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Evaluating the Written Work of Others: One Way Economics Students Can Learn to Write

Harlan M. Smith II, with Amy Broughton and Jaime Copley

Abstract: The authors present a series of writing assignments that teaches students how to evaluate and critique the written economic work of others. The foundation text is McCloskey's (2000) *Economical Writing*. The students' dialogues with McCloskey, with each other, and with the authors of the pieces they evaluate sharpen their understanding of, and ability to use, language as an instrument of economic thought. Interviews with former students identify specific benefits from the student perspective of this approach. The authors show how the assignment series can be modified in several ways and how the general approach, as well as the foundation text, can be used in different economics courses.

When economists discuss how to promote student learning, particularly at the undergraduate level, the talk often turns to writing. Fels (1984), Crowe and Youga(1986), Cohen and Spencer (1993), Davidson and Gumnior (1993), Petr (1998), McCloskey (2000), and Walstad (2001), among others, emphasize that good economic writing and good economic reasoning go hand-in-hand. Poor economic writing often reflects muddled, unfocused, or illogical economic thinking. One key way instructors can help students learn to think like economists, therefore, is to incorporate written work into the undergraduate curriculum.

A specific type of writing assignment that improves student thinking skills requires students to evaluate and critique the written work of others. To acquire this proficiency, students must sharpen their understanding of, and ability to use, language as an instrument of economic thought. In the process, they develop their ability to think like economists because "the hard business of economic thinking is getting the words straight" (McCloskey 2000, 4). This type of assignment has received scant attention in the literature. Only Grunin and Lindauer (1986) and Hansen (1993; 2001) have discussed such assignments at length. Grunin and Lindauer showed that assignments requiring evaluation force students to interact with, and think independently about, economic arguments. Hansen found the benefits of having students evaluate each other's papers in an upper-level class significant enough to make peer evaluation a "regular feature in other courses" (Hansen 1993, 216). In his 2001 piece, Hansen included three evaluation exercises in the set of 16 writing assignments that promote his six proficiencies. Both Grunin and Lindauer and Hansen (1993) noted that when students must evaluate others' written work, they are forced to develop a skill that they rarely use elsewhere in the curriculum and which, consequently, they are initially uncomfortable exercising.

In this article, I present an integrated set of writing assignments, constructed around McCloskey's *Economical Writing*, designed to develop students' ability to evaluate and critique the written economic work of others. This assignment series puts students in a position to learn for themselves what makes for good writing by helping them internalize a set of standards and criteria that separates, objectively, good writing from bad writing. The individual assignments and how they are graded force students to take responsibility for their own learning and transfer to the students themselves the responsibility for becoming authorities on good writing. Collegiate

instructors of writing Peter Elbow and Kenneth Bruffee discuss the benefits of this approach in, for example, McDonald (2000).

After briefly discussing the course where the students do this work, I lay out the sequential nature of the series assignment and illuminate the structure and goals of each individual assignment. In the process, I discuss the choices I have made, concerning when, where, and how to intervene in the students' learning process. I then interview two students on their experiences with *Economical Writing* and the assignment series. What current and former students think about efforts to help them think and write more clearly is important diagnostic material that can be used to increase teaching effectiveness (Hansen 1993, 2001; Palmmini 1996; Simpson and Carroll 1999).

These interviews present a before-and-after view, from the student perspective, of the effectiveness and usefulness of the assignment series. The first student interviewed is a recent graduate in economics, one of 37 who have completed the assignment series under my guidance. The second student interviewed is a senior economics major who has not yet taken the class in which students complete the assignment series. I explain why I selected each student at the start of their respective interviews.

I conclude by discussing the possibilities for using variants or components of this assignment series in different courses, and I identify alternative assignments that develop students' evaluation skills.

THE ASSIGNMENT SERIES

Senior majors in our program are required to take the Economics Workshop, a two-semester course sequence worth a total of four credit hours. By the end of this sequence, the students are able to:

1. Speak effectively and confidently on economic topics in public situations;
2. Give an effective multimedia presentation on a specific economic topic;
3. Communicate economic ideas effectively in writing; and
4. Evaluate and critique effectively the oral and written work of others.

During the first semester, the students focus on developing their oral communications skills by pursuing objectives 1 and 2, and they learn how to give oral evaluations of speeches made by their peers. The second semester focuses on objective 3 and the writing component of objective 4. The students pursue these two objectives primarily by working through the assignment series highlighted here.¹ A brief summary description of each of the five assignments in the series is shown in Table 1. (A complete set of Assignment Sheets is provided in Appendix 1.)

Assignment 1 is the Reaction Essay. The goals are straightforward: to force the students to read the book and to make them think about what McCloskey is saying.

