Presenting Research

Oriana Bandiera (LSE)

Proposals, Presentations, Papers

- Three main forms of communication
- I will start with common elements
- And then discuss each in detail

The key ingredient: the question

A good research question is one that:

- you really want to know the answer to
- you can convince others of its importance
- can be stated clearly in one (short) sentence

A question many want to know the answer to

- classic questions with better data
- classic questions with new methods
- new questions that stem from new theories or existing puzzle

Questions the audience does NOT want to know the answer to

- “fillers”: Paper A does X, paper B does Y, I do X and Y together
- Paper A does X in country 1, I do X in country 2

unless

- good theoretical reason for why X&Y are interesting together
- or why country 2 should be different from 1

Set a question you can answer

- you will be judged on how well you answer the question
- setting up a question you don’t answer will hurt you
- probably the most common mistake

The method

- Choose the best method for answering your question
- Do not worry about fads
- But make sure you are up to date on latest developments

know the literature

- this is essential – and luckily much easier in the age of wifi

- there are many sites that “translate” the latest research for the public
- mostly ungated: MI, VoxDev, WB Impact

- google the authors, chances are that you’ll find ungated versions on their site
- most development papers are at BREAD

know your data

- describe, plot the data before doing anything
- useful to spot mistakes and to avoid mistakes
- useful for the audience to know your context

clarity is essential

- tables should be legible and self contained

- fit in one page, have notes that explain what's going on
- use intuitive variable names like "income" not "inc_clb_88"

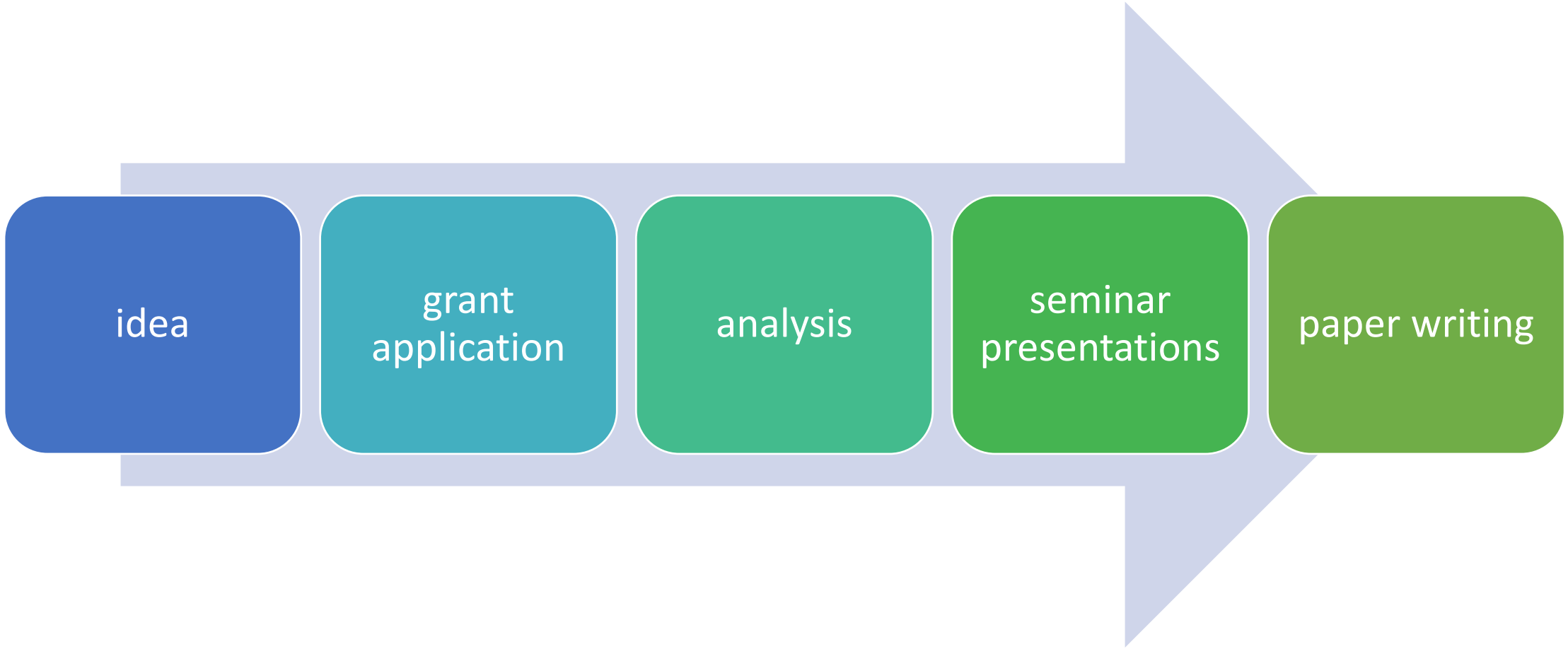
Strike a balance between promoting and defending

