

# How to choose a topic

ECON 4400

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# Main concern: Feasibility

- All of you have good ideas
- All of you have topics that interest you (and that are interesting to others)

Not all good and interesting ideas can be turn into a research paper

- There is an apocryphal quote from Nobel price winner that might be useful:

*“I don't have better ideas than any other person...*

*I am better at getting rid of the bad ones ”*

- Ideas are not good if you cannot make them into papers

# What makes an idea feasible?

## How to test for feasibility

### 1. Honesty

- Can I do this? (Answering this is harder than you might think)
- Am I willing to do this? (Decisions have —opportunity—costs )
- This is not a question of your intellectual abilities.

You are finishing the honours program. Many of you are double majors. You have the potential to pursue your ideas.

- This is a question of you and your environment.

How much time do you have? Do you have a space to work? How many classes are you taking? Do you have a job? Who are you working with?

# What makes an idea feasible?

## How to test for feasibility

### 2. Has it been done before?

- Do not reinvent the wheel! (truth is it has almost certainly been done before)
- Finding a reference paper is **key**
  - There is always a paper that does \*almost\* what you want
  - Finding the paper shows that what you want to do is possible
  - Clarifies to others what you want to do (what is different and what is the same)
- The structure of good papers is already known: Follow the template!

# What makes an idea feasible?

## How to test for feasibility

### 3. What do I need to get the best version of my idea?

- Having a plan is **key**
- Again, reference paper will give you most of the answer
- This can involve data, econometric technics, coding requirements, theory exercises.

# More concerns: Where to find ideas

- Best bet: The internet!
  - But... how to find them... the internet is vast
- How to aim in the internet?
  - Find a reference paper first! (It does not have to be the ultimate reference)
  - From that paper go in various directions:
    1. Authors (go to the authors' websites)
    2. References (who are the authors citing?)
    3. Citations (who are citing the paper?)

[scholar.google.com](http://scholar.google.com) or [connectedpapers.com](http://connectedpapers.com)

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  - Find review articles
  - Two good sources:
    1. Journal of Economic Perspectives: <https://www.aeaweb.org/journals/jep/issues>
    2. Annual Reviews of Economics: <https://www.annualreviews.org/loi/economics>

# How to write?

**It won't be easy, and it will take time**

1. No substitute for time and revisions
2. You **will not do it right at first** that is normal, writing is **hard**
3. **Best resource I have found:**
  - “the little book of research writing” by Varanya Chaubey
  - I strongly suggest you find a copy (~26 dollars on Amazon)
  - Read it, it will be worthwhile (and short). Lessons beyond this course.
4. Honorable mentions: Presentations and visualization by Jonathan Schwabish



# How to best ask for help?

**We are here to help (remember that)**

- 1. Prepare:** Don't wing the office hours (it won't go well)
- 2. Use references:** Drawing similarities with other work (papers) frames the discussion
- 3. Frame your question:** Is it a literature question? An interpretation question? A model question? A computational question? A data gathering/processing question? etc.
- 4. Have you tried emailing us about it?**
- 5. Ask! (Seriously, don't wait... ask!)**

# Some examples

## 1. Alice Wu's Senior Thesis

- Use text analysis and web-scraping to analyze the language used in an online forum about the economics profession.
- Evidence of flagrant misogyny that plagues our field
- Paper is short but execution is clean and idea is novel
- Recent application of this to teachers' evaluations in Colombia
- More on teachers' evals by Professor Boring (real name): paper 1, paper 2

# Some examples

## 2. Beyond GDP: Welfare measures across geography

- Base paper is by Charles Jones and Pete Klenow from Stanford
- Idea is to use simple model and careful measurement to go beyond GDP comparisons across countries
- Elena Falchetti and Vegard Nygard apply this idea to States in the USA
  - Their website has a draft+slides+summary

# Some examples

## 3. Many papers using SIR/SIER models to talk about the pandemic

- Look for papers with good replication codes
  - Simon Mongey, Benjamin Moll, Andrew Atkeson are good examples
- Careful not to just “replicate” what they did
  - Ask yourself: what is **new** about my covid paper?