

Publishing Economic History

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Publishing research in economic history requires many of the same elements as publishing research in general—a compelling question, clear analysis and description, original and persuasive insights, and efforts to relate the findings to existing and future research. Economic history is now fairly well integrated with economics, as described in Abramitzky (2015) and Margo (forthcoming); there is no obvious border, let alone barrier, between the fields (Collins 2015). Economic history research appears with some regularity in the top general interest journals of economics. Some scholars cross back and forth between publishing on economic history and publishing on more contemporary topics.

There are, however, aspects of publishing economic history research that merit special attention from authors who are not already steeped in economic history's literature and mindset. This essay describes some of those considerations and challenges. Most of the discussion is from the hypothetical perspective of an economist preparing to publish in an economic history journal for the first time. Many of the same considerations would pertain to efforts to publish economic history research in general interest journals, though I discuss some additional considerations in that case. Oftentimes, simply being aware of the issues is a step toward overcoming them in crafting one's paper. But more often than not, successful publishing in economic history requires a significant investment to become familiar with historical literatures and data sources and to write in a way that engages the journal's audience.

Framing research for economic history journals

Economic historians seek to understand the wealth and poverty of nations and the people within them. Growth and inequality are foremost themes, supported by centuries of research on industrialization, demographic change, finance, trade, labor markets, and political economy. Economic historians contemplate specific research questions in the context of this bigger picture. A successful economic history paper need not be *about* long-run growth, institutions, inequality and so on, but it is important that the paper *connect* to the larger story of economic development. In other words, even when focused on a particular time or place, successful economic history papers speak to broader themes, pay attention to historical and institutional context, and provide new and clear evidence in a careful manner. To be sure, many successful economics papers, whether historical or not, have exactly these same characteristics.

Successful writing is always considerate of the intended audience. The author must consider the audience's knowledge, experience, and values, by which I mean the questions audience members care about and the kinds of evidence and rhetoric deemed persuasive. Economic history journals are

similar to general interest journals in economics in that they have a broad and diverse audience, albeit not the same audience. Successful papers are motivated accordingly and are accessible and appealing to that audience. The journals that I have in mind here are the ones that I have edited, the *Journal of Economic History* and *Explorations in Economic History*, but similar considerations are pertinent for all economic history outlets.¹

If one is attempting to develop a paper with historical evidence and hoping to publish it in an economic history journal, then in a proximate sense, the key audience members are the journal's editor and referees. But the editor and referees are often thinking about or have internalized the interests and values of the broader economic history profession. Therefore, apart from issues of technical correctness, editors and referees are also concerned with whether a particular paper "fits" the journal in terms of its research question and motivation, its awareness of previous work by economic historians, and how its evidence is marshaled and weighed. Will the journal's readers find the paper interesting and convincing? Will they cite it in their own research? Will it draw new readers to the journal? Does it engage enduring themes in a thoughtful, well-informed way?

Jumping into economic history might sound daunting if one's main area of expertise is in more contemporary settings, but it need not be. Modern economic historians speak the language of economics, including theory and econometrics. Most have been trained in either an economics program or in a specialized economic history program that has a strong economics component. Thus, an author who is contemplating submitting a paper to a leading economic history journal can assume a fairly high level of technical competence in the audience, referees, and editors. In addition, many economic historians have deep competence in other subfields of economics. Thus, there is plenty of common ground for conversation and exchange of ideas.

It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that a good economic history paper is just like a good paper in some other subfield of economics but with older data. Not all competent empirical analyses are deemed suitable for an economic history journal. Papers centered on long-ago events can easily fall flat, and papers on fairly recent events can make for perfectly good economic history. Using "old data" as fodder for the application of a new econometric tool does not make a paper suitable for an economic history journal, nor does using old data to address a question of narrow

¹ There are several other journals in economic history (e.g., *Economic History Review*, *European Review of Economic History*, *Cliometrica*, and more). At any point in time, they vary in style, which reflects a combination of the current editors' preferences, the journal's stated mission, and the state-of-the-art in research. Reviewing recent issues of each may provide a (noisy) signal of the differences. That said, there is a great deal of overlap, with common themes and values. It is rare that a paper is "just right" for one journal but a bad fit for the others.

interest to another subfield (in that case, you should submit it to a journal in that subfield). Many such papers are rejected at economic history journals because they fail to motivate the research appropriately and because they emphasize new techniques but do not develop novel and persuasive historical insight. A frequent trait of such papers is a focus on the statistical significance of regression coefficients without much effort to understand their magnitude in historical context.

Framing economic history research for general interest outlets

Publishing economic history in high-quality general interest journals requires framing the paper for an audience of economists. Some economists might not be very interested in history per se, but many are open to learning about economics from historical evidence. To be clear, economic history papers that succeed in general interest journals are not just excellent examples of economic history research; they are often especially well motivated for a wide audience. Whereas framing for an economic history audience might emphasize using economics to better understand the past in the context of the economic history literature, framing for a general interest audience might emphasize understanding economic forces and theories more generally. Hornbeck (2010), for example, is successfully framed as a paper about property rights and development rather than about agricultural history in a narrower sense.

