

**Low-Cost and Effective Peer
Review Exercises:
Tools to Improve Student
Writing in Economics Classes**

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Abstract

This paper introduces peer review exercises designed to improve student writing. To create them, I drew on the lessons found in 12 books on writing and style. These exercises can help other instructors establish low-cost, high-impact writing assignments.

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Introduction

I teach economics at a mid-sized regional state university in Arkansas and over a three-year period, my students have published over 100 newspaper articles (op-eds and letters to the editors). These student publications appeared in various newspapers throughout the state, a few appeared in out-of-state newspapers, and notably 21 appeared in the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, the statewide newspaper.ⁱ

One could make several different arguments extolling the value of these publications, but I will make only two here. First, having a student write an op-ed is a high-impact assignment because it allows students to apply economic concepts to current events. It forces students to make their own connections between economic models and reality; without these types of high-impact assignments, students would be limited to reading about these connections in books or hearing about them in lectures.

Second, these publications helped students overcome a problem faced by most college graduates seeking jobs; namely, college graduates, on paper, look very similar to employers. At 22 years old, most college graduates just haven't accomplished enough yet to differentiate themselves. Newspaper publications can help students overcome this problem.

How? By allowing students to tell potential employers several compelling stories. First, by publishing op-eds, students can claim that outside entities -- the newspapers -- have verified their writing as high quality. Second, newspaper publications allow students to convincingly claim that they can take complex ideas and present them in a way that a general audience can understand. Employers often want to hire job candidates with these skills for three reasons. First, effective written communication allows employees to work more productively in teams. Since team members often communicate via email and texts, when they write clearly, they can better coordinate their tasks. Second, effective written communication also signals that job candidates have a skill that is often necessary for them to develop into effective managers. Quite obviously, in many fields, effective managers issue written orders and to get the desired outcomes, these managers must be understood. And finally, firms often want to hire job applicants with good communication skills because, once hired, these people have a good likelihood of succeeding at jobs that require communications with clients or the public.

Given the benefits students have received from my writing program, some faculty members may be interested in developing a writing program similar to my own. This paper focuses on one aspect of my writing program that they can replicate. In doing so, it reduces the effort a faculty member must expend to shepherd students toward the goal of newspaper publications. Over the years, I discovered -- perhaps unsurprisingly -- that student work, on its own, is not ready for publication. It often requires heavy editing. To reduce the amount of time I had to spend editing, I developed peer review exercises that enabled students to improve their writing. I had the students go through several rounds of peer reviews before I looked at their assignments. The peer reviews improved the quality of the first drafts that I had to edit,

reducing the amount of effort I had to expend to help students get their op-eds into publishable shape.

To prepare the peer review exercises, I read 12 books on writing and style.ⁱⁱ These books taught lessons that I transformed into peer-review exercises. These exercises can help other faculty develop their own low-cost, high-impact writing assignments.

Literature Review

Simpson and Carroll (1999) surveyed Davidson College's alumni, asking them to reflect on their college years, to determine the effectiveness of the college's writing assignments. The results were clear: the former students thought short assignments provided the best preparation for the skills required in their present occupations. Professors looking to assign short assignments can turn to the literature for inspiration. George (2019) constructed a series of very short assignments, which required students to tweet summaries of the work of famous economists. Since Twitter limits posts to 280 characters, students were forced to be concise. Hall and Podemska-Mikluch (2015) argued that the optimal assignment size exceeds 280 characters. They extolled the virtues of assigning 550-750 word op-eds – which, while short, are long enough to allow students to fully develop their arguments.

Fisher (2019) and Cohen and Williams (2019) also believe students get a lot of value from op-ed assignments. But these last four articles focused on describing the assignments. They failed to provide guidance on how students can improve their writing as they work on these assignments.

Some articles do focus on how students can make revisions in order to improve their writing. Hansen (1993) and Smith et al. (2005) describe course assignments that require students to read books on writing and then to apply the books' lessons to help revise their work. But neither of these articles gave the students any guidance in picking which lessons they should apply. Schmeiser (2017) recommended that students exchange assignments and read their partners' work out loud to help catch any places where the work may be incoherent. Picault (2021) describes assignments that required peer-review feedback but this feedback was unguided. Students merely wrote down their suggestions without referring to any rules-based guidance from their instructors.

My paper bridges these two literatures. Like other articles, it provides the directions for an op-ed assignment. But unlike other articles, it provides explicit rules that students can use to improve their op-eds. With these rules in hand, students no longer have to decide which rules to apply from a very large book. Instead, this paper gives students eight rules to follow. These rules enable students to spot writing problems and then to correct them.

