

EconoFact Chats: What Makes for Good Economics Writing?

Catherine Rampell, The Washington Post

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Michael Klein

I'm Michael Klein, executive editor of Econofact, a non-partisan, web-based publication of the Fletcher School at Tufts University. At Econofact, we bring key facts and incisive analysis to the national debate on economic and social policies, publishing work from leading economists across the country. You can learn more about us and see our work at www.econofact.org.

Michael Klein

Our mission at Econofact is to bring to the public insights from economics on timely and important policy issues. Of course, we're not alone in this effort. Many print and broadcast media outlets have columnists or correspondents who also inform the public on these topics, and in so doing face similar challenges as we do at Econofact, namely making economic and social policy issues that may seem arcane and obscure; interesting, accessible, and relevant. One of the very best people working in this area is my guest today, Catherine Rampell. She is an opinion columnist at The Washington Post. She also appears on CNN, the PBS News Hour, and Marketplace. Catherine has received many awards for her work, including the Online Journalism Award for Commentary in 2021, and the Weidenbaum Center Award for Evidence-based Journalism in 2010. Catherine, welcome to Econofact Chats.

Catherine Rampell

Thanks, Michael. Great to be here.

Michael Klein

Catherine, you were an anthropology major in college. How did you come to write about economics?

Catherine Rampell

So, I took a lot of economics classes in college, to be clear, but I went to school during an era, at least at my university, where virtually every economics major became an investment banker, and I knew that wasn't the path for me. I think I kind of landed on anthropology by default because it felt like the closest thing to journalism, which may or may not have been a good idea. But separately from all of this, I was a research assistant for a well-known economist, Alan Kruger, who sadly passed away a couple of years ago. I was his RA on academic papers, op-eds, a whole host of things, sometimes hunting down data for him. I don't think I quite appreciated what a cool opportunity it was at the time and what a big shot he was. Years later, I was like, wow, that's amazing he gave me a job. But in any event, sometime after I graduated college, when I was working as a journalist already, the New York Times was looking to hire an economics editor to launch a new blog. And the person who was kind of conducting the search within the Times emailed a bunch of economists, said, do any of you know any journalists who know something about this discipline? Because at the time, there were not that many. And Alan very kindly said, you know, you should probably interview my former RA who was working as a journalist and who does know something about this. So that's how they initially got my name. They kind of put me through the ringer and all of that probably gave me more responsibility than I was due at the time, worked out okay. And it turned out to be a really good time, for better or for worse, to be an economics journalist because we were heading into

the financial crisis and the great recession. And there was a lot of material to cover and there was a lot of demand for, you know, clear accessible journalism on these very confusing trends. And, you know, to be honest, well, like I said, I did take some classes in economics to my great shame, I never took econometrics, which I regret. But most of what I know, I have learned on the job kind of necessity over the last 15 or 16 years.

Michael Klein

Well, it was probably, you know, really great that you were working for Alan because he did so many path breaking papers on really relevant policy linked topics. So that was wonderful training, and you eschewed the well worn path from Princeton to Wall Street. So we're all glad about that.

Catherine Rampell

Me too.

Michael Klein

When you're writing an article, Catherine, who do you imagine is your audience? And given that, what background in economics do you assume that they have, if any. In particular, something that we face at EconoFact as well, how do you make the topics that you write about both accessible and compelling?

Catherine Rampell

So for my reader, I try to picture someone who's smart and curious, but not necessarily an expert, not so in the weeds on all the things that I'm writing about. So maybe someone like my mom, although maybe she's not the best example, because she's probably more motivated than the typical reader to actually finish the piece. But I'm saying like, you know, she's not an econ person. But you know, she kind of wants to know about the world around her and get a better sense of what ongoing trends mean or what policies are in a way that's going to be, you know, not not feel like eating your vegetables. And my goal in general is to write things that are hopefully interesting and engaging for experts, and maybe even tell the experts information or data that they didn't know about, but still be accessible to the non experts, which can be hard. It's hard to do without either talking down to people or talking over their heads. And you know, a lot of getting that right. And I don't always. But a lot of it is just about practice. And part of being a good writer, I think is about how is about anticipating essentially how people could misunderstand you. And that's what I mean when I say a lot of it is practice, you know, I've written about certain topics frequently enough that I have a sense of where the tripwires are, what kind of concepts I need to emphasize or define or clarify, because people might misunderstand what I'm talking about. Even simple things like I write a lot of on immigration, for example, you know, clarifying if I'm talking about people here, people who are here lawfully or unlawfully, because there's a lot of confusion about that. So little things like that I think are helpful for making your writing more accessible, just understanding the baseline level of knowledge of your readers and where they might have misconceptions or might not be familiar with certain lingo.