- you want to promote your research → highlight importance of question, new method, new data

- you want to argue that your method is good but don't go too far – no method is perfect, admit weaknesses

- a good strategy is to tell the readers your identifying assumptions and tell them when they fail, so you do the job for them and steer them in the right direction

the life cycle of research projects



stage 1: idea

- look around yourself, are there things that you find puzzling?
- can economics help solve the puzzle?
- would others be interested?
- is it feasible?

stage 2: grant application

- this is where you have to convince others to pay for your idea
- main challenge is getting the right balance between a clear and comprehensive plan and research that's already done
- funders look for
  - clarity and feasibility
  - awareness of ethical concerns
  - impact on society
  - value for money

stage 2: clear and feasible

- respect word limit without using 8pt font
- start with *the proposed research aims to..*
- make sure that you convey *importance* and *innovation*
- make sure you show that is feasible – e.g. do you already have access to the data or know how to get access?

stage 2: ethics

- if your research involves human subjects, ethics is of first order importance
- not just RCTs
- funders (rightly) want to be convinced that you have thought about all possible consequences.

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stage 2: impact on society

- funders care about research that can change the world, for this to happen you need a plan on how to disseminate the findings

- make sure you specify who are the possible consumers of this research and make plans to contact them

stage 2: value for money

- make sure costs are reasonable

- explain in detail anything that might raise red flags:
  - income, fees
  - consultancies
  - unusual travel
  - etc

stage 3: seminars

- the aim is to publicise your research
- to get feedback on your research
  - better to hear about it in a seminar when you can do something about it rather than wait for referees
  - feedback is not necessarily about mistakes
  - often it tells you what people misunderstand so that you can clarify it

When is the right time to give seminars?

- a seminar is NOT an exam
- don’t be discouraged by feedback, that’s the main reason to give a seminar
- you don’t need to wait for the paper to be finished
- you need to be confident in the results, and then you are ready to go

Standard structure

1. Motivation (2 slides max)
2. Research question (1 slide)
3. THIS PAPER
4. The literature (1 slide)
5. Preview (optional, 1 or 2 slides)
6. Theory (even if you don't have a model)
7. Identification Strategy
8. Evidence on Identifying Assumptions (mostly back up slides)
9. Findings
10. Lessons

The audience does not care about your paper- how do you change their mind?

- *enthusiasm*
- *a clear motivation slide*
  - *balance generality and precision*
  - *think as an economist: who's maximising what? under which constraint?*
  - *is there an inefficiency that needs fixing?*
  - ***set up the context so that** it leads naturally to the research question*
- two examples

version 1

Social relations

- Social relations between agents shape behavior in many settings – long acknowledged in social sciences
- Their effect on organisations' performance can be
  - positive because agents might increase effort to help others they are connected to
  - negative because agents might have “parochial altruism” that leads them to:
  - help their social connections at the expense of others
  - and even deliberately hurt others who do not belong to their social group
- Key to understand whether and when this happens

What do you expect this paper to be about?

Do you want to find out?

Let’s try another way

version 2

Delivering public services to remote areas is difficult

- Delivery agents require large compensating differentials
- Many governments and NGOs rely on local agents
  - More willing to stay
  - Embedded in the community -> social relations
- Key to understand how social relations shape the agents' choice of effort & targeting

Delivering public services to remote areas is difficult

here is a problem

- Delivery agents require large compensating differentials
- Many governments and NGOs rely on local agents
  - More willing to stay
  - Embedded in the community -> social relations
- Key to understand how social relations shape the agents' choice of effort & targeting

here is a common solution

is it a good solution? economists can help

The audience does not know your paper

You set the research question, make sure it is:

- one you actually answer
- one that the audience want to know the answer to
- *this is true for paper titles too*

Set a question you can answer

- you will be judged on how well you answer the question
- setting up a question you don't answer will hurt you
- probably the most common mistake (in papers too)
- why?

