Writing in Economics

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Introduction

Economics is a social science that tells us how to allocate scarce resources and maximize the total utility of people's preferences. Because the discipline is a cross between science and sociology, the process of writing within the discipline can be a complicated task. To emphasize the important rhetorical features of the discipline, this essay will explore two major genres of writing in economics: writing for the expert and writing for the layperson. Both genres prove to be very different from one another, perhaps because of the audiences which the genre communicates to. However, the rhetorical features within the subjects of structure and style reflect how economic knowledge is built through observation and mathematical value. As an economist observes and weighs the mathematical outcome, he adds innovations and generative ideas to the knowledge of the discipline.

Structure for the Expert

When writing for the economic expert, structure is important because the goal in economic writing is much like science writing— economists write to instruct replications. The rhetorical features within the discipline of economics, particularly geared towards experts, involve specific formats (sections) and the use of mathematical equations. Like a science experiment that can easily be replicated by the use of a lab report, economics must have a similar report, enabling other economists to study and refer to models already theorized in order to verify specific interpretations of the economy.

For economic experts, writing within a specific format is a way of giving detailed, organized instructions. This method is a step by step approach, similar to a scientific lab report. The sections consist of an Introduction, Model, Data, Results and Conclusion. According to Paul Dudenhefer, author of *A Guide to Writing in Economics*, “Often, one of the most innermost parts of an economic paper is the model section. It is customary in empirical economics papers to have a section devoted to describing your model (Dudenhefer 13). The importance of a section such as the “Model” is to show how one’s observations in conjunction with a mathematical form, produces a new, slightly different model. Nathan Kollett, an advanced student in the Economics Department at the University of Massachusetts Amherst writes in his “Model” section of his report entitled, “A Cross-Regional Gender Study of Wage Inequalities in the Workplace,” “In completing this project, we first specified a basic regression model. Since we are comparing cross-regional data, we had to specify the regions we should be looking at. We adopted the Bureau of Labor Statistic’s framework which divides the country into 9 separate regions” (Kollett 1-2). This statement explains the need for a model, and the kind of model he has chosen to use. The use of a “basic regression model” implies the application of a mathematical model that has been accepted and used for many different empirical studies. Because economists aim to improve and build on already produced mathematical models, this section of the report adds to the knowledge of the discipline, by producing new models, which then are used for further replication and adaptation.

Mathematical equations, which comprise the model, are important in economic writing because they supply the theory, which outlines the author's perspective on the issue at hand. Dudenhefer writes, "In the model section, the writer takes the reader through a series of equations that constitute the model…It is customary to state the statistical technique the analysis will use" (Dudenhefer 13). Because the mathematical equation(s) serve as the model, experts take the author's model and apply it to their own data and research, analyzing the results to look for consistency or discrepancies. Kollett says of his model, "To account for these two determinants, we included the independent variables "edu" for education and "exp" for work experience. We also had to account for a disturbance term, μ. At this point our model looks something like this: $Wage_{region} = ß_0 + ß_1 \cdot Edu_r + ß_2 \cdot Exp_r + \delta \cdot Fe_r + \mu_r$" (Kollett 2). Kollett's explanation of his model gives the reader a clear understanding of the theory needed for adaptation. This method, reflective of observation and experimentation, is applied to the discipline in order to keep the credibility of knowledge. In the world of science, experiments are required because the world is constantly changing. The same goes for the knowledge of economics— the economy is also in constant change.

Style for the Expert

In economic writing, particularly for expert economists, the style of writing is based on objective language. This rhetorical feature is important because like biology and chemistry, economics is based on factual evidence— what is actually happening in the world's economy and why. Because economic writing for the expert is a way of instructing experiments, biases have to be non-existent. For example, in Genevieve

Verdier's report entitled "What Drives Long Term Flows: A Theoretical and Empirical Investigation" she writes objectively: "In order to study the long-term determinants of debt accumulations, this paper makes use of a neo-classical growth model with credit constraints developed by BMS" (Verdier 5). This kind of language is important for the discipline of economics, because when conducting experiments, or when attempting to replicate a model, the variables and exact form of model is important, not the economist's opinion. This kind of objective reasoning applies to the discipline's field of study because economics takes factual evidence and weighs their values through mathematical science, in order to find the best policies for society and the individual.

The use of objective language reveals how economic knowledge is made through observation of factual events and experiments. By writing in an objective method, the knowledge added to the discipline consists of concrete facts. Economic knowledge is formed from experiments and adaptations, thus the model and the data must be solely informational and instructional. Economics is a mathematical science, which utilizes a black and white universal language; thus, objective language is a must when writing in the discipline. If biases seep into empirical reports, the value of the information becomes questionable because the focus turns away from the mathematical variables and objective observations. Economic writers make efforts to stay focused on adding to the scientific knowledge of economics by producing and replicating models. This is why communicating through objective language makes the most sense for the discipline.

