

# Writing Economics Research Papers

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# Good writing matters!

- The goal of research is creating knowledge. To do so, you must communicate clearly, precisely, and succinctly.
- Research is complex. Make it easy for the reader to understand what you found and why it is important.
- Clear writing avoids confusion and misinterpretation. Stay in control. It is your research. You are the expert.

# Special features of job market research papers

- Most readers from different sub-fields. Do NOT use jargon without explaining it first.
- Subject-matter experts will read the full paper; the rest will read the abstract, introduction, tables, and charts.
- Your job market paper is your resume. Research is currency of the profession. Convey your awesomeness!

# Basic structure for abstract and introduction

1. **Motivation.** Why is your question important? Set the stage with the facts; do NOT just say it is important.
2. **Research question.** You must ask a specific question!  
“My paper studies / explores / asks whether ...”
3. **Contribution.** What will answering your question teach us? “My paper contributes to our understanding of ...”

## Basic structure - continued

4. **Methods.** How do you answer the question? Explain your identification and key features of your approach.
5. **Results.** What do you find? Share your main findings (no more than three). Be clear and specific (numbers).
6. **Road map (for intro).** Short description of what is in the rest of the paper by section.

# **MOST IMPORTANT!!!!!!!**

- Contribution and findings are the MOST IMPORTANT parts. MAKE THEM SHINE.
- Lead with YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS and then set yours in the context of others.
- The findings are why we do the research. It's why we read the paper. TAKE TIME TO EXPLAIN THEM.

## More comments on abstract and introduction

- In abstract, each part of the structure is one sentence. In introduction, each part is one paragraph.
- Contribution sections should substitute for related literature sections (but listen to your adviser).
- If you must have a related literature section, keep it short. **YOUR PAPER IS ABOUT YOUR RESEARCH!**

# Examples: Abstract I

Market Power in Neoclassical Growth Models

Laurence M. Ball and N. Gregory Mankiw

NBER Working Paper No. 28538

March 2021

JEL No. E13,E22,E62,H63,O41

Question

## ABSTRACT

Contribution

This paper examines the optimal accumulation of capital and the effects of government debt in neoclassical growth models in which firms have market power and therefore charge prices above marginal cost. In this environment, the real interest rate earned by savers is less than the net marginal product of capital. We establish a new method for evaluating dynamic efficiency that can be applied in such economies. A plausible calibration suggests that the wedge between the real interest rate and the marginal product of capital is more than 4 percentage points and that the U.S. economy is dynamically efficient. In addition, government Ponzi schemes can have different implications for welfare than they do under competition. Even if the government can sustain a perpetual rollover of debt and accumulating interest, the policy may nonetheless reduce welfare by depressing steady-state capital and aggregate consumption. These findings suggest that even with low interest rates, as have been observed recently, fiscal policymakers should still be concerned about the crowding-out effects of government debt.

Method /  
Contribution

Finding 1

Finding 2

Finding 3

Policy Implication

Mankiw is an excellent writer. See his [writing tips](#) on his [blog](#). PS macro students, use “saving” vs “savings” correctly, as he explains!



# Examples: Abstract 2

Can Variation in Subgroups' Average Treatment Effects Explain Treatment Effect Heterogeneity?

Evidence from a Social Experiment

Marianne P. Bitler, Jonah B. Gelbach, and Hilary W. Hoynes

NBER Working Paper No. 20142

May 2014

JEL No. H75,I38,J18

**ABSTRACT**

In this paper, we assess whether welfare reform affects earnings only through mean impacts that are constant within but vary across subgroups. This is important because researchers interested in treatment effect heterogeneity typically restrict their attention to estimating mean impacts that are only allowed to vary across subgroups. Using a novel approach to simulating treatment group earnings under the constant mean-impacts within subgroup model, we find that this model does a poor job of capturing the treatment effect heterogeneity for Connecticut's Jobs First welfare reform experiment using quantile treatment effects. Notably, ignoring within-group heterogeneity would lead one to miss evidence that the Jobs First experiment's effects are consistent with central predictions of basic labor supply theory.

Question

Contribution

Method / Contribution

Finding

Policy Implication

Clear, compact. Tells us what this paper is and who needs to read it. Tip: Read top editors' papers. They won't do what annoys them.