TABLE 1. The Individual Assignments

Assignment 1: Reaction Essay	Read and react to <i>Economical Writing</i> .
Assignment 2: Classmate Critique	Read, react to, and critique a classmate's Reaction Essay.
Assignment 3: Team Paper	Write a co-authored reaction essay on <i>Economical Writing</i> .
Assignment 4: Economist Evaluation	Read a booklet on how to do economic analysis written by a professional economist for undergraduates. Evaluate in terms of economic content, usefulness, and quality of writing.
Assignment 5: Peer Evaluation	Read a research paper written by a senior economics major of a previous year. Evaluate in terms of economic content and quality of writing.

The second assignment is the Classmate Critique. Each student reads a classmate's Reaction Essay and then critiques it according to specific instructions. The students are thus forced to encounter and react to *Economical Writing* a second time—not by rewriting their original Reaction Essays or by trying to figure out what the instructor thinks about the book—but rather by reading what a peer thinks about McCloskey. In the process, the students begin developing their evaluation skills, albeit in a preliminary way.

Assignment 3 is the Team Paper. The students who read each other's Reaction Essay for the Classmate Critique pair up, and each pair writes a joint Reaction Essay on *Economical Writing*. This assignment forces students to further refine their own thinking on McCloskey through sustained interaction with a peer. As the students translate their joint thinking into prose, they sharpen their writing skills.

After completing the Team Paper, the students are ready to tackle the fourth and fifth assignments, the Economist Evaluation and the Peer Evaluation. The students must now use what they have learned from McCloskey and from the first three assignments to evaluate the written work of others.

Why are evaluation skills a central objective of the assignment series? No matter how much writing instructors ask students to do in the major, and no matter how much written feedback they receive, too few students internalize a set of standards or criteria that separates—in a general, objective sense—good writing from bad writing. Instead, students tend to latch onto writing criteria on a class-by-class basis. In Adkins' class, they ask, "What does Adkins want?" On the basis of their answer to this question, they write their papers. In Johnson's class, the students ask, "What does Johnson want?" and write their papers accordingly. Students' paper-writing activities often take on aspects of a strategic game.

In light of this, I have formed the following hypothesis: Asking students to write, no matter how much, without raising evaluation skills to the status of an end in itself is inefficient if

the goals of a writing program are to help students learn how to think more precisely and to express their thoughts more clearly on the written page. Students begin to make progress toward these goals, however, when they have to evaluate the written work of others. As students learn how to apply objective standards and criteria (e.g., McCloskey's) to written work, they begin to see, in a detached way, what works and what does not. In the process, students come to realize that, as McCloskey (2000, 15) says, "The rules [of good writing] are factual rather than logical."

By evaluating the written work of others, therefore, students learn for themselves what makes good writing. Eventually, they realize that they can apply this knowledge to their own work. Once students learn how to evaluate their own writing in a critical and detached way, on the basis of objective standards and criteria, they will have the tools necessary to teach themselves how to write better. The students will be ready and able to take responsibility for their own learning.

Now consider the Economist Evaluation assignment. The students read *How to Solve Economic Problems* (Paulaha 1994), an instructional how-to-do-economics pamphlet written by an economist for undergraduates. The students must then evaluate this pamphlet in terms of its economic content, its usefulness and quality as a how-to manual, and its quality as a piece of writing.

Why this pamphlet? Paulaha (1994) shows students how to use basic economic principles and the economic way of thinking to identify, frame, and solve economic problems, but he violates many of McCloskey's writing rules. So the students have both economic and writing work to critique as they tackle this assignment; and they do critique. The wide range of thoughtful responses I get each year is exhilarating. The students are indeed sharpening their understanding of, and ability to use, language as an instrument of economic thought.

For the Peer Evaluation, the students read a research paper written by an anonymous senior economics major of a previous year, and then evaluate this paper in terms of its economic content and its quality as a piece of writing. I select a paper that contains both good and bad writing and analysis to make sure that the students have a lot to evaluate critically. Given the wide variety of thoughtful Peer Evaluations I have received during the past two years, I believe that this assignment does indeed help students learn how to think more precisely and to express their thoughts more clearly on the written page.

The instructor faces a dilemma when it comes to the Peer Evaluation and the Economist Evaluation: How much guidance to provide? Should one turn the students loose to develop their evaluations as they see fit? Or should the students be required to use a specific framework? If the latter, how tight or constricting should the framework be? I have chosen a middle way. Although I do not require the students to follow any particular framework as they write their essays, I provide them with a set of questions they are free to use if they want to help themselves organize their thinking (see Appendix 1).