Structure for the Layperson

When writing for the layperson, the structure of the writing is generally in the form of prose, set up like a novel with chapters. Communicating in these terms makes sense for this part of the discipline because unlike the economic expert involved with scientific writing, the writing for lay audiences involves the sociology aspect. This method also makes sense because aside from the scientific aspect of economics, the social aspect deals with humanity on all levels, thus there is a need for the layperson to understand the role of economics. In Mark Skousen's *The Power of Economic Thinking*, he addresses the social conflict of welfare. He writes,

> Suppose the President of the United States proposes a new welfare program called 'Foodcare.' Since food is even more vital to each American citizen than health or retirement, he argues, the food stamp program should be expanded and universalized…Thus instead of 19.8 million Americans on food stamps, suddenly 180 million or more begin paying the "food stamp" tax and collecting food stamps, representing perhaps 10 percent of household budgets. (Skousen 14).

From this example, one can see how this writing feature reflects how economic knowledge is made— by observation, and for the layperson's understanding, an explanation of one's observations. In order to make economic knowledge accessible to lay audiences, the information must be relatable— food and even the political issue of welfare is a relevant social topic. This method applies to the discipline because observation is the foundation for building knowledge in economics— economists build off their examinations of the economy. Skousen observes the welfare program, showing the range of statistics in different situations. This method of observation, which is reflective of how the knowledge of the discipline is essentially made, is then explained in lay terms, made accessible to society.

In addition to the method of prose, economists use a rhetorical feature constituting metaphors and comparisons to real life situations. Economists believe that everyone should understand economics because money and business are necessities for survival. Like the rhetorical feature of form (prose), writers for lay audiences find a commonality by using real-life examples and metaphoric images. For example, in Mark Skousen's *The Power of Economic Thinking*, he discusses financial percentages in terms of every day necessities such as "flushing toilets, running water, and central heating" (Skousen 102). This method makes the most sense for this discipline because economics addresses everyday experiences. Furthermore, this feature reflects how economic knowledge is made by forming comparisons and producing replications through observation. By presenting a metaphor to the layperson, economists explain their observations of how the economy functions. This method of comparison and explanation applies to the discipline because economics is based on comparison and adaptation, in order to replicate similar models.

Style for the Layperson

When considering the writing style for the layperson within the discipline of economics, the most common approach involves a goal of persuasion. Many economic pieces written for lay audiences are geared towards a specific group of people— usually under the political labels of conservatives or liberals. Economists use this rhetorical feature as a way to gain interest in the knowledge of the discipline, however in many ways, persuasion can sometimes detract from the discipline's field of study. For example, in

Adam Smith's book *The Wealth of Nations*, he alludes to economics as a form of survival of the fittest. He writes,

> Two greyhounds in running down the same hare...Each turns her towards his companion, or endeavors to intercept her when his companion turns her towards himself. This, however, is not the effect of any contract, but of the accidental occurrence of their passions in the same object at that particular time. Nobody ever saw a dog make a fair and deliberate exchange of bone for another with another dog. Nobody ever saw one animal by its gestures and natural cries signify to another, this is mine, that yours; I am willing to give you this for that. When an animal wants to obtain something either of a man or of another animal, it has no other means of persuasion but to gain the favor of those whose service it requires (Smith 22-23).

As one can see, the economist uses a relatable metaphor (animals), as discussed earlier. The rhetorical feature within this passage is the writer's method of persuasion, beneath the metaphor. To compare economics to the political idea of survival of the fittest, is to state a biased belief that only some can succeed economically. This bias questions the economic discipline and pulls away from the method of observing— it becomes more of a method based on argument. In an interview with Nathan Kollett he expresses his opinion on persuasion in relation to the discipline of economics. He says "Persuasion detracts from the discipline of economics because economists should be impartial to politics. Economics is very mathematical and empirical and because of this it is black and white. Politicizing economics takes away from the credibility of the discipline. We should be basing our economic policies on what the math is, what the numbers are" (Kollett). Because economic knowledge is made from observation and mathematical variables, persuasion is not reflective of these methodologies; it is rather reflective of the way knowledge is interpreted. The knowledge of the discipline is not made through methods of argument— one cannot argue a mathematical equation; it works or it doesn't.

Because of this fact, the method of persuasion adds a whole different dimension to the field of economics, whether or not people believe it is a positive or negative one.

Conclusion

The process of writing within these two very different genres reveals the complexities of the economic discipline. The connection between science and society through economic writing reflects specific assumptions regarding the discipline. One learns that observation and experiment make up the knowledge of economics and that the methods of explanation and interpretation reflect how the knowledge is applied, through replication and adaptation. The rhetorical features discussed in both genres (aside from the feature of persuasion), add to the knowledge of the discipline by presenting economics as a process of observation, experiment and explanation. An economist's goal when writing in the discipline is to present what mathematically makes sense for the economy. Because economics is a social science, it touches on both the scientific knowledge and the needs of society, thus, economics must be accessible for both the expert and the layperson.

Work Cited

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