Michael Klein

So that's very similar to the challenges we face. We think of a similar kind of audience. And we face the same kinds of challenges about accessibility and making things clear. And you know, we're very careful in getting rid of jargon in our articles. But we also hope to, as you do, and as

you hope to, and as you in fact achieve, speak to experts about things that they might not quite know all the details about, but they can be well informed. So you seem to publish a new article every two to five days. Do you find it challenging to come up with ideas for articles that frequently?

Catherine Rampell

Some days, I think I have too many things I want to weigh in on. That's often been the case recently, just because there's so much news happening in the economy. And sometimes I'm panicking, because I have a deadline. You know, I have to deliver two columns a week. I have a deadline, and I can't figure out something to say, or at least something that I won't worry about being embarrassed by six months later. So it varies. It can be challenging. And I think there's also often a trade-off between what feels interesting or provocative in the moment because it's a different thing that other people haven't said, and what's likely to be right or true, particularly six months on. Like for example, I often get asked to make predictions about things like, are we going to have a recession? Has inflation peaked? Stuff like that lately. And people want to know that, but it's very easy to say something that you regret. And I have learned that the hard way, unfortunately. I think the best journalism is work that is both interesting and true. And that's a very small venn diagram overlap between those two things. And sometimes some journalists err towards one versus the other, being more provocative or potentially going out on a limb versus being a little more boring but safer. And it's a trade-off that a lot of journalists have to think about, especially if you're being asked to, like me, come up with hopefully coherent arguments, coherent, well-supported arguments with a thesis twice a week.

Michael Klein

Yeah, you know, they say if you're going to make a prediction, predict often.

Catherine Rampell

I didn't know that one, but yes, fair enough.

Michael Klein

So before this interview, I looked at the columns you've published over the past couple of months. There's a really pretty wide range of topics. There's the credit crunch, taxation, the federal budget, Medicaid, immigration, economic forecasting, even though you don't want to do it yourself, the birth rate, recent policies like the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS Act, just to name a few. Some of the columns are speaking pretty directly to the events of the day, while others are, as you've indicated, and as we say it at EconoFact, evergreen topics. How do you decide on the mix between the topical and the more evergreen subjects?

Catherine Rampell

Well, as I said, sometimes there are things in the news that I feel like I have to write about because they're compelling, people are confused about them, and there's a role for me to play, I hope, in helping readers make sense of stuff, or even raising whatever my own questions are. That might be some big new development like the credit crunch, for example. There are plenty of occasions for that lately. I also have a very long google doc of topics that are usually more evergreen, like things that I want to get to, and they might be anywhere between 10% baked to fully baked. Some things I can execute quickly, if it's like a high concept piece that doesn't require a lot of reporting, or I've already done the research, some things I can't, but I'm often

gathering string over many months. I've been working for months on something about permitting reform. It's been very difficult to get that done, I hope I will, but it's kind of going on in the background. I don't know if I would call that evergreen, but it's not necessarily as time-sensitive, and sometimes I execute those things when they come together, and I think I have sufficient material for it to be compelling. Sometimes I just have to pull the trigger because I have nothing else I really want to write that day. It just varies, but I do try to have a mix of things that are off the news, particularly when there's a lot of news that feels like it's within my key areas of interest, and things that are a little bit more longer gestating.

Michael Klein

The other thing that strikes me about the wide range of topics that you cover, and something you alluded to earlier, is that you need to be conversant with a very wide range of areas of economics. How do you inform yourself about such a wide set of issues, and feel free to include in your answer “EconoFact is a great source for me.”

Catherine Rampell

EconoFact has been a great source for me, and I have cited it in the past, particularly on you sometimes put out these short, they're almost like a white paper with a bunch of cool data that I've been looking for. Again, I think there was something on immigration, I'm trying to remember what it was. I think it was about the missing immigrant workforce or something.