Classroom Assignment

I break my op-ed assignment into three parts. The directions for the first two parts appear in Appendix A (the third part of the assignment requires students to make the changes

called for in the peer reviews and to hand in their final drafts). In the first assignment, the students pick two topics. Each topic must identify an economic concept and identify how it can provide insight into a problem or insight into the likely effect of a proposed policy. I look at their topics and tell them which one they should use. If they do not have a good topic, I suggest one that is closely related to one of their proposed topics.

In the second assignment, the students write their first drafts of their op-eds. This assignment specifies the topic of each of the op-ed's six paragraphs. I have found that students have a much easier time writing coherent op-eds when I give them this road map. This roadmap also makes the project less intimidating. Now students only have six small tasks to complete (writing six paragraphs) rather than one large task (writing an entire op-ed).

Peer Review Exercises

Eight peer-review exercises appear below.

1. Be concise

A. Underline each "is, are, was, were and will be."

Your op-ed can include no more than two of these words. Why? Because they fail to convey action, like a verb should. By removing the aforementioned words, you can often say what you mean in a more direct manner.

B. Rewrite your sentences removing the words I just identified. Your new sentences should use strong verbs that capture the action embodied in your sentences. See below for some examples of how to perform this exercise. The sentence that needs revision appears after the label *Bad* and the revised sentence appears after the label *Better*.ⁱⁱⁱ

(*Bad*) Pat is spending his money to buy an ice cream cone.

(*Better*) Pat *purchases* an ice cream cone.

(*Bad*) There was money in the hands of all of the merchants.

(*Better*) All merchants *held* money.

In the first case, I replaced "is spending his money" with "purchases." In the second case, I replaced "was money in the hands" with "held money." Both revisions make the sentences shorter and more direct.

I do need to make one qualification. You will remember, I mentioned that you can use the aforementioned words (*is, are, was, were* and *will be*) twice in your op-ed. I make this exception because these words work well in definitions. For example, my use of *is* in the following definition is acceptable: Economics is the study of choices and their consequences.^{iv}

2. Keep action in verbs; Have identifiable subjects

A. In each sentence, underline the subjects and then circle or highlight the verbs (In my examples, I will bold the verbs rather than highlight them).

B. For every sentence make sure the subject identifies a person, a group, or something capable of action. Make sure the verb describes an action, a movement, a mental process, a relationship, or a condition.^v When a sentence fails to follow these rules, rewrite it so that it does. Consider the following sentence labeled *Bad*.

(*Bad*) The lack of money **prevented** the *purchase* of anything but the cheapest television.

This sentence has two problems. First, *lack* and *purchase* are nouns, but they embody the action of the sentence, so they should be verbs.

Second, the sentence fails to mention who purchased the inexpensive television. The subject should contain this information.

The sentence below, labeled *Better*, corrects these two problems.

(*Better*) Because we **lacked** money, we **purchased** the cheapest television.

We is the subject. *Lacked* and *purchased* are verbs. They describe actions.

The next sentence labeled *Bad* makes the same mistakes that the previous *Bad* sentence did

(*Bad*) Fewer iPhone purchases **are made** in response to an *increase* in the phone's price.

You will notice that the action appears in the nouns (*purchases* and *increase*) and the sentence never says who makes purchases. *Purchases* and *increase* should be verbs since they convey the action in the sentence. The sentence labeled *Better* corrects these issues.

(Better) When iPhone prices **increase**, people **buy** fewer of them.

In this formulation, the reader will understand who or what performed the action (prices and people) and what they did (prices increase and people buy).^{vi}

3. Keep subject and verb close to each other

A. Underline the subjects and highlight or circle the verbs in each sentence.

B. Make sure the verb directly follows the subject. You **can** retain words like *will*, *can*, *might*, and *just* (like I **just** did). If the subject and verb are separated, rewrite the sentence so they are cojoined.

Notice that in the last exercise in the revised sentence (repeated below), the verbs followed right after the subjects (prices increase and people buy).

When iPhone prices **increase**, people **buy** fewer of them.

Here is an example of a sentence that you would have to rewrite.

(Bad) The Federal Reserve, last Wednesday afternoon, because there was a recession, **increased** the money supply.

Notice how the subject and verb are separated in the following sentence. Such a long interruption makes it harder for the reader to understand the connection between the subject and the verb.^{vii}

As seen below, the revised version is clearer because the reader can more readily see the link between the subject and the verb.

(Better) Last Wednesday afternoon, because there was a recession, the Federal Reserve **increased** the money supply.

