

Purdue University · Department of Agricultural Economics
AGEC 640: Agricultural Development and Policy (Fall 2018)

Guidelines for the Course Project

A key feature of this class is the course project, which for most students should be a detailed literature review of 15-20 pages. Some students may already have access to interesting data and an appropriate method; if so, you may wish to produce an original research paper. For most students, however, it is most productive to use the project to review the scholarly literature on a subject of interest to you. Each step outlined below will help you to build key skills that complement each other. These skills will prove to be extremely valuable to you as a graduate student and in subsequent professional life.

Step 1: Choose a topic. Begin with a question. *What explains X? How does A relate to B? What is the empirical evidence regarding the economic impacts of policy Z?* Starting with a question helps you to focus. Some of you might decide to do your project on the same theme as other work you are pursuing, for example as part of your research assistantship. That's fine and can help you to specialize and achieve a deeper level of analysis. However, sometimes it is preferable to diversify and start research on something new. Either way, with luck the literature review you write for AGECE 640 will become a major part of your future research portfolio – for example, it could become Chapter 2 of your thesis or dissertation. It is also good practice for other choices, requiring both introspection (What do I like? What am I good at doing?) and empirical research (What materials are available to me?). Please email to me a title and one-paragraph description of your preferred topic no later than October 4th. You can do this sooner, if you want to. In fact, if you are struggling to find a topic, and need some feedback, sooner is better than later! A

Step 2: Assemble your sources. Work from the published peer-reviewed literature on your topic. A good scholarly literature review is not like other essays. Its goal is to provide an authoritative description and assessment of previous research, so as to guide decision-makers, and perhaps your own future research on that topic. A key step in graduate school is navigating upstream and downstream in the flow of knowledge. To find original sources quickly, by far the best technology is [google.com/scholar](https://scholar.google.com/), which returns only papers with a formal title, named authors and a bibliography, and ranks search results by their relevance and their authority in terms of subsequent citations. You should actively search out the key papers cited in your sources' bibliographies, and find the papers that cite your sources. The internet has vastly accelerated and expanded the bibliographic search process, and raised expectations about what constitutes competent scholarship. As you collect sources and gradually define the boundaries of your topic, you will begin to see the larger picture. In this way, you can structure the review so that you describe each source clearly and compare its findings to those of the others. Your goal is to build an argument of your own and draw your own conclusions about what the scholarly literature has to say on your topic and the question that motivates your inquiry. For this assignment, 10-20 sources is probably a manageable number. You must submit in class a printed copy of your complete list of citations on November 20th. This deadline is for your benefit: after this date, you should not be searching for new source material, but instead focusing on synthesizing the material at hand. As you work, you should keep an eye out for discoveries that will lead you to refine and possibly redirect your project. Sometimes you will find increasing returns from a narrower specialization, and sometimes you are better off with a broader perspective. If you are finding too many sources, then this is a signal that you've defined your topic too broadly. If you can't find very many sources, then your topic is too narrow. Your goal is to read everything relevant to your topic so you can become an expert on it. If you find that you need to change your topic substantially, you must discuss this with me ahead of time.

Step 3: Organize your thinking. Reading well with efficiency is a difficult task in itself. When looking for material on your topic, you must learn to skim until you see something that relates to what you already know in an interesting way, and then dig into that very carefully. On a given day, you may skim ten articles in an hour, and then spend two hours trying to understand one short paper in its entirety. The trick is to be self-directed, so that you are choosing what to read and how to digest it for the review, and learning to avoid wasting time and mental energy reading things that are irrelevant to your needs. Additionally, it is crucially important that you create a set of directories and file names that allow quick retrieval of your work through this course, graduate school and beyond. These will be used on your flash drives, hard disks, and email folders. A good system will allow you to store and then retrieve hundreds of sources and datasets, as well as your own writing for this and other classes.

Step 4: Write what you read. As you read your sources, remember your goal is not just to understand, but also to communicate. You should aim to transform what you read into your own writing as quickly and efficiently as possible. Type the citation into your bibliography immediately, and write up your summary as quickly as you can. You can always move and rewrite text later. You should consciously imitate the style you see in the best of what you read. For example, top work in economics generally follows a tradition of citation for specific facts or ideas, and also citation for general reference. For example, you can note that such-and-such was first suggested by Smith (1999), or simply state the fact followed by its source (Smith, 1999), or you can say that Smith (1999) was a prominent contribution to this field. What you should *not* do is attribute to one source something that does not come from there. A common error, for example, would be to say “climate change is an important issue (Smith 1999)” when in fact Smith is only one of many people to have written on this question, and only in a narrow context. The citation convention is the system described here: <http://libweb.anglia.ac.uk/referencing/harvard.htm>. You should try to imitate many other features of your sources including the formats of title pages, charts and tables, footnotes and so forth.

Step 5: Edit what you’ve written. Once your draft is written, you should seize every opportunity to improve it, with the expectation that you will make changes every time you re-read something. Writing is not finished until you’ve run out of time. To improve your writing, one of the best online resources is maintained by Purdue’s English department (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu>). They also provide excellent face-to-face tutoring. For an appointment, call them at 494-3723.

Step 6: Meet the deadline. This project, like many things in academic life, has a deadline. It also requires you to optimize subject to constraints. You will be expected to communicate your project findings in both oral and written formats. A key challenge is to speak and write with brevity and precision. You will have a strict limit on time for the oral presentation (and a maximum of five slides, including the title slide) and a rough limit on the written paper (about 5,000 words, plus charts and tables). I will give you additional instructions along the way. You will need to prepare a standard oral presentation using slides and deliver this in class (on either December 4th or December 6th). The final written paper is due in PDF format and must be delivered to me electronically as an email attachment by 5pm on December 14th. You will find that deadlines for conference paper submissions are rarely if ever extended. Accordingly, the December 14th deadline is firm and I will not accept late papers under any circumstances. Turning in your paper early is fine.