More generally, the instructor must choose a role to play throughout the assignment series. When, where, and how should the instructor facilitate and shape the students' dialogues with McCloskey, with each other, and with the authors of the pieces they evaluate? Because the

goal of the assignment series is to put students in a position to learn for themselves what makes good writing by helping them internalize a set of objective writing standards and criteria, I have chosen to act as a facilitator. I have decided not to lecture the students on writing nor to lead discussions on the required readings but rather to focus my efforts on constructing assignment sheets that will transfer responsibility for learning and the responsibility for becoming an authority on good writing to the students themselves—if they follow the instructions. In grading, I focus on whether the instructions have been followed. When I encounter unclear or illogical thinking at any stage, I provide immediate feedback designed to help students discover what they are trying to say and help them evaluate whether their thinking makes sense. Given the sequential nature of the assignment series, the students take this feedback seriously. They appreciate this feedback as well once they realize that its purpose is to improve their thinking and writing skills.

AN INTERVIEW WITH A RECENT GRADUATE

Amy Broughton graduated, as an economics major, just a few months before doing this interview. She was a solid but average student in our program; her economics GPA was in the B-to-B_ range. She is also dependable. I knew that even though she had graduated and moved on in her life, if she agreed to participate in this project she would follow through to the best of her ability. Amy's perceptions of *Economical Writing* and the assignment series, moreover, are representative of those held by the 37 graduates who have completed the assignment series under my guidance. Evidence to this effect is provided in Appendix 2.

Question. Amy, please introduce yourself by explaining your decision to major in economics and your current future plans.

Answer. I graduated with a bachelor's degree in economics. But I entered college Planning to study biology because my original goal was medical school. I soon discovered, however, that I enjoyed the courses I had to take in the college of business and began thinking about an MBA or law school. After talking with professors and friends about what major would be best, I decided upon economics. I've never regretted this decision, although I'm still not sure what career to pursue. Right now I'm planning on applying to law school. To gain experience and learn about the legal profession, I've just started working for a law firm.

Q. How did completing the assignment series improve your writing?

A. Most students I know sell their textbooks back right after the final exam, or even before the class is over. But it has been almost a year since I first read *Economical Writing*, and I still have the book. I still use it. Each time I read it, I uncover more ideas and tips that I am able to put into practice. I would recommend this book to anyone, not just economics majors.

McCloskey believes that writing, like mathematics, can be learned. She says on page 8 that "It's an evasion to talk of writing as a natural gift, a free lunch from the gods, which some people have and some just don't." While I was in English 101, I would have disagreed with her. I felt the gods had given me the "filet mignon/lobster special" as my free lunch. Little did I realize how wrong I was. I first noticed problems during my second college English class, when my professor told me to write more simply. But it was not until I began working on the assignment series that I realized I had a lot more to learn about writing than I thought. My skills were actually more on the "cheeseburger value-meal" level.

Completing the assignment series helped me improve my writing. I learned to spot mistakes in papers that I otherwise would have thought were perfect. As a result, I am able to express my ideas more clearly. I believe this proves that my thinking is better.

One of my great fears was taking the GMAT, especially when I learned that it contained a writing assessment section. However, I kept the required essays clear and precise, remembering many of McCloskey's tips. When I compared scores with a fellow economics major who had not read *Economical Writing* and had not done the assignments related to the book, I learned that I had done better than he. I was glad I had read the book and learned something from it.

I recently spent six months working for an economics research center. As I put together my reports, I discovered that what I had learned during the assignment series reached far beyond the classroom. McCloskey's tips, I realized, are applicable in the "real world" as well. And I must have learned those tips well, for my writing abilities received praise from my supervisor. I was able to practice good writing.

Q. What five specific tips in *Economical Writing* did you find most helpful, and why?

A. The fifth most important tip in the book, to me, is "Write Early Rather Than Late" (ch. 8). McCloskey makes many good points here. She says to use a note card for each new idea and organize the cards in a manila folder. She also says that an outline will help you in writing a paper. I followed this advice on the GMAT. On scratch paper, I organized my thoughts for each essay. This saved time because I was not stuck on any paragraph. My essays had direction. McCloskey also points out that you should write down an idea as soon as it comes to you because if you wait, you will forget it. I can't count how many times this has happened to me. Usually I can remember some of the idea, but it was never as good as that first thought.

Number four on my list is "Speak to an Audience of Human Beings" (chapter 11). McCloskey says to pick an actual person, or even invent an imaginary reader, and direct your writing to her. This will keep you from writing a paper that doesn't flow. This rule has helped me remember, too, that the point of writing is to be understood by your intended audience. I have learned that if my intended reader can't understand what I've written, I must rewrite my paper until she does.