# Examples: Abstract 3

## The Labor Market Impacts of Universal and Permanent Cash Transfers: Evidence from the Alaska Permanent Fund<sup>†</sup>

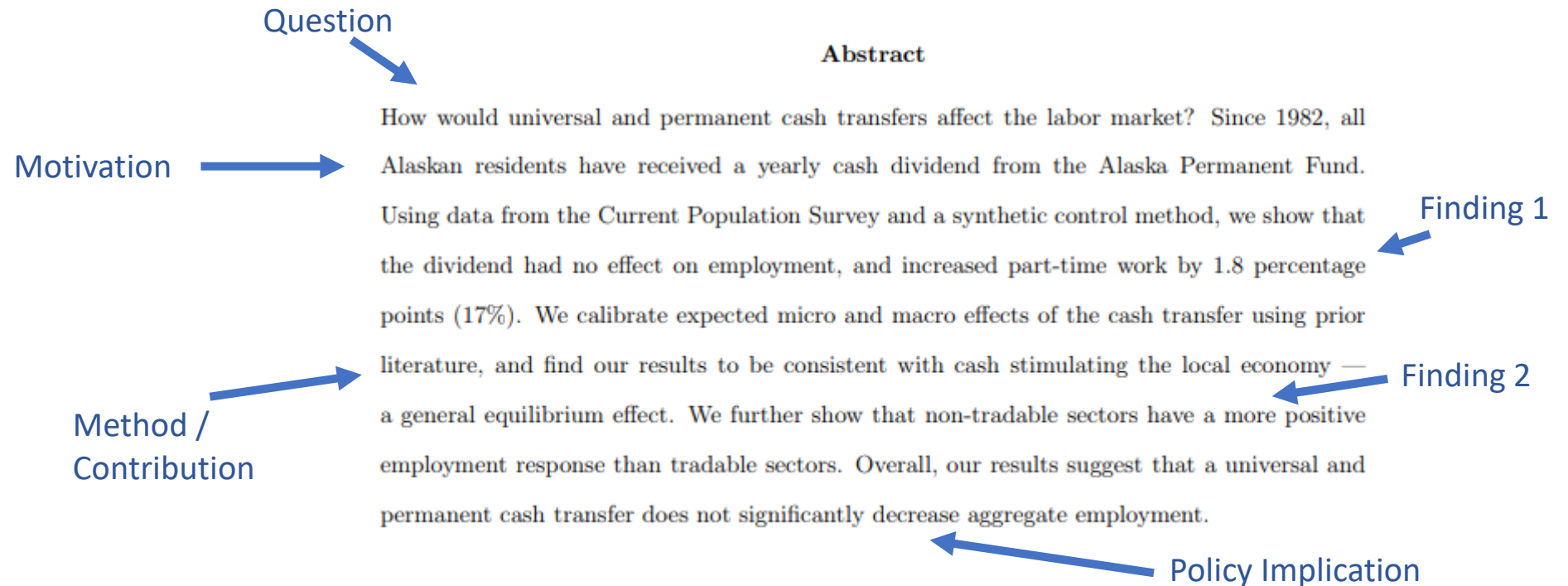
DAMON JONES

IOANA MARINESCU

University of Chicago and NBER University of Pennsylvania and NBER

December 2019

Clear, compact. No one order for good structure but do include all the key parts.

