Summer School in Public Economics

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Session IX

Doing Research and Publishing in Public Economics

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Overview

- Selecting or choosing a research topic
- Conducting the research – choosing a methodology
- Writing the paper
- Submitting the paper – where?
- Dealing with the journal (and the editor)
- Conclusions: Some final considerations

Research Topics and Ideas

- Read the literature.
  - Know what has – and has not – been done
  - Identify gaps – empirical technique, new theory, and so on
- Keep a "file" with research ideas/thoughts/musings.
- Discuss with colleagues (junior or senior).
  - Co-authored work
  - Insight that you will undertake yourself
  - Mentor?
- Identify a policy issue.
  - Public Economics is often driven by policy problems – read the newspapers.
- Be wary of writing "Comments".

Conducting the Research

- Empirical Methodology: Data
  - Field data – available and accessible?
  - Experimental data – Jim Cox on how to conduct experimental research
  - Survey data – specific purpose survey (Deaton)
  - Anecdotal evidence
- Requesting Data
  - Published work – convention
  - Public but restricted use data (e.g., National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), Current Population Survey (CPS), High School And Beyond, Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID),…)

Writing the Paper

- Writing well – a key element
  - Write a good "Introduction" – this motivates and sells the paper.
  - Emphasize the good points – papers are often rejected for weak parts even when some parts are good. If you are unsure, ask someone or drop the material.
  - Be clear in your exposition.
  - Be careful in reporting empirical results.
  - Write a good "Conclusions" – this ties the paper results back to the Introduction and emphasizes its contribution.
  - For strategic reasons, give some thought to whom you cite (and the journals that are cited).

After Paper is a Draft

Note: we are talking about an **advanced** draft.

- Send to colleagues for comment.
- Present at conferences or seminars.
- Revise based on comments
- Then submit.

→ Where to submit?

Submission Strategies

- All journals have an interest or a special focus.
  - Cues: papers you cite, recent papers published by the journal (but check to see if editorship has changed).
  - Think "general interest" versus "field" journal – where does your paper fit?
- Have a submission "tree" (plan).
  - Try for the highest ranked journal you think you have a reasonable chance and have the next journal picked.
  - The "tree" will keep you from being discouraged when the paper is rejected

Submission Strategies

Some journals and their focus

Journal	Weight	Focus	Median Pages
J. Pub. Econ	0.50	0.40	21
Nat. Tax Journal	0.23	0.38	16
Economic Inquiry	0.23	0.18	14
Pub. Fin. Review	N/A	0.85	12
J. Political Econ.	0.74	0.13	27
Am. Econ. Rev.	0.58	0.14	7
Public Choice	0.17	0.57	17
Int. Tax and Pub. Fin.	N/A	N/A	12
KYKLOS	N/A	0.51	13
Pub. Fin./Finances Publiques	N/A	0.73	12
FinanzArchiv	N/A	0.66	8
European J. Political Econ.	N/A	0.30	15

Submission Strategies

Journal Lag Times:

Selected Data

Journal	Average for 1999 (months)
AER	21
JPE	20
QJE	13
J. Pub. Econ.	9.9 (not final review)
J. Law & Econ.	14.8
Econ. Inquiry	13.0
Econ J.	18.2 (not final review)
J. Acct. & Econ.	11.5 (not final review)

Submission Strategies

- Submission Tree – most papers are not published in the first journal to which they are submitted – the average estimate (Azar) is 3 – 6 journals.
- Lags are cumulative.
- The first published article on a topic acquires a significant advantage.
- Decision tradeoff: submit high and risk being "scooped" if paper is rejected (after a long wait) versus submit lower to get paper out first and more quickly?

Journal Strategies

- Editor's decision to reject outright ("desk reject") or to send out for review
- Given a review, editor's choice of referees
  - Look at acknowledgements?
  - Look at references
  - Internet search of "topics"
  - "Editorial Express"
- Single-blind versus Double-blind versus No-blind

Journal Strategies (cont.)

Types of Editorial Responses:

- "Accept" – rare in the first instance
- "Reject" – very common
  - Rejections can be nasty: "Sir your manuscript is both good and original. Unfortunately that part that is good is not original and that part that is original is not good." Samuel Johnson
- "Invitation to revise-resubmit" – somewhat more common
  - Strong R&R – no guarantee but high probability
  - Weak R&R – lower probability

Next Step

Outright rejection – don't get discouraged!

- Read the comments objectively and dispassionately and optimistically – decide whether to revise or just submit elsewhere as is.
- Is the paper badly flawed? Perhaps you missed some major issue and now it is apparent to you. Burn the paper?
- Seek the advice of a colleague.
- Here is where it is good to have more than one research project ongoing.

Next Step

Revision requested – be ready to do some work

- Evaluate the strength of the invitation to revise & resubmit – is it a weak R&R? Do you revise or go elsewhere? Seek advice.
- Follow the comments and do what makes sense to you or what you can do.
- Enclose a detailed response to the reviewer (and the editor) outlining what you have done and have not done (and why).
- Know that if you do not do everything there is a good chance the paper will be rejected – an invitation to *revise* is just that.
- Conflicting referee reports – what to do?

Next Step

- Accepted paper
  - First – rejoice!
  - Second – meet the style guide instructions.
  - Third – do *not* immediately send another paper to the same editor (journal).
  - Fourth – get on with your work. Publishing reminds people that you can and so more will be expected.

Journals: Do Not do These Things

- Do not send a letter to the editor complaining the referees are idiots.
  - Do not send a letter to the *editor* complaining that the *co-editor* is an idiot.
- If you find an editor that seems to like your work, resist the temptation to send a lot of papers there – even your friends won't always be able to find room.
- Do not try to publish essentially the same material more than once.
  - The MPU phenomenon

Journals: Do These Things

- It is OK to send a query if your paper has been there a while without response (say, 6 months).
  - But make sure that you are not delinquent in your own reviewing, especially for this journal.
- If an editor asks you to review a paper AND it is in your field, say "yes".
  - Review promptly and carefully – you will learn what makes good and bad papers.
  - Be constructive in your report.
  - Try to find a reason to accept, not just to reject – you will be in limited company.
  - Do *not* put a recommendation in the report – save this for the cover letter to the editor.

Conclusions: Some final considerations

- Sole-authored versus co-authored papers?
- Many "small" papers versus fewer "big" papers?
- Independent contributions versus comments?
- Top journals versus lower-ranked journals?
- General interest versus field journals?
- Theory versus empirical versus experimental versus…?

Remember:

- An article cannot get published if it is not written.
- An article cannot get published if it is not submitted.
- Follow a strategy in submission.
- Be prepared for rejection.
- R&Rs go the top of the queue – remember to interpret comments objectively and to be fully responsive to the referee comments.
- There is an "optimal" rejection rate for you.

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