"Rules Can Help, But Bad Rules Can Hurt" (ch. 3) is number three on my list. I entered college writing the way my high school English teachers had taught me. I made straight A's in high school English, so what could I have been doing wrong? But McCloskey showed me that most of the rules I had learned were incorrect. Instead of making a paper flow, they did just the opposite. McCloskey says that these rules are set by Miss Jones, a fictional eighth grade English teacher. If my education has been at all typical, I'd have to say that many people follow at least some "Miss Jones Rules," perhaps for their entire careers. I had no idea I was using Miss Jones Rules until I read *Economical Writing*.

I rank "Avoid Elegant Variation" (ch. 20) as McCloskey's second most important tip. *Elegant variation* is when different words are used for the same word. Miss Jones preaches that all writers should do this. Her rule is, "do not repeat the same word within three sentences." I followed this rule carefully in every paper I wrote before I tackled the assignment series.

But McCloskey says that varying words elegantly just confuses the reader. She says to use one word to mean one thing. When McCloskey forced me to think about this, I realized that she’s right: another term for *elegant variation* is *confusing variation*. So before doing this interview I looked again at the words you use to describe each assignment and reviewed our agreed-upon terminology. The last thing I want to do here is confuse the reader by using too many different words to describe the assignments. I’d rather be clear, so the reader can understand me, than be elegant to satisfy Miss Jones.

TABLE 2. How Effective Is Each Assignment?

Reaction Essay	* * *
Classmate Critique	*
Team Paper	* * *
Economist Evaluation	* *
Peer Evaluation	* * *

This point leads to the tip I consider to be first and most important: “Be Clear” (ch. 4). McCloskey argues that this is the one genuine golden rule of writing. I agree. You must be clear to be understood. McCloskey’s quotation from the Roman professor of writing, Quintilian, on page 12 really struck me: “. . . write not merely so that the reader *can* understand but so that he cannot possibly *misunderstand*.” I realize now that the most important task of the writer is to make sure the reader understands what the writer is saying. If the reader misunderstands, what has the writer accomplished?

Q. Which individual writing assignments in the series were most effective? Which were least effective? Why?

A. Now you’re asking me to get down to what is, from the student’s perspective, the heart of the matter. In Table 2, I rate each of the assignments by giving them one, two, or three stars (with three being the most effective). I’d like to talk about three of the assignments, one which I found very effective and two that were lacking in some respects.

The fifth assignment in the series, the Peer Evaluation, gets three stars from me. To complete this assignment, I had to evaluate and critique a fellow major’s work. At first I thought I could fly solo, but I flew straight into the pavement. I was therefore grateful for the optional questions you provided as guidance. This guidance enabled me to throw my initial hesitancy away and helped me apply my newly found McCloskey knowledge to the paper. I began to notice where the writing had gaps or faults, and where the paper didn’t flow, thanks to the author’s use of many Miss Jones Rules. By the end of this assignment, I discovered that I was able to use McCloskey’s tips, objectively, to determine how good or bad the paper was in terms of both content and writing. My initial hesitancy and fear turned into a sense of accomplishment.

If I was hesitant about tackling the Peer Evaluation, how do you think I felt about the Economist Evaluation? I never got comfortable using McCloskey’s tips to evaluate *How to Solve Economic Problems*. I also found it hard to evaluate the pamphlet’s economic content. Maybe I had trouble because this was the first time I had to do such an evaluation. Maybe the Peer Evalu-

ation was easier simply because of the struggle I went through to complete the Economist Evaluation.

I give one star to the Classmate Critique. You wanted us to interact with our partners and evaluate their work. Interact I did. Evaluate I didn't. For the most part I felt like I was giving my opinions rather than using McCloskey's tips to evaluate objectively my partner's essay. This assignment, however, did serve as a good bridge between the Reaction Essay and the Team Paper. I learned more about what McCloskey says in *Economical Writing* by considering my partner's reactions to this book and how they differed from mine.

Q. How effective was the assignment series as a whole?

A. I believe that all five assignments were important, and I wouldn't have learned as much without doing them all. Without the Economist Evaluation and the Peer Evaluation, the first three assignments would not have been that helpful. And just doing one of the evaluation exercises was not enough. I needed to do both the Economist Evaluation and the Peer Evaluation to get (somewhat!) comfortable looking at someone else's writing and being objective about it. These two exercises gave me enough practice applying McCloskey's tips that I've since been able to apply them to my own writing. I can now look at my own writing with a "cold eye" (to use McCloskey's phrase) and criticize myself without flinching. As I noted earlier, I'm learning how to practice good writing.

