Best Practices for Writing Policy Papers and MPA Dissertations
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1. Subject matter
   a. It is important to pick a topic for a long project carefully. You will work on the project for a while, so you have to be interested in the answer to the question you pose.
   b. Keep a list of potential subjects somewhere on your hard drive.
   c. If you don't have a topic when the year begins, The "Annual Review" journals, or generalist journals in any field, often provide keys to research frontiers.
   d. An advantage of picking a topic early is that you have more time to discover what questions remain unanswered in that general area. Sometimes, the real question only reveals itself after a long time of learning about a given subject.

2. Substance
   a. Always make an argument and tell readers what your argument is in the first two paragraphs.
   b. Make sure to position the question & argument in a broader context.

3. Quality of Writing:
   a. Even in policy writing you should to find your own "voice". Good writing helps get your point across.
   b. Numbers less than 10 should be written out, i.e. (four students, 16 students).
   c. Do not write with acronyms or jargon;
   d. Avoid the passive voice (note that US versus European conventions differ);
   e. Best to avoid "we" when there is only a single author (again, conventions differ);
   f. Do not use conjunctions (i.e. Don't use "Don't"…Use Do Not ☺);
   g. Do not use a thesaurus to find more sophisticated words – often these break up the flow of writing and read strangely.

4. Policies are often described too vaguely for those unfamiliar with them to understand. Always give examples of ideas:
   a. If a free trade agreement is to lower barriers in the service sector, give an example "for example, by allowing service workers to move to either country in search of work".

5. Math:
   a. Make sure to double-check all mathematical equations (including sub-scripts in regression equations) with your basic econometrics textbooks.
   b. When you use numbers, including percentages and income figures, always use referents in other major currencies or to other countries' figures.
   c. In formal writing, write "percent" instead of %, and USD instead of $.
   d. Finally, always interpret regression coefficients relative to relevant baselines (like averages of the independent variable and standard deviation shifts). You

can even compare the magnitude of the effects you find to those of other, similar studies.

6. Scholarly evidence:
    a. Use quotes sparingly (better to reformulate ideas in your own voice);
    b. Literature reviews are boring when they are a list of findings. Try instead to categorize research around themes or hypotheses and give an overarching summary.
    c. If you cite someone (i.e. "according to so-and-so (2011)) make sure to tell us why we care about so-and-so's taxonomy, system, etc.

7. Figures:
    a. All figures in the report should be described in the body of the text.
    b. Make sure to use high quality images if you are replicating from another author's work.
    c. Number all figures and tables and give a detailed explanation *within* the figure legend reporting source, year the data refer to, and the definition of the data. A figure should be understandable entirely on its own.

8. Non-native English writers.
    a. It may help to write a few papers in your native tongue first and then translate, so you will learn to write a well-structured argument before you try to think in English.
    b. Have a native speaker/ writing center tutor edit **every single piece of assessed writing** before you turn it in. Sometimes poor syntax and bad grammar can move you from a distinction to merit or merit to pass.

9. Document formatting
    a. Use Serif fonts (like Times, Garamond);
    b. Submit in **unlocked** PDF because often people take notes inside while marking;
    c. Always double space.

10. Recommended readings
    a. Strunk and White *The elements of style.*
    b. Karen Elizabeth Gordon *The well-tempered sentence.*