Michael Klein

Yeah, by Giovanni Perri and Reem Zaiour. That was one of our most cited pieces, and actually we have something by them, something new coming out quite soon as well.

Catherine Rampell

Oh, cool, I will look for it! But in general, I would say I am highly reliant on a large and generous group of experts who are willing to help me. Journalists are almost by definition dilettantes. We have to be quick learners and be kind of baseline conversant in a lot of subjects, but we are not experts on everything. And so I benefit from the generosity of a lot of people in my network who I've met, interviewed, spoken with over the years in different fields. People who I know will take my call, who will not judge me if I ask basic or dumb questions and patiently explain things to me, and help me get things right. And it's harder earlier in your career, I think, to navigate who's a trustworthy person, or who's a credible expert on certain things. I've been doing this long enough that I have a better sense of that. And if I don't know whom to call on a particular topic, there are also people that I know can kind of connect me, you know, people at the NBER, for example. I'll say I'm really looking for an expert on X, Y, and Z. But now I have a better sense of how to find people. And it's also useful for me to get a sense over time of who really cares about being quoted and who wants to be quoted, who really doesn't want to be quoted. But they want their name out of the press, but they're invested in helping media coverage be better. And knowing the difference between those people and, you know, who's going to be willing to take calls under what conditions, you know, a lot of it's practice. And then I also often ask people when I'm interviewing them, particularly if it's a subject that I am relatively new to, a question like who disagrees with you on this. And most people will, in my experience, you know, be willing to give a candid answer on that. You know, they might say, oh, well, that person's wrong. But I want to get a sense of where the sources of contention are

in any topic that I'm learning about, so that I get a better sense of what the arguments, you know, for and against are, what the complications are, what the caveats are, et cetera.

Michael Klein

And one of the goals that we had at EconoFact, even early on, was that we wanted to provide experts across the country who aren't normally contacted, the opportunity to talk to people like you and also to afford journalists a much wider roster of people that they can get in touch with. And, you know, we've been, I think, quite successful in that. And, you know, there's a lot of expertise out there that isn't drawn on because it's just hard to know who to call as you're suggesting. Another thing that we want to do is we want to correct misperceptions. And some of your columns are very good at correcting widely held misperceptions. For example, your recent column about the burden of taxation. Which commonly held views do you think are the most off base, and being so are especially problematic for the political discourse that's going on in the country?

Catherine Rampell

Oh, we could do a whole other hour on this. Taxes are very fertile ground for a whole bunch of reasons. People have very strong and often very wrong opinions because everybody pays taxes so they think they're an expert. And our tax system is not designed to be particularly legible. It's really complex. It's easy to be confused. And there are tricky things in it too, you know, about, like, even when you're, whether we're talking about an individual person's taxes, whether their taxes went up or down, for example, very confusing to people. They think that it's about how big the size of their refund was at the end of the year, often, because I hear these people, oh, my taxes went up because my refund was smaller. It's like, no, that's not necessarily true. Maybe you're withholding changed, or what have you. And there are other tricky things writing about taxes and budgets writ large, like what is a baseline? It's very easy. Like I said, the system is, in some ways, I think it's complex by design. I think in some cases, it's complex of necessity. But getting people to understand baselines, counterfactuals, things like that, not super intuitive.

Michael Klein

Yeah, they say that a camel is a horse designed by a committee, or in this case, a tax writing group. And, you know, one of the interesting things about taxes that I didn't really think about until we published a post by Bill Gale, who's at Brookings, is that if you're thinking about sort of the whole system and the progressivity of the system, you want to think not just about who pays what, but who gets what as well. So the progressivity includes what people receive from the government, not just what people pay.

Catherine Rampell

And there are a lot of misperceptions to be clear about what people receive as well. Whenever I write about Medicare and the long-term structural problems relating to Medicare, I often hear from readers, well, I paid for my benefits. And it's like, well, you did pay into the system. But, actuarially, you are likely to get a lot more money out in the form of services than you pay in either through payroll taxes or premiums. And again, the system is not super legible. People don't know what they're receiving. They don't know necessarily the value of their taxes accrued over the years or benefits that they're receiving. And those kinds of complexities in the system, I think, make it harder to have an informed debate about what policies are problematic or what

policy fixes would be helpful for things like making the Medicare trust fund hold, for example.