AN INTERVIEW WITH A SOON-TO-BE STUDENT

At the time of her interview, Jaime Copley was a senior economics major who had not yet taken the class in which students complete the assignment series. Nor had she read anything by McCloskey in other previous classes. To prepare for this interview, I asked Jaime to read *Economical Writing* and answer the following questions: What are your initial reactions to, and impressions of, the book? What is the single most important specific lesson contained in *Economical Writing*, and why?

I selected Jaime because, like Amy, Jaime is an average student in our program. Jaime was also willing and able to take on this project outside of class, on top of her other responsibilities. Finally, Jaime was not taking a class from me at the time, nor was she going to complete the assignment series the following semester under my guidance.² Jaime's interview responses, therefore, are not tainted by a conflict of interest.

Q. Jaime, please introduce yourself by explaining your decision to major in economics and your current future plans.

A. As I began my freshman year, I had no idea what I wanted to pursue as a major. In hopes of finding out I took all sorts of introductory courses across many different disciplines. My favorite course turned out to be principles of microeconomics. The instructor encouraged me to think about economics as a major, so in the fall of my sophomore year I took principles of macroeconomics. I discovered that I truly liked economics. After talking more with my first economics instructor and the chair of the department, I decided to become a major. Like Amy, I have never regretted my choice. But I'm still not sure what I want to do after graduation. At this point I'm leaning toward teaching in the public school system.

Q. As you read through *Economical Writing* for the very first time, what were your initial reactions to, and impressions of, the book?

A. Unlike most students entering our college, I had an extensive background in writing. In high school I took three years of journalism. During these years, I held the positions of assistant editor and editor-in-chief of the yearbook. I thought I had an advantage over the average college student in English 101. After I finished McCloskey's book a few weeks ago, however, I thought to myself, "Why have I never even heard of *Economical Writing* before?"

I wish that I had read this book before I had written my first college English paper. McCloskey challenged me to put everything that I had ever learned about writing aside and to think in new ways and to try new techniques. I had always been taught, as Amy just mentioned, the "Miss Jones way": I never ended sentences with prepositions, I never used "I," I never repeated the same word within three lines, and I always said what I was going to say, said it, and then said that I said it. And to think, not only did I learn these techniques in high school, I had been helping to correct others' work in critique sessions based on what I had been taught. I was turning into Miss Jones and I didn't even know it.

Q. In your view, what is the single most important specific lesson you have already learned from *Economical Writing*, and why?

A. McCloskey says that you can never revise enough. As she points out on page 33, some of the best writers work at it the hardest, to make less work for the reader." Hemingway (as quoted in the book) turns this point around by saying that "easy writing makes hard reading." I now agree. But how can the student learn how to revise papers effectively? McCloskey provided me with four specific tips that I believe are extremely helpful.

In chapter 4, McCloskey says that "Reading your own writing cold, a week after drafting it, will show you places where even you *cannot* follow the sense with ease." Like most students, I am a procrastinator. The thought of writing a paper at least one week before it is due is simply unimaginable to the average college student. Anyway, I always thought that I did my best work under pressure. I was wrong. But it was not until this past year that I began writing early and revising at least once before I turned a paper in. I believe this has been a tremendous help to my papers, although I'm sure that some of my professors would still disagree.

The next point I'd like to emphasize is located in chapter 6. It pertains to the three elements of classical rhetoric: invention, arrangement, and style. McCloskey says that invention is framing the arguments worth listening to. This, to me, means outlining. Making an outline of the most important points that you want to write about is a step that most students do not take. They just sit down at the computer and start writing.

Arrangement refers to the placement of the points. In my own writing, I have always had an introduction, statements about my main points, and a conclusion. But McCloskey says that you can experiment with the arrangement of any essay. This would never have occurred to me. The particular way I had been using—the Miss Jones way—had been hammered into my head for so many years that to stray away would have been unthinkable. Until now.

Style is so important that McCloskey dedicated a whole chapter to it. I took her to mean that style is getting your thoughts down on paper and revising, revising, revising until what you

are saying is just right. Once again, the concept of revising is totally foreign to most students. But now that I've tried it, I believe it works.

The third point that caught my attention was on page 30, where McCloskey says that an outline should be used "as an aid, not a master." This surprised me. In the past, on the few occasions when I prepared an outline, I always stuck to it. I never drifted too far away. And it never occurred to me that I could revise my outline. I didn't revise papers, so why would I revise an outline?