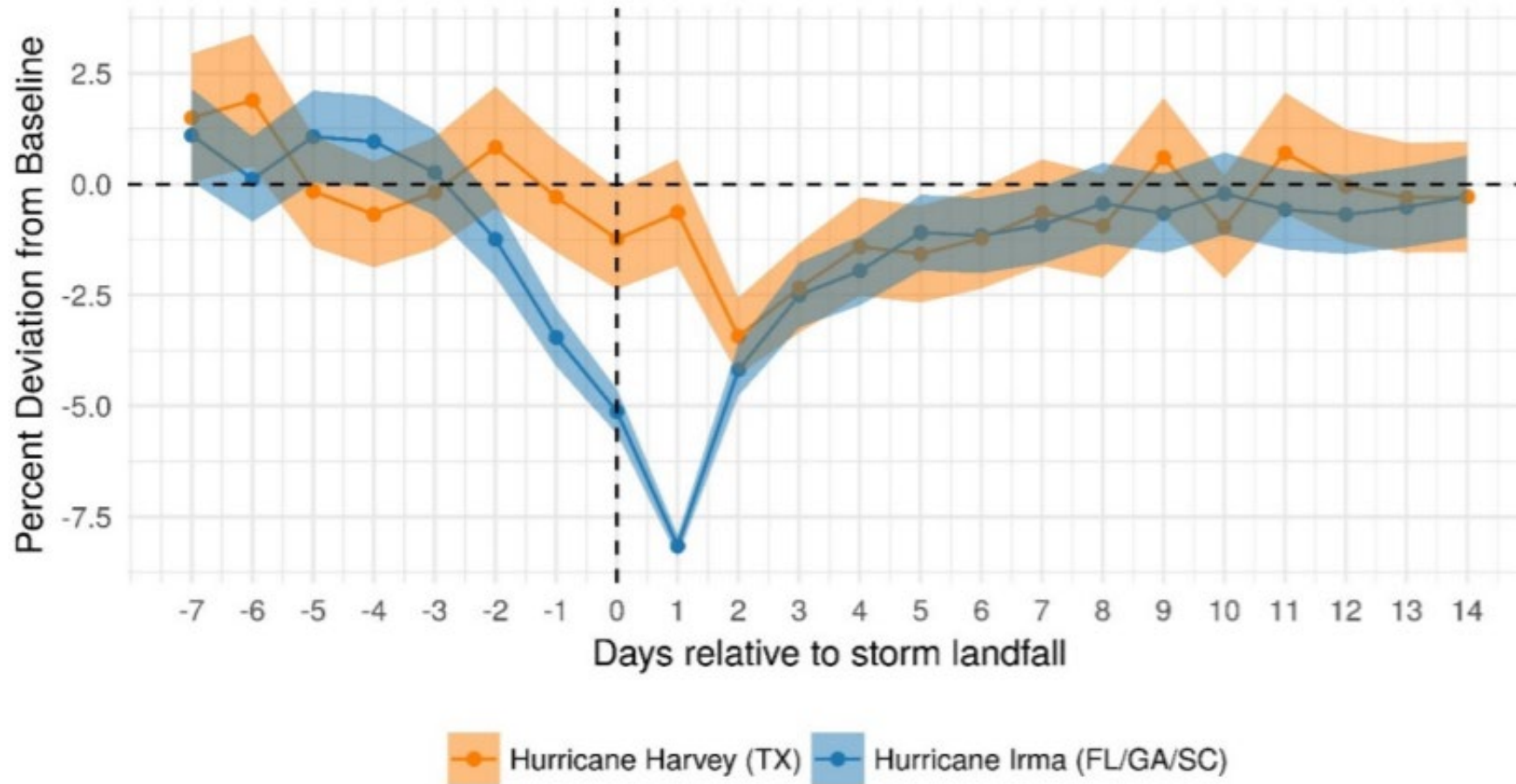


# Charts are as important as words

- A picture is worth a thousand words. Many think visually. Have a ‘money chart’ for your main result.
- Tables and charts must be understandable without reading the paper text. No acronyms, jargon, or symbols.
- Label axes. Use big enough font sizes. (Pity us old people.) Make sure prints clearly in black and white.