Michael Klein

So do you think it's completely apocryphal that there's a bumper sticker out there that says, 'get the government's hands off my social security.'

Catherine Rampell

I think there was a photo of someone with a sign that said, 'get your government hands off my Medicare' during the Affordable Care Act. That's my recollection. Maybe I've invented the memory, but I feel like I have seen that somewhere. And I definitely have heard sentiment that kind of convey the same thing, even if not quite as comically or as pithily as that version.

Michael Klein

Catherine, you have a special emphasis on data-driven journalism. And that's evident in many of your articles in which you cite statistics to make your point. You also published recently a very good article co-written with Yan Wu that looks at detailed budgets of three people to show how their finances are being stressed by rising prices. And that article too was very data driven, but there's a direct human element in that as well. When you try to get your point across to readers, how do you see the respective roles of statistics, and more human narratives?

Catherine Rampell

I think the most compelling economic journalism is often work that marries the quantitative side, data documenting a real phenomenon or trend with real-world examples to make those trends and statistics more tangible or more human. To be candid, it is often hard to do in my columns because of the length. The time that it takes to explain the person who exemplifies the trend, consumes most of my 750 words. So it is challenging. In the piece that you mentioned, it was a longer piece. They gave me a little more room to talk about this, and to talk about, to dig into some of the data that had been, we got receipts data from one of these receipt scanning apps called Fetch. So we could actually match up what people's expenses were, how they had shifted and how that compared to their recollections of how much prices had changed because people have fuzzy memories. And then we also got data or got some data analysis from the Penn Wharton Budget Model, which again, were very generous with us and crunched some numbers looking at how much expenses versus earnings had changed year over year for different types of households. But one other thing I want to mention is that the narrative human element is important not only for making your subject more concrete and intelligible to the public. It also, I think, is useful, very useful in the reporting itself, and the research itself because there are things that you miss if you only look at what's already been measured. What off-the shelf metrics are already available, even if you put them together in interesting ways. So for example, in this piece that you were talking about where I looked at how consumers were responding to inflation, how they were feeling the effects of inflation, because there had been sort of a puzzle like on some level the economy looks spectacular, and yet consumers are really bummed, despite all these jobs that are out there, is inflation really that big of a deal? And talking with people, one of the themes that came up across many, many interviews about the cost of inflation was not just the financial cost, but the psychological cost. What I might refer to as the mental tax, that they have to spend more time price shopping and paying attention on trips to the grocery store that might have once been

kind of on autopilot. Those kinds of details about how people are experiencing the economy can be very hard to quantify. To my knowledge, there are no real good measures of like how stressed out people are because they have to exert more mental energy price shopping. But it came up a lot, and it's something I would have missed if I were looking only at off-the-shelf metrics.

Michael Klein

So finally, Catherine, I'd like to ask you, if you could wave a magic wand and get every high school civics teacher in the country to teach one of your columns. Which one would it be?

Catherine Rampell

I mean, they could all read my Phantom of the Opera eulogy if they were so inclined.

Michael Klein

This is a civics class, Catherine.

Catherine Rampell

Okay, okay. Yeah, I don't know that the Phantom was a model citizen. I think the recent piece that comes to mind that I would point people toward was a piece called something like "Everything You Know About the Debt Ceiling is Wrong and Here is Why." It was about a broader theme of interest to me, which is about why government is so opaque. You know, one of the things that I keep talking about, why the tax system is so opaque, our legislative system is so opaque, the immigration system, lots of things that I write about, and whom that benefits, whom that complexity benefits. Because when you have complexity in government systems, it leads to a lot of misconceptions about things. And I think that complexity often rewards demagogues. There's this line about immigration that it takes five minutes to explain and 30 seconds to lie about. And I think that is true for a lot of complex policy issues. So that's what the piece is about. I mean, again, it's sort of like an undercurrent in my work. It's part of the reason I write about the topics that I do, because I feel like there are ways for me to add value when there are these complex technical subjects that I can hopefully help translate, and help people make sense of. And that piece is sort of a good summation of my approach to all of that.

Michael Klein

Well, you certainly do add value. I'm a big fan of your columns, you know, as are, I'm sure, millions of other people. It's been great speaking with you today. And thanks for joining me, Catherine, on EconoFact Chats.

Catherine Rampell

You're very welcome. Thanks for having me.

Michael Klein

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