ウィリアム・トムソン

『若き経済学者のためのガイド』
——経済学の効果的な書き方と話し方——

William Thomson, *A Guide for the Young Economist: Writing and Speaking Effectively about Economics*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A., The MIT Press, 2001, xvi+pp. 118.

The good Ph.D. student works hard. The very good Ph.D. student manages to solve a difficult problem. The excellent Ph.D. student finds an important problem and solves it. But even the excellent student tends to underestimate the importance of good exposition. He may well fail to recognize that his work is not completed until his results are presented in a manner in which the argument is easy to follow, the main result can be quickly grasped, and its significance can be readily evaluated in relation to other contributions in the field. William Thomson, a leading researcher in game theory and justly famous for his devotion in supervising Ph.D. students at the University of Rochester, spends the first two chapters of this extremely useful book to tell the young economist how to write and present a research paper. These two chapters are complemented by the last chapter, which contains hints on how to write a referee report. In this review, I shall concentrate on the first two chapters.

The duty of a supervisor includes not only helping the student formulate a concrete, well-defined question and answer it, but also going through various versions of his papers. When it comes to economic contents of the student's work, the supervisor can refer him to earlier contributions in the field. The supervisor, however, had no such reference, except for manuals on academic writing in general, that he can count on regarding the writing skill in economics. The supervisor must of course have gone through his own training, but such an experience alone is not a guarantee for him to be a good writer. Even if he is a good writer, being a good teacher on writing is another matter, as he rarely puts on record useful insights on writing in any systematic way. This hole has now been filled in by the advent of this book.

None of the hints and suggestions in the book is really a surprise or magic, but all of them are easy to forget when concentrating one's own work; and this is why the book should be kept on every, young or not, economist's desk. From my somewhat idiosyncratic point of view, I can categorize the suggestions into three groups.

The first group consists of suggestions that are well known and straightforward. For example, everyone knows that it is important to state effectively the originality and significance of the paper (in Section 1.4 of Chapter 1). Still, it is worthwhile to stipulate what is and is not to be done specifically for this purpose, as Thomson does.

The second group of suggestions are those which only a few are aware of but everyone would endorse. For example, it is very important in any mathematical proof to leave no ambiguity on what a quantification refers to (Section 5.4 of Chapter 1), but no one, as far as I know, has ever described the issues involved as meticulously as Thomson. Another example is the benefits of explaining, in front of a live audience, whatever one has written down (Section 2.1 of Chapter 2). Perhaps the suggestions in this group are the most enlightening ones for Ph.D. students.

Suggestions in the third group are neither standard nor conventional. Many have missed the importance of these and some might even disagree with them. I guess, though, that the not-so-young economist would most appreciate these suggestions. For example, Thomson suggests in Section 7.3 of Chapter 2 that when writing down a formula on the board during a seminar presentation, we start from the inside and then move to the outside, that is, write augments in the brackets first and then the symbols representing the function, and finally add all quantifications needed. This is indeed a marvellous suggestion, as the oral and written explanation can then be synchronized in a most natural and logical manner. He also suggests, in Section 3.9 of Chapter 1, that when a concept is being defined in a paper, the object (a number, vector, or subgroup of consumers in a cooperative game) on which the term depends be italicized along with the concept itself. For example, when the Arrow-Pratt coefficient of absolute risk aversion in expected utility theory is being defined, we should italicize the preposition "at" preceding the monetary amount at which it is calculated. One might object to this suggestion on the ground that this is unconventional and unsightly. But the coefficient does depend on the monetary amount at which it is calculated and, more practically, neglecting the monetary amount may cause a grave misunderstanding. As an example, the standard definition of a consumer being more risk averse than another is that the first consumer's Arrow-Pratt coefficient of absolute risk aversion is greater than the second consumer's counterpart when both of them are calculated at the same monetary amounts; but if they are exposed to the same "background" risk, the more risk-averse consumer may exhibit a more risk-seeking behavior when choosing over risks stochastically independent of the background risk. As shown by Stephen Ross, John Pratt, and others, a sufficient condition for the more risk-averse relation to be preserved even in the presence of background risks involves comparison of their coefficients of absolute risk aversion calculated at different monetary amounts. This points to the importance of including a monetary amount at which the coefficient is calculated in the definition of the coefficient.

There are some suggestions that I do not totally agree with. For example, Thomson suggests in Section 5.4 of Chapter 2 that if two conditions on a transparency for a seminar presentation are identical except for the direction of inequalities, then, to highlight the difference between the two, we replace the words by dashes in the second condition. I guess that writing down the second condition in full is an equally effective way to induce the audience to notice the parallelism, and it also brings about an additional flair for kindness. Yet Thomson's suggestion still made me realize that even when writing down the second condition in full, we should pay special attention to the spacing between words in the two conditions so that the parallelism can be easily seen. In general, even when we disagree with Thomson's suggestions, they are so well thought-out that we can still learn something constructive out of this disagreement.

One might argue that the book deals only with the cosmetics of writing and presentation, which are only of secondary importance in any academic work. I agree that the academic contents are the most important element, but this by no means imply that we do not have to take exposition seriously. I can give two reasons for this. One is, as Thomson also points out on the first page of the book, that researchers, especially productive ones, are too busy to pay attention to any poorly written paper, however important its contents are. The other is more methodological and, I believe, more important: Economics is a well established discipline, with a more or less standardized set of materials taught at graduate schools. Most researchers have got the idea of what it is about, how it has been developed, and where it is going. Doing research in economics is not only to solve what used to be unsolved problems: Such a half boiled research result would, at best, be located on the periphery of the main body of economics. The work is completed only after the solution is successfully delivered to the audience of other economists so that it becomes a new building block of the system of knowledge in economics that each economist has in mind and on which further advancement can be based. While the book appears to be just a collection of specific hints and suggestions for good exposition, I believe that this line of thoughts was an underlying philosophy that motivated Thomson to offer useful hints and suggestions.

The book is fun to read and can even be a bedside reading. Its contents can probably be best learnt by reading each of the three chapters without interruption and then by carefully applying the lessons to the paper or seminar preparation that one is currently working on. But each subsection has a fairly descriptive title, which makes it possible for the reader to pick up only those topics which are of immediate need, and also to skim the entire book.

With a small initial investment of obtaining and going through the book, the reader can achieve an extraordinary large gain in his skill of writing and speaking effectively about economics. The reader must of course do the exercise of actually implementing the suggestions of the book in his own work, but the task is much easier than it would be without the book, as Thomson tells the reader specifically what to do to improve his exposition.

In concluding, I would like to express my deep gratitude to Koichi Tadenuma for his comments on the earlier version of this review.

[Chiaki Hara]