Finally, McCloskey says in chapter 24 that "reading out loud is a powerful technique of revision." By reading out loud, you're hearing what the reader is hearing and will be able to make sense of what you have written. I have actually used this particular technique before. During the first semester of the Economics Workshop, which I just completed, I had to do a variety of oral presentations. I learned that without reading your speech out loud before you give it, you could possibly make a complete idiot out of yourself. I couldn't figure out why I hadn't done this for every paper that I had written, not just for my speeches. You can definitely make an idiot out of yourself by turning in a paper that makes no sense.

Now that I have finished the book, there are two big questions in my mind: Have I really learned the value of revision? Will I actually be able to translate what I've learned from McCloskey into better writing? I'll find out next semester when I tackle the assignment series.

EXTENSIONS AND CONCLUSION

The assignment series can be extended in many different directions. After completing the Peer Evaluation, the students could review articles from an undergraduate journal in economics. The class as a whole could read a set of articles, and groups could be assigned to review individual papers. A set of "referee reports" could thus be generated for each article. The referees for each paper could then read each others' reports and develop a common final report. Each group could then present its final report to the class.

Students could also be asked to select a paper that they had written in a previous economics class and critique it in accord with specific instructions. This assignment would give the students practice evaluating their own writing in a critical and detached way. It should also give them a sense of accomplishment, as they discover for themselves how far they have come in their understanding of, and ability to use, language as an instrument of economic thought.

If the instructor prefers to move the class closer to the frontier of economic research, the students could evaluate and critique professional journal articles. Given the level of analysis they would encounter, the students could tackle the articles in teams. Doing this would give the students additional practice at refining their economic thinking through sustained interaction with a peer.

Because the typical undergraduate economics major in the United States does not go on to earn a Ph.D., Palmini (1996), Wright (1999), and Simpson and Carroll (1999) emphasize

helping students learn how to write for the practical world of business and the professions. One way to do this would be to have students evaluate and critique actual written work generated by the business sector, for example, business memos and reports. Students would learn about the purpose and nature of writing in the business world and in the process discover what makes good writing in the fields that most of them plan to enter after graduation. These assignments, therefore, may well “sell themselves” to the students.

My current plan to extend the assignment series involves adding a sixth assignment to the original five, a Professional Evaluation. After reading a chapter from the latest *Economic Report of the President*, each student will be assigned a partner, and each pair of students will write a joint evaluative essay on the chapter. The students will also write two Classmate Evaluations: after each team assignment students will evaluate their partner’s contribution to their joint effort. The challenge will be to provide the students with the guidance and incentives necessary to ensure that each Classmate Evaluation exercise proves worthwhile and productive.

The assignment series can also be adapted to fit different economics courses. For example, instructors in programs requiring a senior thesis could use the first three assignments, which are based entirely on *Economical Writing*, as a lead-in to the thesis itself. Each student could also be required to evaluate and critique a draft of a classmate’s thesis. These exercises should improve the quality of the students’ final written work and provide the instructor with support, in the form of McCloskey’s writing standards and criteria, when helping individual students tighten up their writing.

The term project in our Intermediate Macroeconomics class asks students to select a current macroeconomic topic, read articles in the popular press on this topic all semester, write short annotations on the articles, and use these annotations as the basis for the term project portfolio. This assignment could be modified to develop evaluation skills. The students could evaluate and critique some or all of the articles they read, and at least one of these evaluative essays could be included in the portfolio. Alternatively, during the semester students could focus on learning about their topics by simply annotating the articles they read. At the end of the class, armed with a deeper understanding of the topic, they could evaluate and critique some of the articles they read and construct their portfolios around these essays.

Most students who have completed the assignment series think *Economical Writing* should be required reading in econometrics. Chapter 15, in particular, “Make Tables, Graphs, and Displayed Equations Readable,” has helped many of our students write better papers in that class. The imaginative use of McCloskey in econometrics could have a lasting impact on the quality of students’ quantitative work.

More generally, *Economical Writing*, alone or combined with assignments that help students develop evaluative skills, can be used in nearly any economics course. Any writing assignment that requires students to read outside of class creates an opportunity to help students develop the ability to evaluate and critique the written work of others. As they acquire this proficiency, students learn to think more clearly as economists and discover for themselves what makes good writing.

APPENDIX 1

Writing Exercise 1: The Reaction Essay

STEP 1: Read *Economical Writing*, 2nd edition, by Deirdre N. McCloskey.

STEP 2: Write out your answers to the Response Questions. Address three of the questions in detail: #1, #6, and a third of your choice. Briefly address the other three questions. Your answers must be typed, double spaced, and in total no longer than five pages.

STEP 3: Bring two copies of your Reaction Essay to class.