4. Get rid of negatives

A. Underline every negative word such as *not* and *none*. We will try to get rid of these words because they confuse readers. They force readers to work hard to read your passage since readers must think of a relationship and then the opposite of that relationship – a two-step mental process.

B. Rewrite the sentence to avoid using negative words. The resulting sentence will be easier to read. Now, the reader only has to go through a one-step mental process. Here are some examples of sentences that should be rewritten as well as revisions that eliminate the negative words.^{viii}

(*Bad*) We did not go outside.

(*Better*) We stayed inside.

(*Bad*) You should not use negative words.

(*Better*) You should avoid using negative words.

5. Create a sense of flow (cohesion).

A. In each sentence, beginning with the second sentence of each paragraph, underline the old information. Determine whether it comes in the beginning, middle, or end of the sentence. If it appears in the middle or end, rewrite the sentence and the previous sentence (if necessary) to create a better flow.

A sentence should begin with the old and familiar and move to the new. The first pair of sentences below violates this rule and the second pair of sentences follows it.

(*Bad*) Economists focus their research questions on issues involving **markets**. The arrangement that allows buyers and sellers to come together to make transactions is a market.

(*Better*) Economists focus their research questions on issues involving **markets**. A market is an arrangement that allows buyers and sellers to come together to make transactions.

Compare these two pairs of sentences. You can move from one sentence to the next one more easily in the second sequence of sentences. Since the reader already read about markets, do not wait to introduce it in the second sentence.^{ix}

6. End sentences with complex material

A. Underline the complex material in a sentence. When the complex material fails to appear at the end of a sentence, rewrite the sentence so it does.

Readers can understand complex material better if it comes at the end of a sentence. This complex material includes information the reader did not see coming or information that they will struggle to understand (like a list).^x

(Bad) Prices, output decisions, and lives' choices have become the focus of what economists study.

(Better) Economists study prices, output decisions, and lives' choices

Notice how much easier the second sentence is to follow.

7. Consistent subjects in a paragraph

A. Underline the subject of each sentence. In each paragraph, determine whether the subjects are as consistent as they could be? Revise if necessary.^{xi}

If three sentences have the following subjects, the reader might have a hard time understanding the material.

(Bad) Prices, Economists, research results

If you rewrote the three sentences with the following subjects, the reader would have an easier time understanding your prose.

(Better) Economists, they, researchers

Here are three sentences with inconsistent subjects.

(*Bad*) The county fair attracts customers from six different counties. Over 100 miles was traveled by one customer to attend the fair. Two hundred feet was traveled by another person.

The subjects are fair, over 100 miles, and two hundred feet. Because these subjects are so different, the reader will struggle to understand the passage. Below is a revision with a consistent subject [consumer(s)], which makes it easy for the reader to follow the passage.

(*Better*) Consumers gather from six different counties to attend the county fair. One consumer traveled over 100 miles to attend the fair. Another consumer traveled only 200 feet.

8. Keep like ideas together

A. Underline the topic sentence of each paragraph. A topic sentence is the main point of a paragraph.

B. Put a Y (for Yes) over each sentence that seems to be on the same subject as the topic sentence. Then, put an N (for No) over each sentence that does not seem to belong in the same paragraph as the topic sentence. This exercise helps identify and correct a major problem with student writing.^{xii} Students often mention the same ideas in several paragraphs, but never really thoroughly develop the ideas of their paragraphs. This exercise helps a student group like ideas within the same paragraph.

Discussion of What's Next

After the student peer reviews and after my edits, I determine which op-eds are good enough to make the short list. In my general education class, I encourage all of the students, whose assignments made the short list, to submit their op-eds to their hometown newspapers, using an email account other than their school account. Local newspapers usually only publish op-eds from people who can list a home address from the area the newspaper serves. Because of these limits on who can successfully submit op-eds, these local papers offer students the best chance to get their op-eds published. If the local paper does not publish their op-eds, or if they come from a town without a local paper, I encourage the students to pare down their op-eds and submit them, as letters to the editor, to the state's most prominent newspaper. The leading state paper is an excellent outlet, in part, because it makes rapid decisions about whether it will publish the letters. This paper also notifies the writer if it plans to print the letter. In contrast, local newspapers just print the submissions, leaving students to learn of their publications from relatives who read the paper. Consequently, I ask students to have their relatives keep an eye out for their articles.

I also found a way to overcome the problem that a student could get a letter or op-ed published but never bother to let me know about the publication. To solve this issue, I gave students an incentive to let me know that their op-eds have been published. More specifically, I gave students extra credit if they sent me a copy of their op-eds as they appeared in the newspaper.

