How to Write Well

When I was CEA chair, I sent the following guidelines to my staff as they started drafting the Economic Report of the President. A friend recently emailed me a copy, and I thought I would share them with blog readers. They are good rules of thumb, especially for economists writing for a general audience.

ERP Writing Guidelines

- Stay focused. Remember the take-away points you want the reader to remember. If some material is irrelevant to these points, it should probably be cut.
- Keep sentences short. Short words are better than long words. Monosyllabic words are best.
- The passive voice is avoided by good writers.
- Positive statements are more persuasive than normative statements.
- Use adverbs sparingly.
- Avoid jargon. Any word you don’t read regularly in a newspaper is suspect.
- Never make up your own acronyms.
- Avoid unnecessary words. For instance, in most cases, change o “in order to” to “to”
  o “whether or not” to “whether”
  o “is equal to” to “equals”
- Avoid “of course,” “clearly,” and “obviously.” Clearly, if something is obvious, that fact will, of course, be obvious to the reader.
- The word “very” is very often very unnecessary.
- Keep your writing self-contained. Frequent references to other works, or to things that have come before or will come later, can be distracting.
- Put details and digressions in footnotes. Then delete the footnotes.
- To mere mortals, a graphic metaphor, a compelling anecdote, or...
a striking fact is worth a thousand articles in Econometrica.

- Keep your writing personal. Remind readers how economics affects their lives.
- Remember two basic rules of economic usage:
  - “Long run” (without a hyphen) is a noun. “Long-run” (with a hyphen) is an adjective. Same with “short(-)run.”
  - “Saving” (without a terminal s) is a flow. “Savings” (with a terminal s) is a stock.
- Buy a copy of Strunk and White’s Elements of Style. Also, William Zinsser’s On Writing Well. Read them—again and again and again.
- Keep it simple. Think of your reader as being your college roommate who majored in English literature. Assume he has never taken an economics course, or if he did, he used the wrong textbook.

U.S.?  

ADVICE FOR STUDENTS

Advice for Aspiring Economists  
Where do economists come from?  
Choosing a Graduate Program  
Advice for Grad Students  
Advice for New Junior Faculty  
Which math courses?  
Why Aspiring Economists Need Math  
Love Econ, Bad at Math  
Summer Reading List  
JD vs PhD: My Story  
My Life as a Student  
PhD or not?  
Education Beyond the Classroom  
An engineer seeks career advice  
A Question about Learning Economics  
Good Academic, Bad Human Being  
Are B-school economists different?  
How to Write Well  

PRINCIPLES OF ECONOMICS

Translated  
Animated  
Rap Version  
Acrostic Version  

A FEW TIMELESS POSTS

A Must Read  
The Pigou Club Manifesto  
Resolutions for Another New Year  
Outsourcing Redux  
How do the right and left differ?  
How to Decentralize Monetary Policy  
On Inequality  
How to Recapitalize the Financial System  
My Personal Work Incentives