

CHAPTER 16: A CHECKLIST



Assumptions

1. Describe, in non-technical terms, the study design behind studies used as the basis of assumptions about causal effects.
2. Pay particular attention to assumptions that describe how changes in policy change individual, firm, or government behavior. If the assumption was based on a randomized trial, say so. If not, describe, in non-technical terms, how this assumption was estimated and the direction of bias, if any.
3. Same goes for assumptions about the impact of exposures on health outcomes (for example, red wine consumption and heart disease incidence).
4. Suppose you are predicting the impact of a policy in a particular geographic area. Further suppose you base your assumptions on studies conducted in other areas. Before you list your use of an assumption based on a study conducted in one geographic area to predict the impact of a policy in another area as a limitation, stop and think. Are the areas really so different that the assumption is way off-the-mark? If so, describe why.
5. Same as above, but for time.
6. Policy analysis assumptions are numerical. For example, "I assume that an increase in the price of gas will reduce truck sales." is just stating a theory, not an assumption. An assumption would be something like, "I assume that a 10% increase in the price of gas will reduce truck sales by 3%."
7. Do not claim that a sensitivity analysis reduces or addresses uncertainty, bias, or generalizability.

Organization

1. Make the goal of the analysis clear early on. If I've read a page and still don't know the objective, there is a problem.
2. Shorter paragraphs improve comprehension.
3. Use informative section headings.
4. If you include a sensitivity analysis, do not describe it until after you have fully presented the main analysis.
5. Make your main results easy to find and understand. It is OK to repeat your main result.
6. If your analysis addresses a common condition, like diabetes, assume that your reader knows that the condition is associated with a high disease burden. You do not need to overwhelm your reader with statistics about mortality, prevalence, costs, etc.

Exhibits

1. Remove unnecessary lines from tables and graphs
2. The font in tables and graphs should be as large as or almost as large as the text font.
3. Round to significant digits. For example, if you predict that a policy will decrease spending by \$23,348,319.76, report it as \$23,348,319 or, better yet, \$23 million. (Same goes for references to numbers in the text.)
4. Numbers in tables should be right-aligned.
5. Text should be left-aligned.
6. Create tables in Excel or using the table function in Word rather than using tabs in or spacing in text.
7. Try to write row labels on a single line (text on a single line is easier to read).
8. You can eliminate text like "Number of" or "Percent of". (It should be obvious—if there is a percent, put a "%" after the number of a "(%) after the row label.)
9. Rows in tables should be single-spaced (makes it easier to follow the progression of calculations).
10. Eliminate unnecessary whitespace between rows labels and numbers.
11. Use row labels for descriptive text. Don't put text in the same cell as numbers. For example, write "People with diabetes (millions) 34,000,000" rather than "People with diabetes 34,000,000 million."
12. Minimize use of bolding or italics. Take out unnecessary lines. Maximize the content to ink ratio.
13. There is no set guideline on how many tables you should have. It depends on the analysis. Ask yourself, "How would I want to see the information displayed if I was reading the paper?"
14. Long tables, especially those that spill over from one page to another, can be difficult to read. Break those up into smaller tables.

Word choice

1. Beware of “this.” If you use “this” at the beginning of a sentence, make sure it is clear what “this” refers to.
2. Watch out for “result in.” If you have a sentence like, “Enacting a tax will result in a reduction in...”, change it to “Enacting a tax will reduce...”
3. The word “overestimation” should not appear in your paper. Same for the word “utilize”.
4. Avoid jargon (for example, “relative risk”). If you must use it, explain it.
5. Avoid the phrase, “proposed policy.” Just name the actual policy (for example, “tax increases” or “coverage”).
6. Keep acronyms to a minimum or, better yet, avoid them completely.
7. It is fine to write in the first person and use active voice: “We assumed that...”, “We predicted that...”, “We conclude that...”
8. Know the difference between “cost-saving” and “cost-effective” and use these terms correctly.
9. When citing other work, be mindful about the form of the citation. For example, if you refer to another work using the following phrase, “According to a study by Jackson et al. (2018)”, stop and think: Does my reader know or care about who Jackson et al. is?
10. Consider rewording sentences over 25 words or breaking them up into two shorter sentences.
11. Is the policy clearly described? For example, merely citing the name of a piece of legislation is insufficient. Is the mechanism linking the policy to the outcome clearly described (in cases where it is not totally obvious)?
12. Cut unnecessary sentences and words. Cut relentlessly. But cut words, not content.