A question the audience want to know the answer to

- this should have been your first concern when starting the project!
- classic questions with better data
- classic questions with new methods
- new questions that stem from new theories or existing puzzle

Research QUESTION (singular)

one paper = one idea

Version 1

- We study how social connections shape the delivery of an agriculture extension program in Uganda.
- The program employs extension workers (EWs) to provide training and sell improved seeds to the community
- As time and seeds are limited, agents face an allocation problem.
- We test the role of social connections on the targeting choices of delivery agents.
- And how this depends on cleavages

Version 2

- Does group identity shape the effect of social connections on the delivery (targeting and coverage) of public services?

Version 3

- Do delivery agents favour their friends relative to the friends of the losing candidate?
- Does this increase their friends' productivity **relative to the friends of the losing candidate?**
- Does this depends on the difference between the political affiliation of the delivery agent and the losing candidate?
- Does it affect the number of farmers trained? Does this depend on the number of friends of the delivery agent?

Version 1

useless details

- We study how social connections shape the delivery of an agriculture extension program in Uganda.
- The program employs extension workers (EWs) to provide training and sell improved seeds to the community
- As time and seeds are limited, agents face an allocation problem.
- We test the role of social connections on the targeting choices of delivery agents.
- And how this depends on cleavages – who cares?

there is no question!!!

Version 3

none of these are wrong, but they are too specific, and too many

- Do deliver agents favour their friends relative to the friends of the losing candidate?
- Does this increase their friends' productivity **relative to the friends of the losing candidate?**
- Does this depends on the difference between the political affiliation of the delivery agent and the losing candidate?
- Does it affect the number of farmers trained? Does this depend on the number of friends of the delivery agent?

THIS PAPER

- state exactly what you do
- without all the details
- in most cases 2 sentences are enough

Literature – don’ts

- criticise others
  - A&B do X but it is all endogenous – I improve enormously
- list N (large) strands
  - my paper relates to 18 strands of the literature
- do a shopping list
  - A does X
  - B does Y
  - C does Z …

Literature – dos

- cite the main papers, no matter how old
- show that you have read all the relevant literature
- argue how you build on the literature ..*you can add value even if the existing lit is good*

Theory (even if you don't have one)

- most empirical papers do not need a new model
- but they do need a coherent framework to guide the analysis
- otherwise it all feels (and is) arbitrary
- ask yourself:
  - who is the main decision maker?
  - what does she maximise?
  - under which constraints?
- that will help you justify your empirical specifications

Data

- your main enemy is the shopping list
- try to find a coherent framework

1. by variable..as in ”I need X Y Z”
    - X: I use the Census, Y: my own survey..
2. by method, if that’s your contribution
    - I run a survey to measure XYZ
    - I combine this with a lab game to measure..

Identification –minimal list

- source of variation of X
- identifying assumptions: I can measure the causal effect of X on Y under the assumption that….
- evidence in support of **identifying assumptions**
- every method relies on identifying assumptions– also RCTs

Findings

- one finding per slide
- most important finding first
- you MUST have a logical path from one finding to the next
- legible tables

Robustness Checks

- This slide should not exist
  - identification checks should come before
  - everything else (definitions, thresholds, probits) should be in appendix

Conclusions

- Don’t summarise
- Rather, take implications of your results
  - for policy
  - for theory
  - for future research

4. paper

- paper should look professional, use latex if you can, most software is free, e.g. overleaf
- never dismiss other people's research
- pay special attention to tables
  - title should describe what the table does ("effect of X on Y" rather than "OLS estimates")
  - variable names should be easy to read
  - consistent number formatting
  - if you use stars format so that all numbers are in line
  - we don't need to see the coefficients of all the controls

most importantly

- no matter how you communicate it, make it exciting
- because if you show that you don’t care others will follow