Guidelines for Research Paper

Purpose:

The research paper is designed to provide some "hands-on" experience with statistical techniques.

Schedule:

Proposal: due in class on Thursday, April 18.
Final Paper: due by 4 PM on Friday, May 10.
The paper **must** be submitted to me in person. *No late papers will be accepted.*

Proposal:

A printed proposal is to be submitted in class as the first part of the research assignment.   The proposal should have three components:

1. *Hypothesis to test*: A few paragraphs motivating your topic and briefly discussing related published work (see below).
2. *Data source(s)*: Describe the dataset you will be using. (Will you collect your own data? If so, describe how.)
3. *Technique*: A brief explanation of how you plan to test your hypothesis.   I am looking more for a conceptual explanation rather than for details about the estimation scheme.

The purpose of the proposal is to help you get on track early and to help you to identify places where your paper can be improved. A proposal should be two to three pages in length. You should have someone proofread your proposal before submitting it. Please attach a signed copy of the peer-reviewed version of your proposal to the re-written version you submit in class. Choose someone who will give you honest, constructive feedback; the reviewer need not be an Econ 300 student.

I will provide comments on your proposals by Tuesday, April 23. In the event your proposal is unacceptable, you should arrange to meet with me immediately to discuss alternatives and plan to submit a new proposal by Friday, April 26. If you have spoken with me about your idea prior to submitting the proposal, and have followed the guidelines presented here, your proposal will most likely be approved.

Of the 25% of the course grade attributed to the research paper, at least 5% will be based on the proposal. The proposal must be submitted on time to receive credit.

Final Paper:

The final paper should present carefully and clearly the motivation for your project, a discussion of any theory, a summary of related research, a presentation of any data issues, the estimation technique and the empirical results, and a conclusion. Two important things to remember: (1) Make your tables and/or graphs as easy to understand as possible — they should help you to prove your point. (2) Numbers are not enough; you need to provide an economic interpretation: what do your results *mean*?

The final paper will probably be around 10 pages in length (give or take a few pages, not counting tables and figures), but that is not a rule. The paper should be long enough to satisfy the description of the previous paragraph but no longer. Shorter, focused papers are preferable to longer, rambling ones. Excessive length will be penalized, including uninformative tables or graphs. Also, do not include a printout of your data unless I request it specifically. You should have someone peer-review a draft of your paper in its (nearly) final form. Grammatical, logical and spelling errors all will detract from your overall grade. A good paper is one that you personally find interesting, and one in which you can interest the reader (namely me!).

How do I find a suitable topic?

First, keep your eyes and ears open. Read current news periodicals (e.g. *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Economist*) regularly. Flip through this and past semester's textbooks (aren't you glad you kept them?) for "boxes" with applied examples or discussions of interesting research. If you have another social science course this semester that requires a research paper, particularly another Economics course, it may be possible to write a related paper for this class; please talk with me about this option early. Sometimes a good idea will come from an unlikely source, such as a late-night debate with friends or a phone conversation with a relative. I strongly encourage — and expect — you to discuss your topic with me *before* the proposal is due.

Once you have found a research topic, you should use *EconLit* or the *Social Sciences Citation Index* (SSCI) to find what published research exists on your topic. Look at the abstracts to locate one or two (or more) papers that seem relevant and read them carefully, making note of the data they use and the estimation techniques. Reviewing a few papers should help you focus your own paper. Try to stay clear of articles with proprietary data (unless you plan to collect your own) or advanced estimation techniques. A brief discussion of related literature (usually a page or two at most) is an essential part of your final research paper.

A common mistake is to choose a research question which, although interesting, is too difficult to address in a paper to be written in a single semester. If you find your topic is out of control, view this paper as a stepping stone to later research and focus on one small piece of your overall question. By thinking about your research question in depth as you write your proposal, you hopefully will be able to avoid this pitfall. If you have any questions about how to proceed, do not hesitate to ask me.