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Last Updated: October 2021

The purpose of writing an economic or policy analysis is to clearly and concisely convey economic theory and empirical facts in a professional manner. This document summarizes helpful tips for writing in economics, including some of the common mistakes made by students.

The examples in this document are based on the following writing prompt:

Compare and contrast the relative merits of a carbon tax and a cap-and-trade policy.

1. Unless prompted, your analysis should not include personal opinions or anecdotes. For example, you should not include phrases such as, “I enjoyed reading this article,” or, “I did not previously know about this topic.”

In specific cases, you may be asked to summarize a body of research and draw a conclusion. Even in this scenario, your conclusion should be based on the existing research and not your personal opinion. Furthermore, the research used to draw your conclusion should be clearly represented and cited in your analysis.

2. As an undergraduate student, most of your assignments will require reviewing and summarizing existing economic research. This research should be clearly cited, both in the text and in a bibliography at the end of your writing. The only reason a statement or novel assertion would not require a citation is if it is based on your own original idea.

Correct: “One advantage of a carbon tax is that it creates a stable price to encourage future investment, as opposed to the more volatile price under cap-and-trade (Kaufman, 2016).”

Why this is correct: This statement is not an original idea of the student, and as such the source of the idea is cited in the text.

3. Use reputable sources and cite them correctly. Reputable sources include peer-reviewed academic journal articles, news articles from major newspapers, and think tank reports. Note that just because a website has a “.org” URL does not mean it is a reputable source. You should also be wary of newspaper opinion pieces that are not supported by clear and cited evidence.

Once you find a reputable source, it is important to cite it correctly and give the author credit.

Consider the following citation:

Frank, Charles. “Pricing Carbon: A Carbon Tax or Cap-And-Trade.” The Brookings Institution. August 12, 2014.

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/planetpolicy/2014/08/12/pricing-carbon-a-carbon-tax-or-cap-and-trade/>

Within the text, this citation should be referenced using, at least, the author's last name, Frank. It would be incorrect to cite this in the text as, "The Brookings Institution states..." or "Charles states..."

Be especially careful with newspaper articles. You should be citing the author's last name both in the text and in your bibliography.

4. Use a professional tone in your writing.
 - Avoid contractions. For example, write "do not" instead of "don't."
 - Avoid colloquialisms and idioms. Colloquialisms include phrases such as, "hit a roadblock," "fell through the cracks," "boils down to," or "digging deeper." Only use phrases or expressions that can be interpreted literally.
 - Avoid informal or vague language. For example, "The government sold a lot of permits." Not only is the use of "a lot" is informal, it is also vague. Instead write, "The government sold 1,500 permits (source here)."
5. Favor shorter sentences and shorter paragraphs over long sentences and long paragraphs. Shorter sentences are easier for the reader to understand.
6. Plan the flow of your essay in advance. You should always have an introduction and a conclusion, though for some assignments one sentence for each is sufficient. Each paragraph should have a topic and a topic sentence. Changes in topic should trigger a new paragraph.
7. Avoid the passive tense. Most of the time, using active tense will also result in shorter sentences (see #5 above).

Incorrect: "Wanting to decrease carbon emissions, the government could levy a carbon tax."

Correct: "The government could levy a carbon tax to decrease carbon emissions."

Incorrect: "The tax is being levied by the government."

Correct: "The government levies the tax."

Incorrect: "The tax is going to be levied by the government."

Correct: "The government will levy the tax."

Incorrect: "The risk being the unknown quantity."

Correct: "The risk is the unknown quantity."

8. Unless what you are referring to is clear, avoid using "this," "it," or "which."

Incorrect: "By setting an exact cap on pollution, the government can better regulate carbon emissions. The disadvantage of *this* is that..."

In the example above, it is unclear what “this” is referencing: “This” could be referencing the cap on pollution, the government regulation, the carbon emission, or something from a previous sentence.

Better: “By setting an exact cap on pollution, the government can better regulate carbon emissions. The disadvantage of *this policy* is that...”

Correct: “By setting an exact cap on pollution, the government can better regulate carbon emissions. The disadvantage of *a cap on pollution* is that...”

9. In almost all cases, adverbs are not needed in professional writing and should not be used.

Examples:

~~Obviously~~, the effects of climate change will continue to worsen over time.

~~Interestingly~~, a carbon tax can be ~~highly~~ inequitable.

10. Lists should be constructed with parallel grammatical form.

Incorrect: “Some of the benefits of a carbon tax include reducing emissions, the government revenue generated, and to make progress on global climate goals.”

Correct: “Some of the benefits of a carbon tax include reduced emissions, increased government revenue, and progress on global climate goals.”

Further examples of parallel construction:

<https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/grammar/parallelconstruction>