Conclusion

My writing program helps students obtain unusual accomplishments that serve several purposes. It gives students something unique to discuss in a job interview. It gives them an opportunity to showcase their work that has achieved an outside verification on its quality. Finally, the program creates a lot of goodwill for the students' universities or colleges. The students' family members get very excited to see their relative's name in the newspaper. The family usually ends up buying several hard copies of the paper. In discussing the student achievement, the family ends up engaging in very positive word-of-mouth promotion for the student's institution of higher education.

The peer review exercises outlined in this paper represent a portion of my writing program that other professors can easily adopt and make part of their own writing programs. These exercises reduce the effort professors have to expend on editing student work so that it reaches publishable quality. Hopefully, with a lower cost of administering a writing program, more professors will see the advantage of establishing such a program. To give these professors an idea of how students use my exercises, Appendix B provides examples of student writing that followed the advice found in my exercises.

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Appendix A: Writing Assignments

First assignment

Make a list of 2 topics for your op-ed. For each topic include the problem / issue you want to address or an event you want to analyze. That is, identify a policy, a proposal, or an event that caused the problem or created a net benefit. For each topic, identify an economic concept that relates to the problem or event. You can cover each topic in 2 or 3 sentences.

I will let you know which of your two topics you should use. In your next assignment, you will hand in a draft of your op-ed on this topic.

Second assignment

Each student will write an op-ed. Your op-ed should be around 450 - 600 words. In your op-ed you will pick an economic concept, explain it in everyday language, and use the concept to explain a problem and to inform a proposed policy solution. Some economics concepts that you might want to consider include: supply and demand, cost-benefit analysis, negative externality, positive externality, and comparative advantage.

Make sure you use data or cite research in your first paragraph. The method of citing research or statistics is informal and might look like this: According to research by Harvard professor Bubba Gump,; According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics,

We will be doing peer reviews on Monday (in person class) and a self-review in the online class.

Bring four hard copies of your op-ed to class. Your classmates will write on these copies when they do peer reviews of your work. Here is an outline for your final op-ed.

Paragraph 1 (short paragraph)

Identify a problem. Describe the problem. Explain why the problem is an important issue and how it affects society's or an individual's welfare. Make sure you give some evidence (statistics or research findings) to support your claim that the issue is a problem. Examples of problems might include: global warming; overfishing; too much a specific type of pollutant; people not getting enough vaccines; trade subsidies encouraging inefficient production; and tariffs decreasing wealth.

Paragraph 2 (paragraph)

In everyday language explain the economic concept that you will use in your analysis. Explain how this economic concept can give insight into the problem.

Paragraph 3

Either 1) identify an actual or proposed policy that is meant to solve the problem or 2) identify a policy or event that caused or remedied the problem. Explain the policy or event. Explain how it relates to the economic concept in the previous paragraph.

Paragraph 4

Who benefits from the policy (or event)? Explain how the policy benefits these people. Make sure you include the obvious benefits and the unintended or less obvious benefits -- if there are any. For example, a policy that offers free flu shots helps the person getting the shot as well as the people who come in contact with this person. Explain how (use statistics here to support your claims).

Paragraph 5

Discuss the obvious costs of the policy (or event). Also discuss the unintended or less obvious costs of the proposed policy – if there are any. Be sure to explain how the policy changes incentives in a way that harms some groups. Identify these groups and explain how the policy affects them [use statistics to support your claim].

Note on paragraphs 4 and 5: Most likely, besides the obvious benefits and costs, you will either have an unintended (or less obvious) benefit or an unintended (or less obvious) cost to discuss, but not both. For instance, negative externalities have an unintended cost, while positive externalities have an unintended benefit. You should include the most important unintended consequence in your discussion.

Paragraph 6 (short paragraph)

Make a recommendation concerning the policy (or event) based on the benefits and costs you discussed in the previous two paragraphs. For instance, you may want to discuss whether the policy should be adopted, continued, modified, or repealed.

Appendix B: Examples of Students Work

1) Be concise

In the sentence below, Jennifer does a nice job avoiding the use of “is.”

Her sentence appears below as does a sentence that I wrote that includes an “is.” I added the words in italics to enhance the sentence’s clarity.

Jennifer Tenday, U.S. Huawei Ban, *Log Cabin Democrat*, January 5, 2020

(Better) The American government **fears** that its equipment could be used by the Chinese government to spy on other countries and *on U.S.* companies.

(Bad) The American government **is afraid** that its ...

2) Keep action in verbs; Have identifiable subjects

In Brandon's sentence, we can easily identify the subject (families). The action of the sentence resides in the verb (own). In my revision, ownership is the subject, which is inappropriate since it contains the action of the sentence.

