Working with Economists Part 2

Sam Zuckerman
Senior Speechwriter and Editor
Economic Research Department
Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco

Review

In general, editing economists for nonprofessional readers involves two sets of skills:

1. General principles of editing applicable to all expository writing, including brevity, clarity, logical sequence, good syntax, and proper grammar and word choice.
2. The special problems of economics editing, including wringing out jargon and expressing complex ideas in plain language.

Economics is a specialized field with its own vocabulary (jargon) and a particular way of looking at the world. Economists love reducing the messy and complicated world to mathematical models, which they can use to run statistical exercises.

Most of the rest of us think about the world in some combination of conceptual and anecdotal modes. Our job is to make sure that the mathematical and statistical world of the economist is translated into a qualitative story that makes sense to nonprofessionals.

That means making sure mathematical ideas are expressed qualitatively in the clearest possible terms, without doing violence to the underlying ideas.

Any economic model is about correlations – relationships between such variables as interest rates, output, and employment. These can be expressed mathematically and statistically. But they can also be expressed descriptively. Economic writing for nonprofessionals always renders discussions of correlations or other relationships in descriptive terms.

Let the economist imagine he (or she) is at a dinner party and is asked to describe his (or her) work… What would he (or she) say?

KNOW YOUR READERS

The first step in editing economists is understanding the readership you are trying to reach. That determines how much complexity and technical content are appropriate.

READERS

Economic writing for nonprofessionals may include such groups as:

- Teachers
- Business Writers
- Financial Professionals
- Government officials

Let’s assume you are targeting an educated, intelligent readership that has not had technical economics training beyond one or two college classes. That still leaves a lot of questions unanswered…

Do you write:

- GDP
- Gross domestic product
- Gross domestic product, the broadest indicator of economic activity, measuring the nation's total output of goods and services…

- FOMC
- Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC)
- Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC), the Federal Reserve’s policymaking body

- To test the relationship between consumer spending and credit conditions, I run a regression…

- To test the relationship between consumer spending and credit conditions, I run a regression, a statistical exercise estimating the degree of correlation between two variables…

- To test the relationship between consumer spending and credit conditions, I perform a statistical exercise to estimate how much these two variables are correlated.

Models vs. relationships

Economists love their econometric models. They win recognition, promotions, academic appointments, and, maybe, Nobel prizes for elegantly manipulating data. They like nothing better than to describe the clever workings of these models in mind-bending detail.

Some of your economists will be tempted to do this even when they write for a broader readership. As a result, some fraction of the material you edit will be about models or will include extensive discussion of models.

- DO NOT, I REPEAT, DO NOT LET THEM GET AWAY WITH THIS IN WORK INTENDED FOR A GENERAL AUDIENCE. USE STEALTH, GUILE, FLATTERY, DIPLOMACY, AND, IF NECESSARY, BRUTE FORCE TO WREST THEM FROM THEIR SPREADSHEETS. (EXCEPT, OF COURSE, TO PREPARE USEFUL FIGURES)

When writing for a general readership, an author should use descriptive language to explain economic relationships. Brief discussions of methodology are appropriate, as long as these are not too technical. But the focus should be on the results of using a model, not on the workings of the model itself.

Think of this kind of explanatory material as handrails that help keep your readers steady on their feet as they go through the text. The broader the readership you target, the more handrails you have to provide.

CLICHES

We are all zealous about weeding out jargon, the bane of economics writing. But what about its equally obnoxious cousins, the overused turn of phrase and the hackneyed metaphor. Some economists can't help allowing these unwelcome visitors into their prose.

For most economists, writing isn’t a vocation. It’s a task they have to perform to communicate their ideas and get published. They generally aren’t obsessed with words the way many of the people in this room are. It’s natural that they often make the lazy, familiar choice.

- Headwinds
- Well anchored

And my personal favorite…

- Going forward,

As in, “The Economy will recover going forward…”

Does anyone think the economy will recover going backward?

The use of “will,” the future tense, makes going forward redundant. It should be reserved for cases where emphasis of the time frame is needed. Otherwise it uses ink, pixels, and precious brain space, and is karmically challenged…

Thank you for listening to my rant…

Now on to the next subject…

And that next subject is that curious hybrid – the jargon cliché! Words and phrases such as “downside risk…”

What is the downside risk of eliminating downside risk from our vocabulary?

Editing Samples

- While the emphasis here is on the supply function, we are not altogether ignoring housing demand. Empirically, changes in house prices are one of the most important predictors of housing starts. Presumably, house prices are changing in large part due to fluctuations in the demand for housing. This latter point highlights one of the primary challenges in estimating the way that housing supply (starts) depends on house prices. It is necessary first to strip out the relationship between house prices and housing demand that could befuddle the estimation of the supply function. We do this through the technique of instrumental variables, where we first regress house price changes on a set of demand factors such as the user cost of housing, changes in mortgage rates, non-farm employment, demographic variables like the number of married couples, and the lags of the other variables in the supply function. After this process of controlling for the affect of the demand factors on house price changes we then take the predicted house price changes from this model and use them as our house price factor in the model of housing supply. Similarly, we use instrumental variables on the construction cost variable.

Although the focus here is on housing supply, demand must also be considered. Empirically, changes in house prices are one of the most important predictors of housing starts. House prices change in significant part because of fluctuations in housing demand. This point highlights one of the primary challenges in building a model in which housing starts depend on house prices. It is necessary to strip out the relationship between house prices and housing demand, which could confuse estimation of supply trends. We do this by performing a statistical exercise in which we examine the relationship of house price changes to such demand factors as the cost of housing to users, changes in mortgage rates, nonfarm payroll employment, demographics such as the number of married couples, and other variables. After controlling for the effect of the demand factors on house price changes, we then take the predicted house price changes from this model and use them as our house price factor in the model of housing supply. We use a similar statistical technique to examine the variables affecting construction costs.

~~While~~Although the ~~emphasis~~focus here is on ~~the~~ supply ~~function, we are not altogether ignoring housing,~~ demand~~.~~ must also be considered. Empirically, changes in house prices are one of the most important predictors of housing starts. ~~Presumably, house~~House prices ~~are changing~~change in ~~large~~significant part ~~due to~~because of fluctuations in ~~the~~housing demand ~~for housing.~~. This ~~latter~~ point highlights one of the primary challenges in ~~estimating the way that~~building a model in which housing ~~supply (~~starts~~) depends~~ depend on house prices. ~~It~~ is necessary ~~first~~ to strip out the relationship between house prices and housing demand ~~that~~, which could ~~befuddle the~~confuse estimation of ~~the~~ supply ~~function.~~ trends. We do this ~~through the technique of instrumental variables, where we first regress~~ by performing a statistical exercise in which we examine the relationship of house price changes ~~on a set of~~to such demand factors ~~such~~ as the ~~user~~ cost of housing to users, changes in mortgage rates, ~~non-farm~~nonfarm payroll employment, ~~demographic variables like~~demographics such as the number of married couples, and ~~the lags of the~~ other variables ~~in the supply function.~~. After ~~this process of~~ controlling for the ~~affect~~effect of the demand factors on house price changes, we then take the predicted house price changes from this model and use them as our house price factor in the model of housing supply~~. Similarly, we~~ We use ~~instrumental~~a similar statistical technique to examine the variables ~~on the~~affecting construction ~~cost variable~~costs.