Course Objectives

This course aims to support you in the initial phase of your thesis research. Through presentations and discussion, you will receive feedback on your work and practice essential skills of a well-trained economist.

Administrative Issues

One meeting per week, Tue 1-4pm in Leacock 517.

Contact:
email: markus.poschke@mcgill.ca
office hours: by appointment.

Requirements: Previous completion of all comprehensive and field examinations.

Grading: Pass/fail. Your grade will be based on your third year paper, due at the end of the year, on your presentations of your own work, and on your productive interaction in class. If you miss a presentation for medical reasons, it will be rescheduled, if and only if you provide me with a valid medical note within two days of the presentation.

Note: In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

Academic Integrity: McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the code of student conduct and disciplinary procedures (see http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity/ for more information). Note: According to Senate regulations, instructors are not permitted to make special arrangements for final exams. Please consult the Calendar, section 4.7.2.1, General University Information and Regulations at www.mcgill.ca.
Course Outline

This is tentative in the sense that both the timing and nature of activities may change.

**Week 1** Introduction. Explanation of the course, introductions by everybody. Presentations of your research status and interests.

**Week 2** Presentation by Nicolas Gendron-Carrier

**Week 3** Presentations by senior PhD student(s)

**Weeks 4, 6** No class

**Weeks 5, 7, 8** “Idea presentations” by students (30 min).

**Weeks 9-11** Presentation practice.

**Weeks 12** tba

**Weeks 13** Work plans for the winter.

Next term (Winter 2019): In the continuation of this course, I will expect your work to become more concrete. We will start with longer presentations of your work. I am also planning to have you hold submit two drafts of your work, a rough one at the beginning of the term and a more polished one at the end.

The culmination of the full-year course is your presentation of your ongoing work to the department in the Third Year Paper Presentations in April 2019.

**Complementary activities**

Being a good economist requires many skills that you need to practice. You practiced some of them in coursework, and will exercise some in your research. You will also present a lot in this course – a very important skill. Attending seminars and conferences and talking to other economists, in particular more senior ones, is also very important. I therefore expect you to

- attend all departmental seminars. We may talk about them in class to some extent. Also attend the job market talks in Jan/Feb.

- attend relevant workshops and conferences in town. As an example, there will be a Cireq workshop on micro theory as well as workshops on IO (McGill/Desautels) and on macroeconomics this term. Next term, there will be Cireq workshops on applied economics and on econometrics. Each one of you should identify at least one relevant workshop in town, tell me about it, and attend it.

- meet seminar speakers. When there are speakers in your field, you should sign up for meeting them.

To help you with this, you will
• give a short in-class presentation (15 min) on two seminars you attended this term, and
• report on meeting one seminar speaker.

To coordinate, send me, before Sep 11, a page describing your research interests/activities (update what you already sent), planned topic, who you are talking to/plan to talk to, and which seminars (at McGill or elsewhere) you will report on.

Presentation guidelines:

General points:

• Prepare a pdf-file with a presentation. (If you use Powerpoint, still prepare a pdf-file, like this you avoid funny characters appearing on your slides. At some point you should learn to use Latex plus e.g. Beamer.) Do not overload your slides.
• Target group: You are presenting to a class of economists. You know their background.
• Be economical with your time. Do not try to say everything – say what’s important.

Ideas presentations: There are roughly two potential types of presentations. Your situation may also fall in between.

1. You start with a research question.
   • Explain why this is an important question.
   • Explain what is known about it, and where the existing literature falls short.
   • Explain what you would do, stressing what you would do differently (and provide context so that we can understand the difference).
   • Explain your proposed methodology.

2. You are interested in a field/area but don’t have a concrete question yet.
   • Give context.
   • Explain why this is an interesting area, and why you think that there is potential for you to contribute to it.
   • Explain how you would go about finding a concrete question. For example, is there an extension/refinement of existing work that is worth doing?

Presentation practice:

• You will have one hour for the presentation.
• Present a paper from the literature (for example, a paper that your work will build on, a classical paper, or a recent paper at the frontier).
• Present it as if it was your paper.
• We will ask questions about content, so make sure you understand the paper well.
• At the same time, the main objective of the paper is to practice presenting, so I will give feedback on this.

Project presentations:
• What is your research question?
• Put your question/interest into context (but avoid a lengthy literature review).
• Why should others care? (Explain this in a way that others, who are not experts in the same sub-field, can understand.)
• Explain your approach to the problem (methodology).
• You probably will only have very preliminary results at this stage, so here you can really focus on relevance of the question and pertinence of the approach you’re using. Show some results for illustration if you have them.
• If your work has a theoretical component:
  – Explain the ingredients of the model.
  – Point out important assumptions.
  – Use equations only where they are helpful.
• If your work has a quantitative component:
  – Explain the methodology used and how it relates to previous work.
  – Explain the data you use/will use, if there is anything particular about it, how it compares to previous work.
• In both cases: To the extent that this is possible, explain the most important results.
  – In ca 30 minutes you will not have time to talk about all results, mention the most important one(s).
  – Explain intuitively how they come about. Use equations/graphs if useful. If there is a convenient graphical representation, use it.
  – What assumptions (theory/identification) drive the result? Do you think that they are plausible? What would happen if we changed them?
• Evaluation:
  – What have we learned?
  – What are remaining weaknesses? What is your plan for continuation? Do you need to change anything major?
Discussions: The purpose of a discussion is to do a service to the audience: help them understand a paper better.

- Key elements:

  1. Brief summary: research question, method, data

  2. Put the work in perspective: why is the paper important? How does it fit in with the literature? What do we learn? Do we learn anything beyond the specific question of the paper that could be useful elsewhere? In other words, focus on the big picture.

  3. Boil the paper down to its essence.

  - This element is most useful for theoretical papers. What are the key results, which assumptions are truly required to get them, and what drives the results? Sometimes people come up with a simplified model for this.

  - For empirical papers, simplification may sometimes also help. What guides the estimation? If the method is complicated, what does it do, in a nutshell? What drives identification? Given this, how can we interpret results?

    Often the author wants to show many things, so simplifying the paper really helps. (Also given that most people can only remember 1-3 key things about a paper anyways.)

  4. In the usually allotted time, you may not be able to do all of this in detail. In any case, it is helpful to focus on just a few important issues.

- You can/should be critical, but constructive. For example, you may find that results hinge on a certain assumption that you find very implausible (e.g. in theory or identification). You could explain why you find it implausible (e.g. cite evidence) and propose how this could be remedied.

- In your special case, you may discuss a paper that is not in your field. So of course you can’t know everything about that field. You may however try to look for insights in your field that are relevant for the paper to discuss.

- What not to do:

  - Excessive detail
  - Comment on absolutely everything
  - Unsubstantiated criticism