It has been extremely helpful for me to create an outline of a research paper before I begin doing any data or computational work. It will focus your question and tell you what kind of results you will want to generate. Below I layout the bones of the outline I use. Note that a pure theory paper may not have all these sections, but even a heavily empirical paper should at least provide a narrative of the economic model at work (if not a formal, mathematical model).

1. Introduction
   - What is the question?
   - What do you find?
   - Why is this important?
   - What is novel? (you mainly just need enough of a literature review to set you up to answer this question)
   - How do you do it? (briefly)
   - How is the rest of the paper laid out? (“In Section 2 I present the model...”)

2. Model
   - Specify model (See the “Specifying an Economic Model” guide)
   - Even if no formal mathematical model, spell out the mechanisms at work and their implications
   - Either here or in intro, you need to give some kind of hypothesis that you can test (if using data) or prove (if just theory)

3. Data
   - What is the dataset? Describe it (time frame, sample frame, perhaps how collected)
   - Present some descriptive statistics relevant to your question
   - If possible, show us if your data says anything about your question without any econometric model (e.g. raw correlations)
   - Pictures (i.e., graphs) can be especially helpful/persuasive

4. Empirical Methodology
   - How do you estimate your model/test it’s predictions?
   - Why do you do it this way? Have you considered other approaches?
   - Describe the identification of your model (i.e., what characteristics of the data allow you to identify each parameter of interest?)
   - Describe assumptions you need to make to estimate the model.
   - Describe any important choices you make for the estimation (e.g., clustering, weighting, etc.)

5. Results
   - Present the estimated parameters
   - Describe the (important) numbers from the table(s) in the text
   - Recall, pictures can be especially helpful/persuasive
   - Give some context for the results (e.g. run a counterfactual, compare to some aggregate statistic, compare to something the reader might be more familiar with)
6. Discussion/Conclusion

- What was the question?
- What did you find?
- What does this mean/why important?
- Caveats?
- Implications for future work

When writing, fill in this skeleton. List what tables you will have where and what the rows/columns will look like. Draw the graphs you think will be more informative for your question. Doing these things before you begin doesn’t mean that things won’t change along the way, but they will provide a great guide and save you a lot of time and effort.