

A Model of Economics Writing

Wing Suen

The University of Hong Kong

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This essay expounds a bad habit in economics writing. The remainder of the essay is organized as follows. The introductory paragraph contains an example. The next paragraph is a review of the literature. The third paragraph documents some empirical evidence concerning the extent of the problem in our profession. The busy reader may skip this paragraph without losing any sleep, as the evidence is already embedded in paragraph two. The only reason that I put it in the essay is the editor lets me. Paragraph four provides the main argument of the essay. It explains why the bad habit is bad. Paragraph five extends the earlier paragraph by providing a further argument. In the sixth paragraph, I discuss some possible objections to my thesis. The last paragraph, in case you are in doubt, concludes.

I took a random sample, which happens to be the September 2007 issue, of the *American Economic Review* from my shelf. Approximately 61.90 percent (thirteen out of twenty-one papers, to be more exact) of the articles in that issue contain an obligatory paragraph that purports to help the reader with the structure of the article. The presence of this obligatory paragraph and the length of the article are inversely related: the shorter (longer) the paper, the more (less) likely it is to carry the obligatory paragraph.

[omitted]

The average reader of an economics article has a good understanding of the organization of markets and the organization of firms. (S)he can spot any error in the appendix pages of *Econometrica*. (S)he has sat through numerous PowerPoint® presentations that contain: an introduction, a road map of what is to follow, a preview of the main results, a model, the main results, further results, a review of the main results, a summary of what has transpired, a conclusion, and (five minutes past the hour) still more results that the speaker says he has no time to present. A typical journal paper is twenty-three pages long in the *AER* issue that I examined. Its organization is predictably refreshing: with an introduction, ... [I won't repeat] Does our reader really need that extra help from the obligatory paragraph? The implications for editorial policy should be obvious.

In the event that the reader is not so sure of what lies ahead, he can always flip through the rest of the paper to see the section titles. They are usually printed in boldface to help those of us whose eyesight is failing, and are much less likely to cause digestive troubles.

A perceptive reader may object: If we are so smart, why are we still doing it? Traditional economic analysis would blame it on market failure: journal papers are written for referees rather than final consumers. In any case, recent advances in behavioral economics have established that the question has no bite. An even more perceptive reader may ask: Aren't you just stating the obvious? I thank the reader for raising this question, but a full analysis of the problem is beyond the scope of this essay. In the working paper version of this

essay (Suen [2047], available from the author upon gentle request), I provide a full rebuttal to this objection.

Now I come to my conclusion. This paragraph is not needed because I have already said what I want to say. None the less, I encourage further research to add more noise to this pressing issue.