

Writing History-of-Economic-Thought Papers

A Handout from the EcoTeach Center, Duke University

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The history of economic thought (sometimes called the history of economics) is concerned with the history of the discipline of economics—the history of economic ideas, of economic methodology, of economic practice. How, and why, has economics become so mathematical? What accounts for the rise and influence of the Chicago school (Friedman, Becker, et al.)? What are the origins of rational choice theory? How did the labor theory of value change over the nineteenth century? What circumstances attended the composition of Keynes’s *General Theory*? To what degree did the French economists of the eighteenth century influence John Stuart Mill? Just what was the *Methodenstreit* all about? What role have funding agencies played in the evolution of the discipline? How did the demand theory we know and love come to be? Practitioners of HET need to be skilled on two fronts: first, they need to know economics, to understand economic concepts and economic methodology; and second, they need to know the tools and techniques of the historian. (Note that HET is *not* economic history. That is, it is not the history of economic institutions or economic activity, such as a history of the Federal Reserve would be, or a history of the changes in tobacco manufacturing. Economic history is a separate subject altogether.)

HET papers rely on two sources of evidence: primary and secondary. Primary evidence refers to the writings of an economist himself, or the writings in which a particular idea was set forth. Primary evidence may be divided into published sources (Keynes’s *General Theory*, for instance) and unpublished sources (e.g., Keynes’s papers in King’s College Library). Secondary evidence refers to other HET papers—articles and books *about* a particular economist or idea. Suppose you wanted to research the rise of the Chicago school. Primary sources would be such things as the minutes of department meetings, department memos, and the writings (published and unpublished) of the people involved (say, Milton Friedman’s autobiographical writings). Your paper, once finished, would constitute a secondary source.

HET papers usually state and support a thesis. A thesis is simply an interpretation or argument that needs to be supported with evidence. The evidence, as indicated above, comes from primary and secondary sources.

Thesis-driven inquiries may begin explicitly with a research question. To what degree did the French economists of the eighteenth century influence John Stuart Mill? The answer would constitute a thesis. Or with only the vaguest notion of a question in the foreground, a thesis may emerge inductively as one reads and rereads—and reads again!—the primary sources. That is, the substance of a thesis may emerge by reading *between the lines* of a text. The substance of the interpretation is then usually implicit, rather than explicit, in the text; it is not plainly evi-

dent to the casual or superficial reader. Whatever the thesis is, and however it was determined, it is usually stated in the introduction of the paper.

In *The Craft of Research*, Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams rank three kinds of thesis statements according to their significance. The least significant is a thesis that further confirms what others have consistently argued. Next in significance is the thesis that helps clear up a puzzling, uncertain, or otherwise vexing issue. Those two are by far the kinds of theses that the vast majority of HET projects (indeed, that the vast majority of research projects in general) advance. Far, *far* less common, but greatest in significance, is the thesis that causes scholars to completely reconsider an issue long thought settled.

Introductions to HET papers usually present certain pieces of information: what the paper is about, what is new or valuable about the paper, what the thesis of the paper is. The body of the paper is by far the longest part. It is where you present your evidence that supports your thesis. In many HET papers, the body begins by setting the historical context for the topic you are about to discuss. It then usually moves on to consider the evidence you have gathered in support of your thesis. It is usually helpful to readers to point out the way in which the evidence you present supports the thesis, rather than letting readers figure it out for themselves.

Conclusions to HET papers are often brief—one, two, perhaps three paragraphs. And whereas in introductions you usually build up to your thesis statement, in conclusions you usually *begin* with it. The conclusion is your chance to sum up your argument in a clear and concise manner, and in a way that does not simply repeat, word for word, what has been already said. It is also the place to suggest other lines of inquiry or broader implications of the topic and findings that you didn't have to space to explore. The conclusion helps answer the question, "So what?" In any event, it should not essentially repeat the opening paragraph or simply restate the theme and findings.

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