Response Questions

1. Identify the six most helpful specific writing tips in the entire book. Rank them from #1 (most important) to #6. Explain why you chose each of these tips.
2. In chapter 4 (“Be Thou Clear....”), who does the author argue is the best judge of your writing? Do you agree with this argument? Why or why not?
3. What is the central idea of chapters 1 and 2 (“Writing Is the Economist’s Trade”; “Writing Is Thinking”)? Was McCloskey persuasive? Why or why not?
4. What do you think of McCloskey’s suggestions in chapter 8 (“Write Early Rather Than Late”)? Do they make sense to you? Why or why not? How do your current writing practices compare with McCloskey’s suggested practices?
5. How important is chapter 11 (“Speak to an Audience of Human Beings”)? Explain briefly.
6. Consider the following chapters: 13, 17, 21, 24, 28. Which chapter is most important for Undergraduate students to read, which is least important, and why?

Writing Exercise 2: The Classmate Critique

STEP 1: Exchange your Reaction Essay with your assigned partner.

STEP 2: Read your partner’s Reaction Essay.

STEP 3: Prepare a written response to your partner’s Reaction Essay by answering the following five questions:

1. Did your classmate satisfy all requirements for the Reaction Essay? If not, specify how the assignment failed to meet the requirements.
2. Do you agree with your classmate’s answer to Response Question #1? Why or why not? Has your classmate’s ranking of the six most helpful tips changed your thinking about which tips are most important? Why or why not?
3. Do you agree with your classmate’s answer to Response Question #6? Why or why not? Have your classmate’s arguments changed your thinking about the relative importance of these chapters? Why or why not?
4. Which of your classmate’s answers to the other four Response Questions was most clear or understandable? Why?
5. Which of your classmate’s answers to the other four Response Questions was least clear or hardest to understand? Why?

Writing Exercise 3: The Team Paper

Write a Joint Reaction Essay on *Economical Writing* with your partner. Your joint essay must be typed, double spaced, no longer than five pages, and must address each of the following items:

1. Identify the eight most important specific writing tips in the book.
 - Rank them from #1 (most important) to #8.
 - Explain your choice of the most important tip.
 - Pick two of the other tips, and explain why you put them on your list.
2. To what extent should students pay attention to McCloskey's suggestions in chapter 8 ("Write Early Rather Than Late")? Why or why not?
3. Consider the following chapters: 4, 11, 13, 14, 17, 21, 24, and 28.
 - Rank these chapters in order of importance, from #1 (most important) to #8.
 - Explain your choice of the most important chapter.
4. Consider all chapters other than the ones you had to consider explicitly in your original Reaction Essay and in questions 2 and 3 above. Which one is most important, and why?
5. Should McCloskey be required reading in the Economics major? If so, why and in what course(s)? If not, why not?

Writing Exercise 4: The Economist Evaluation

STEP 1: Read the pamphlet *How To Solve Economic Problems*, by D. F. Paulaha.

STEP 2: Use what you have learned from the previous three assignments to evaluate and critique this pamphlet in terms of:

- (1) its economic content;
- (2) its usefulness and quality as a "how-to manual" for practicing economists;
- (3) its quality as a piece of writing (while making specific use of *Economical Writing*).

FORMAT REQUIREMENTS: Prepare your evaluation of this book in the form of an organized, coherent essay (as opposed to a list of answers to questions). Your essay should

- Have a title, which reflects accurately the specific content and conclusions of your essay.
- Be typed, double spaced, in a standard 12-point font, and no longer than six pages.
- Start with a coherent Introduction and end with a coherent Conclusion.
- Include in the Body an analysis of the book in terms of all three aspects noted above.

You are

not required to spend an equal amount of time and space on each aspect. Emphasize the specific area(s) you want to highlight, as you see fit.

Below are some questions that may help you prepare your evaluation. Use them as you see fit.

1. Economic Content; Usefulness as a How-To Manual:

- (A) What point is the author trying to make in chapter 1, “Economic Style”? If you had to write down—in one sentence or one paragraph—what the author means by “economic style,” what would you write? To what extent do you agree or disagree with his definition, and why?
- (B) In the second chapter, “Principles of Economic Problem Solving,” the author argues that economists use a specific “thought-process” when they tackle real-world problems. Were you aware of this thought process before reading this book? Do you think that this statement adequately reflects the thought process in economics? Why or why not?
- (C) In the second chapter, what key principle (or principles) does the author want you to remember about the way economists address real-world issues? Do you think your classmates will identify the same principles you do? Do you think your economics professors would agree with the author’s key principle(s)? Do you agree with Paulaha? Why or why not?
- (D) In the third chapter, “Elementary Concepts of Economic Thought,” the author argues that the first 10 concepts he lists “...form the foundation of the economic approach to problem solving.” He also asserts that “*They are rules of action.*” Has the author convinced you of this? Why or why not?
- (E) In chapter 4, “Common Errors and Misconceptions,” Paulaha provides a list of the nine most “common errors and misconceptions” people have about economics. With which of these items do you agree? On which items do you disagree? Explain.
- (F) If you had to prepare a “Frequent Five List” of common errors and misconceptions about the economic way of thinking and the economic way of approaching the real world, what would be on your list? Prioritize your items, from #1 to #5. Feel free to make use of items on the author’s list if you think they belong.

