey of leaning with all of its missteps and side-tracks), getting it mostly wrong until the last paragraph when finally you get it, hopefully, correct.²

If your current draft describes the journey, you need to take the next step, discarding that draft and writing a paper that explains how neurons affect behavior.

² Answers to exam questions often read as journeys through confusion and changes of mind.

As I write about something I often learn that I can't explain it. This is because I do not understand it. When I finally figure it out, I write a new explanation that is typically a highly edited and revised version of my initial sentences.

That is, separate in your mind the notion of writing about a topic as a way to figure out the topic, and your paper about the topic.

How will you organize your essay? Hopefully not simply as a sequence of findings reported in the order they were found. "In 1492 Columbus discovered America. In xxx there was the first settlement in North America. In xxx George W. was born. and ... and ..."

For example, if your topic is explaining how neurons affect choices, ask yourself whether relating the history of neuron science is the best way to tell your reader how they work and how they affect behavior.

There are different ways to describe what is known and relevant: point-counter point, like a debate; or starting with the big picture and then zooming in to one or more specifics; or starting specific and then generalize out.³

Often a second draft is organized differently than the first. You get all the facts down but realize everything would be clearer if it were presented differently.

³ Articles in the NYT often start with a specific, a specific example, e.g. an article about global warming might start with an example its effect (oranges growing in Colorado, or some such thing).