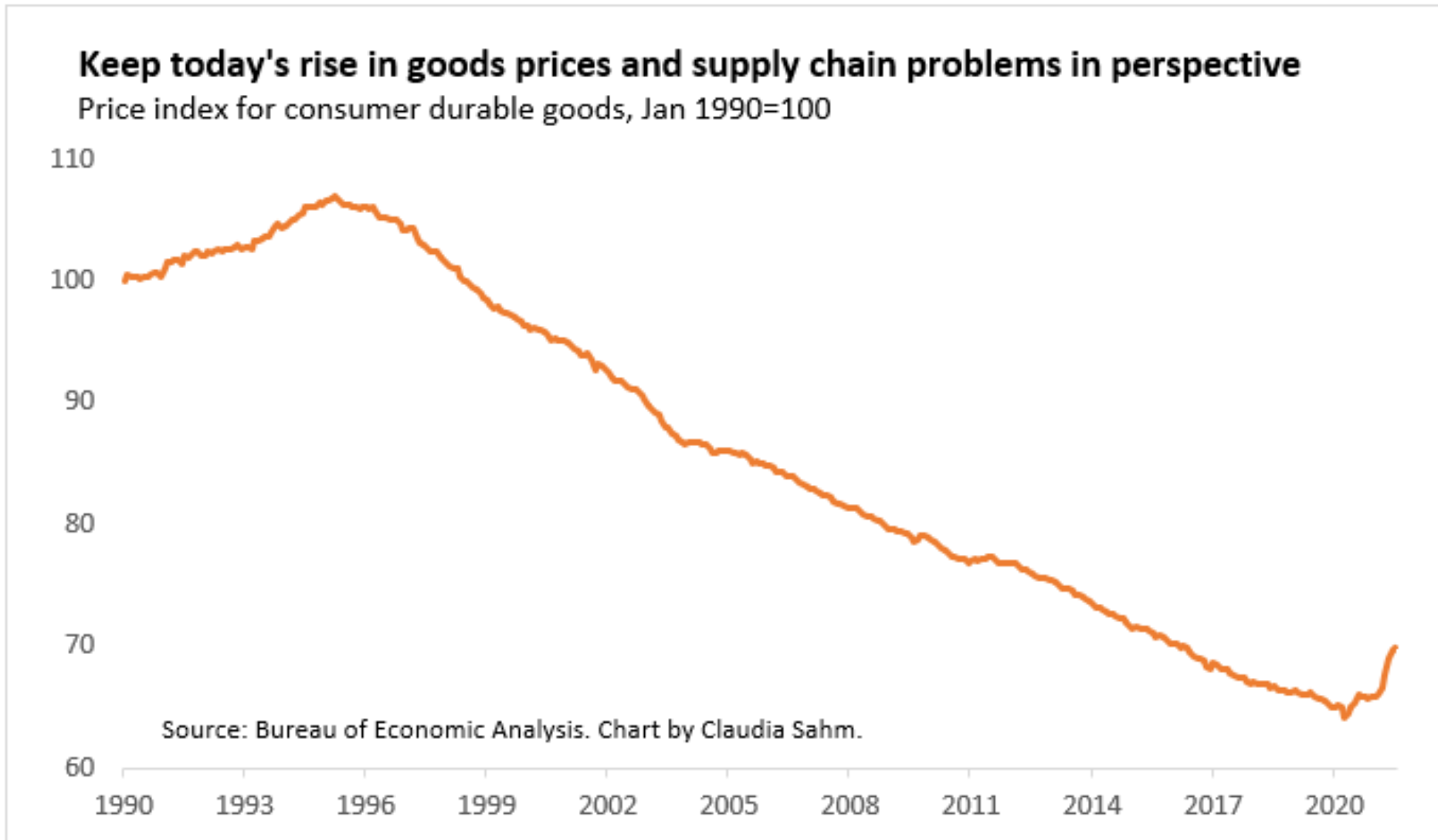
# Examples: Chart I

**Figure 11. Effects of Hurricanes on National Retail Sales Group Spending**



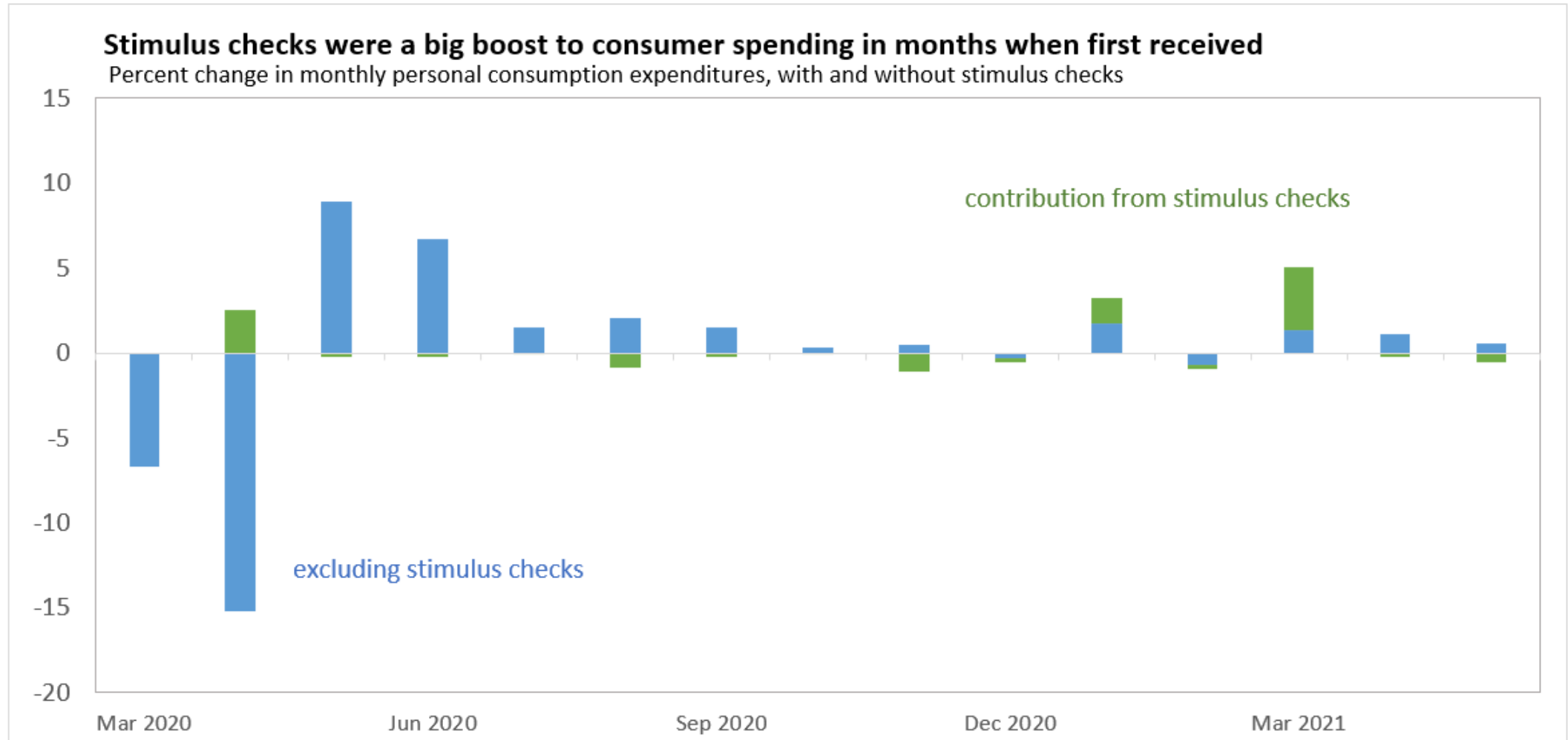
Source: Aladangady, Aron-Dine, Dunn, Feiveson, Lengermann, and Sahm ([2021](#)).

# Examples: Chart 2



Source: Sahm ([2021](#)).

# Examples: Chart 3



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis. Surveys of Consumers. Sahm ([2021](#)).

## Other general tips

- Stick to the facts. Avoid subjective words, such as “surprising,” “important,” or “obvious.” Limit adverbs.
- Focus on economic significance, not statistical significance, of your results.
- First sentence of paragraph should make main point.  
Read consecutively they should tell story of your paper.

## Get feedback from others

- Trade drafts with someone not in your field. Can you understand each others' abstracts, intros, and tables/charts?
- Make sure your adviser agrees with and understands each of your contributions and main findings.
- Writing is hard and pays off. It's not a gift, it's a craft. You have worked hard on your research. Now share it!



## Be proud of yourself and your work!

- Science is NOT a zero-sum game. We all stand on the shoulders of giants, and you have contributions to make.
- You are the cutting-edge of economics. We need new ideas and voices. That's you!! Own it.
- No research is definitive. Do not apologize for what you did not do. Share what you did.

## Moment of Zen

“The quality of your paper is orthogonal to the quality of your person.” ~John DiNardo

“Be kind to yourself. Life’s a marathon not a sprint.”  
~ #macromom

# Thank you!

Send me questions or feedback:  
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