Brandon Hagerla, How much have you saved for retirement? *Log Cabin Democrat*, July 5, 2017

(Better) Many families **own** multiple tablets, laptops, computers, and televisions.

(Bad) The ownership of tablets, laptops, computers, and televisions occurs in many families.

3) Keep subject and verb close together

In the pair of sentences below Blake places the subjects and verbs next to each other. I underlined the subjects and bolded the verbs. I added the words in italics to enhance the sentence's clarity.

Blake McMillan, Homes underwater, *Log Cabin Democrat*, December 12, 2018.

FEMA **runs** the National Flood Insurance program (NFIP), which seeks to provide affordable insurance for homeowners in flood prone areas. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) **reported** that in 2016 the median premium was roughly \$520 per year, but the Property Casualty Insurers Association of America **estimates** that equivalent *private sector* premiums should cost two to three times that amount.

4) Get rid of negatives

Jacob avoided using a negative in the sentence below by writing "always be aware of." I rewrote his passage to include a negative, which makes the reader work too hard.

Jacob Thomas, The Cost of Going Digital, *Log Cabin Democrat*, March 29, 2017.

(Better) I love video games. It's been a passion of mine since I was six years old, but as much as I love to watch and play video games, I must always be aware of the costs of this rather expensive hobby.

(Bad) I love video games. It's been a passion of mine since I was six years old, but as much as I love to watch and play video games, I must never forget the costs of this rather expensive hobby.

5) Create a sense of flow (cohesion)

Hannah Malone, May 2023, unpublished

In the pair of sentences below, Hannah does a nice job of starting the second sentence with information that ended the first sentence. By doing this, she created a cohesive flow to her writing.

Pharmaceutical research and development can best be studied using cost-benefit analysis. The **cost-benefit model** assumes that when making decisions, people are self-interested and try to efficiently use their resources and knowledge to reach their goals.

6) End sentence with complex material

Makayla ends her sentence with a list. By placing the complex material at the end of the sentence, she made her sentence easily understandable. I rewrote her sentence so that the list comes at the beginning of the sentence. Readers will struggle more to understand my sentence than they will to understand her sentence.

Makayla Palmer, Is chronic wasting disease more than just a danger to the ecosystem? *Log Cabin Democrat*, December 26, 2018.

(Better) Chronic wasting disease (CWD) causes deer and elk's brains to degenerate leading to severe weight loss, abnormal behavior, and ultimately death.

(Bad) Severe weight loss, abnormal behavior, and ultimately death await the deer and elk with chronic wasting disease.

7) Consistent subjects in a paragraph

Oscar consistently uses "you" as his subjects in the following paragraph. Do note, however, that in the second sentence, he places the you in the dependent clause and implies it in the independent clause. Because Oscar has a single actor throughout his paragraph, the reader has an easy time understanding his prose.^{xiii}

Oscar Nieves, Hot Stocks and Stock Pickers, *Log Cabin Democrat*, June 13, 2018.

You shouldn't believe what "stock market experts" on TV tell you. Next time, when **you** stumble upon Jim Cramer, don't put any weight on the advice he gives about which stocks to buy and sell, rather watch the show for entertainment. In the long run, **you** will be better off investing in index funds that mirror the stock market, as **you** will take luck out of the picture ...

8) Keep like ideas together

All of the sentences in Alison's paragraph stay on one topic. These sentences cover more specific information as they progress through the paragraph.

Allison Archer, Dry Counties, *Log Cabin Democrat*, January 18, 2018.

Alcohol prohibition ended in 1933 with the 21st amendment, so why, nearly 85 years later, does southern America have "dry counties?" Many southern states, including Arkansas, have passed laws forbidding the sale of alcoholic beverages in certain "dry" counties. For example, out of Arkansas's 75 counties, 39 of them have banned the selling of alcohol.

Endnotes

ⁱ Thanks to Thomas Snyder, Jacob Bundrick, and an anonymous referee for helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.

ⁱⁱ These books appear on the reference page.

ⁱⁱⁱ Clark, p.19-26 and p.31-35.

^{iv} These words (is, are, ...) also effectively describe a state of being, like when you identify some things as true or "acceptable" as I did in the previous sentence.

^v Williams, p. 49.

^{vi} See Williams, p. and Goldberg, p.148.

^{vii} Williams, p. 41-99.

^{viii} See Pinker, p. 172-178.

^{ix} See Williams, p.102-4.

^x Williams, p. 140-146.

^{xi} Pinker, p. 139-186.

^{xii} For exercises like this one, see Williams (1997).

^{xiii} You will notice that Oscar violates rule four about avoiding negatives. His writing only provides an example of how to comply with rule seven.