2. Quality of Writing

- (A) Can you identify (1) the author’s purpose in writing this book, and (2) the audience to whom the author is writing? Why or why not? If not, what problems does this cause the reader?
- (B) What aspects of the author’s presentation style are least effective, most bothersome, or most problematic? Why? What aspects of the author’s presentation style are most effective? Why?
- (C) If you were asked to offer editorial advice to this author (for a revision of this book) What advice would you give? Be specific.
- (D) If McCloskey was asked to evaluate this book, what are the two, three, or four biggest points you think she would emphasize?
- (E) Is this book well-written? Why or why not?

Writing Exercise 5: The Peer Evaluation

STEP 1: Read the paper I distribute in class, which was written by a Senior Economics Major who graduated a few years ago.

STEP 2: Evaluate and critique this paper in terms of

- (1) the quality of its economic content and economic analysis;
- (2) its quality as a piece of writing (while making specific use of *Economical Writing*).

FORMAT REQUIREMENTS: Your evaluation should take the form of an organized, coherent essay (as opposed to a list of answers to questions). Your essay should:

- Have a title, which reflects accurately the specific content and conclusions of your essay.
- Be typed, double spaced, in a standard 12-point font, and no longer than six pages.
- Start with a coherent Introduction and end with a coherent Conclusion.
- Include in your paper (the way you think best)

- (1) An analysis of the paper in terms of both aspects noted above. Cover both equally.
- (2) Your answers to the following questions: By the end of the paper, has the author Achieved his/her main purpose? Why or why not?

Below are some questions that may help you prepare your evaluation. Use them as you see fit.

- (A) Can you identify (1) the author's purpose in writing this paper, (2) the audience to whom the author is writing, and (3) the author's principal conclusion? Why or why not? If not, what problems does this cause the reader?
- (B) What aspects of the author's presentation style are least effective, most bothersome, or most problematic? Why? What aspects of the author's presentation style are most effective? Why?
- (C) If you were asked to offer editorial advice to this author (for a revision of this paper), What advice would you give? Be specific.
- (D) If McCloskey was asked to evaluate this paper, what are the two, three, or four biggest points you think she would emphasize?
- (E) Is this paper well-written? Why or why not?

APPENDIX 2

Statistical Evidence of Student Attitudes Toward the Assignment Series

1. Semesters during which the assignment series has been taught: 2
2. Total Enrollment: 37
3. Five statements on our *University Student Course Evaluation* are relevant:
 1. The assignments are relevant to course objectives.
 2. The grading method is appropriate for course content.
 3. Complexity and length of course assignments are reasonable.
 4. This course has effectively challenged me to think.
 5. The practical application of subject matter is apparent.
4. Sixteen of the 17 students in the course during semester 2 agreed with all three of the following statements on the *Writing Across the Curriculum Course Evaluation*.³
 1. Students are encouraged to challenge the instructor's ideas, the ideas of other students, Or ideas presented in course assignments.
 2. Writing assignments are a means to learning the subject matter in this course.
 3. The instructor encourages students to reflect on and evaluate their own learning and growth.

TABLE A1. The Percentage of Students Who Strongly Agreed with Each Statement

Statement	The class: Semesters 1 & 2 N = 37	Dept. of Economics: Semesters 1 & 2, all instructors, all classes N = 1,590
#1	97	68.5
#2	91	65.4
#3	92	61.2
#4	76.5	58.5
#5	78.3	60.3
All 5 statements	86.3	63

Note: Just 1 student out of the 37 disagreed with just one of the statements.

NOTES

1. The second semester of the workshop also features a guest speaker series. Prominent local and regional business people, along with recent economics graduates, speak to the students about career options available for undergraduate economics majors, how to prepare a resumé and write a cover letter, how to initiate a job search, and what is necessary to make a successful transition to graduate school, work, and career.
2. I was on sabbatical leave the semester during which Jaime completed the assignment series.
3. The results of this evaluation for semester 1 were lost during a reorganization of the university's Writing Across the Curriculum office space.

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