There is no simple or single recipe for framing such a paper. But there are certain lines of argument that one often sees to motivate economic history research for general audiences. Studies of the Age of Mass Migration, for instance, might emphasize not only its historical importance but also the appeal of studying international migration in an environment free from policy barriers to European immigrants (Abramitzky, Boustan, and Eriksson 2012). The idea is that in the absence of modern policy distortions, we can see economic forces operating more clearly. Studies of history and health might emphasize that a long-run perspective is required to understand the lifelong implications of particular events or policies (e.g., Almond 2006, Goodman-Bacon 2017, Alsan and Wanamaker 2018). Other studies might suggest that historical experience provides useful insight on issues that are highly relevant in developing economies (e.g., Nunn 2009, Donaldson forthcoming). And yet others find historical examples of exogenous shocks or random assignment that yield compelling insight on important economic questions (e.g., Hanlon 2015, Bleakley and Ferrie 2016). The list could go on, but the pattern is apparent—the authors establish the work’s relevance to economics broadly speaking and then carry out exemplary empirical research.

Data in economic history research

Many economic historians cut their teeth doing archival work or creating new datasets from other primary sources. Economic history probably attracts scholars who are inclined to enjoy this kind of work, but I think the training and effort reinforce a value system in which creating and evaluating new data are highly esteemed. If you have created a new dataset to address an important question, the effort should be highlighted in the main text, especially if submitting to an economic history journal. In addition to drawing attention to the novelty of the research effort, this emphasis engages economic historians in something they care about deeply—the handling of primary data sources, the interpretation and coding of historical information, and the decisions and tradeoffs that are made along the way. It is possible to bog down a paper with too much detail (data appendices are helpful), but it is fair to say that economic historians, like all good empiricists, are curious about the origin, quality, and vulnerabilities of data.

On the other hand, if an author has “merely” downloaded some existing dataset for analysis, the paper can still succeed as an economic history paper. But the author should keep in mind that economic historians will be highly attuned to the quality and quirks of historical data sources; the author must be, too. It is not enough to say that some well-known paper or author used the data previously and that, therefore, it must be reliable for the analysis at hand. For instance, thanks to Ruggles et al. (2017, henceforth IPUMS), it is now easy to download large samples of harmonized U.S. census microdata. Yet every census varied in how it was carried out, in what questions were asked and about whom, and in how answers were originally recorded before being harmonized for the IPUMS. The IPUMS website provides copious documentation and references for researchers; it seems clear enough that users should read it, but many do not. Perhaps a greater danger is that as more historical data have become easily accessible via the internet without careful curation by the IPUMS team or a similar group, well-intentioned novices might mishandle and misinterpret raw source information. Referees and editors might (or might not) save an author from a mistaken interpretation, but they might also reject the paper for being careless or uninformed.

The key point is simply that economic historians take data quality seriously. That includes knowing the primary sources and their limitations and being upfront about those limitations in writing the paper. Successful publishing in economic history is more likely when authors demonstrate that they have done some serious digging to understand their source material, to improve it where they can, and where they cannot, to be clear about its blind spots and biases. The other side of this coin is that economic historians tend to be sympathetic to those who must work with imperfect data, as long as it is done with care.

History in economic history

Economic history papers come in many flavors. Some emphasize a combination of economic theory and history in settings where quantitative information is scarce. Others delve into archival sources to illuminate important historical institutions, trends, or events. But many papers in leading economic history journals are similar in structure to papers that one sees elsewhere in applied empirical economics. This familiarity of form might obscure the amount of historical knowledge that goes into producing credible economic history research.

It is important for economists who are writing about economic history to be fully aware of related work in history (i.e., written by historians and likely to be found in books rather than in articles) or in other fields. Writing well about economic history requires finely tuned historical perspective and deep knowledge of the time, place, and sources. This is a challenge for many who come into economic history from a traditional background in economics, where theoretical and econometric skills are built from the start, but where exposure to historical themes and sources is often quite limited. Reading deeply in history can help in everything from choosing an interesting research question, to thinking clearly about the institutional framework that is essential to one's theory, to finding a compelling research design, to locating and interpreting primary sources and relevant case studies.

The historical literature evolves over time, and economic history research needs to keep pace. Do not pick up the "classic" book on your topic and end your investigation there. On occasion, a referee report from an historian may be amused (or aghast) by a paper's outdated characterization of a certain historical setting or event, its failure to cite relevant recent research by historians, its oversimplification of history, or its misreading of some sources and ignorance of others. All of this damages the paper's credibility. Sometimes that kind of lapse is reparable, but other times it goes straight to the heart of the paper's interpretations or assumptions. There is no substitute for reading history and delving into primary sources, but it helps to confer with experts and to seek feedback on preliminary research through correspondence, conferences, and seminars long before submission to a journal.

I want to end on an encouraging note for those who are considering writing research in economic history. There is one great advantage to being new to a field—the ability to see everything with fresh eyes and from a new point of view. Progress in any field depends in part on newcomers breathing new life into it, making connections that earlier scholars did not. I think economic history

is especially welcoming of newcomers, perhaps because it is open to insights from multiple disciplines. If you have ideas to contribute, we are all ears.

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