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. 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 will build key skills that complement each other and will prove to be extremely valuable to you in your graduate-school career and subsequent professional success. Here are a few guidelines for those steps:

**Choosing a topic.** You might do this project on the same theme as other work you are pursuing so as to specialize and achieve a deeper level of analysis, but sometimes it is preferable to diversify and start research on something new. Either way, with luck the literature review you write for AGEC 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 2\textsuperscript{nd}. 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!

**Changing the topic.** 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 or find better prospects in an entirely different direction. If you decide to change your topic, you must discuss this with me ahead of time. You must hand to me in class a printed copy of your first draft, with a complete list of citations, on December 2\textsuperscript{nd}.

**Communicating your work.** This project, like many things, must be communicated in different ways to different audiences. 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 5 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 feedback on the draft; then you will need to prepare a standard oral presentation using slides in class (on December 9\textsuperscript{th} or 11\textsuperscript{th}). The final written paper is due in PDF format, delivered to me electronically by 5pm on December 19\textsuperscript{th}.

**Defining the task.** 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. As you collect sources and gradually define the boundaries of your topic, you will begin to see the larger picture and can structure the review so that each source is described clearly and compared to the others in an argument of your own, drawing your own conclusions about what the scholarly literature has to say on your topic.
Assembling your sources. 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, which returns only papers with a formal title, named authors and a bibliography, and ranks search results by their relevance and also their authority in terms of subsequent citations. You should actively search out the key papers cited in your sources’ bibliographies, and also 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.

Understanding your sources. 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.

Writing 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.

Organizing your material. It is crucially important that you create a set of directories and file names that allow quick retrieval of your work through grad 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.

Imitating your sources. 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. The convention for these citations is the “Harvard system”, as described here: http://libweb.anglia.ac.uk/referencing/harvard.htm. Many other features of your sources should also be imitated, including the formats of title pages, charts and tables, footnotes and so forth.

Editing your work. Once your draft is written, you should seize every opportunity to improve it, expecting to 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.