University of Southern California
Econ 700: Applied Microeconomics reading group
Fall 2022

Professor: Fanny Camara
Office hours: by appointment
Lecture: Th 2:00pm-3:30pm

Course Overview and Requirements

The primary goal of this reading group is to help students advance their research from the idea-generation phase to the paper-writing phase. The group will meet once a week and students will present their research in a **short presentation** format. Presentations will be scheduled ahead of time using a google spreadsheet (link) where students will update their titles as their presentation slots approach. Students will submit a **one-page research proposal** to both professors every time they are scheduled to present. Individual presentations will be followed by questions and feedback from faculty and students. The format of presentation and feedback will change over the course of the semester as each student identifies a promising research idea that merits further development. At the end of the semester a report will be issued giving comprehensive feedback on the relative strengths of the research proposals presented.

Presentation Format

Students will present either every other week or every fourth week. **Please make sure to carefully read and adhere to the following presentation guidelines:**

(i) Stick to the time limits described below. In order to do this, you need to practice your talk and time yourself prior to our meeting. If you don't get to the punchline on time, we'll have to skip to the next person due to time constraints. Time keeping duty will rotate among participants in the order they appear in the spreadsheet.

(ii) **Prepare and share slides ahead of time.** In addition to the one-page research proposal, you should have slides prepared to aid your presentation of the idea. See more specifics on presentation format for each phase below.

(iii) **Update the google doc with a title for your idea.** During weeks that you are presenting, there will be an X next to your name on the google doc. You should update that prior to giving your talk by replacing the X with the title of your talk.

Phase 1: Idea generation

Students will present a new idea or a reformulation of a previous idea every meeting. The purpose of this stage will be to tease out promising ideas from non-promising ideas. Ideally, the idea will consist of:

(i) A research question
(ii) A motivation (including key papers in the literature if relevant, as well as a clear statement of the contribution)
(iii) A proposed empirical strategy
(iv) A description of an existing data source that could be used to estimate (iii).

In this phase, students may also choose to present (i) + (ii) + (iii) and a description of an ideal data set (even if they do not know of its existence), a description of a novel data set w/o a research question, or an innovative research question that they would like advice on how to address.

Students will get a maximum of **10 min** (presentations may be shorter) to discuss their idea and will receive feedback for **5 min** for a total of **15 min** per student. A decision will be made on whether the idea is promising or not or on whether the student needs to approach the idea from a different angle. The student will be committed to bring a new idea or improve upon that idea (if some aspect of it was promising) by the following presentation time.

The first time you present an idea, the presentation should start with the research question and a brief motivation. In many cases it is helpful to include a statement on how the idea is different from the closest paper in the literature. The explanation of the empirical strategy should start by a statement of what the identification challenge is (e.g. an unobserved determinant of treatment variable *x,* such as *w*, may also be causing outcome *y*). Then state to what extent the empirical strategy and data you have considered addresses this challenge. At this stage, we expect the empirical strategy to be work in progress, so it need not be perfect.

If you present the same idea more than once, the follow-up presentations will be slightly different depending on the feedback you receive. If the feedback was to reformulate the research question, then the presentation should have a similar format to the first time you presented it. If the feedback was on reformulating the empirical strategy or looking for additional data or a different context, then the presentation should only state the research question, give a brief explanation of context, and quickly move on to whatever is new.

The student will "graduate" from this phase by writing:

(1) half an intro (with research question, motivation, and brief description of empirical strategy)
(2) draft of data and empirical strategy descriptions

Transitioning to Phase 2 will happen on a case by case basis, and students that decide to do so may go back to Phase 1 at any point during the course of the semester. It is absolutely fine to go back to Phase 1, as this is much better than wasting time on a non-promising idea in phase 2.

Phase 2: Idea advancement

Phase 2 will consist of longer time slots every fourth week. Presentations will be scheduled according to time constraints and student input.

To use the time efficiently, students must send the latest version of the Phase 1 draft and slides to all participants at least 2 days in advance (by Tuesday night). All participants should read the drafts of the longer presentations prior to our meeting.

During their presentations, phase 2 presenters should only very briefly summarize their introductory slides under the assumption that the attendance will have read them. They should plan to talk for approximately 15 min including questions from the audience, as well as having a 10 minute “big picture” discussion at the end of their presentation.

Feedback will consist of short comments (mainly addressing presenter’s questions and problems) along the way and feedback at the end for a total of approx. 10 min for a total of 25 min per student. Feedback will have the purpose of defining what the next steps are. Students should take note of these steps as they’ll re-state them (along with progress made on them) on their next presentation.

First time presentations will have roughly the following structure:

(a) State research question/goal (this should take a minute max.)
(b) Discuss empirical results so far.
(c) Discuss challenges and pose questions to the audience.
(d) Get feedback and establish new set of goals for next week.

Follow-up presentations will have roughly the following structure:

(a) State research question/goal (this should take a minute max.)
(b) Update on new results addressing last presentation’s feedback.
(c) Discuss new challenges and pose questions to the audience.
(d) Get feedback and establish new set of goals for next week.

The goals of this stage are:

(1) To establish a narrative for the results (refine the research question, data used, and steps of the empirical strategy to deliver a single “punchline”)
(2) To define the main set of tables that will deliver this narrative and to produce most of these tables.
(3) To start writing a discussion and interpretation of the results.

Grading will have two or three components (depending on your year):

(1) The share of scheduled presentations delivered (with 1 freebie)- 60% (50%)

(2) The extent to which your presentation met the standards given in the syllabus (time limits, format, elements, etc.) – 40% (30%)

(3) There will be an additional requirement that will be binding for third years in their Spring semester and for fourth years in their Fall semester. When binding, the requirement will account for 20% of your grade:

a. Fourth years in their Fall semester will have to submit a quals committee form by the end of the term.

b. Third years in their Spring semester will have to submit a third year paper advisor form by the end of January.