



How Should Investors respond to rising real rates?



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P 07 4924 9100 / E kennas@kennas.com / www.kennas.com

5th Floor Capricornia Electricity Centre Cnr Fitzroy & Alma Streets / PO Box 201 / Rockhampton Qld 4700



Should investors adjust their portfolios in response to the U.S. Federal Reserve enacting the first in what is likely to be a series of interest rate hikes?

For most investors, the answer will be no, other than regular rebalancing. But history shows that certain sub-asset classes have consistently outperformed during rising real rate environments.

"Our research suggests that the current environment may present opportunities for those investors who have the ability and willingness to take some active risk and be a little more targeted in their approach," said Ian Kresnak, an investment strategist at Vanguard and a member of the Vanguard Capital Markets Model (VCMM) research team¹.

RARE CONDITIONS PROMPT ACTION

Kresnak noted that we are in an unusual market and economic environment, which is likely to mean that the Fed will raise interest rates over the coming years to levels not seen since before the global financial crisis. Although the recent events in Ukraine and uncertainty about the effects policy normalisation will have on the broader economy raise the risks that rates may not rise as much as we anticipate, it is unlikely that they will stay at or below current levels due to high inflation rates.

This environment is likely to lead to rising real interest rates, which differ from nominal interest rates in that real rates are adjusted to remove the effects of inflation. The VCMM team investigated how some sub-asset classes performed during rising real rate environments and what drove performance. Given Vanguard's expectation that the Fed may raise the nominal rate to 3%, the team focused on similar periods with relatively large rate hikes that also led to spikes in real rates.

The analysis examined a mix of economic environments during which real rate increases occurred, including during an improving economy in 1992–1994 and a period of low growth and low interest rates in 2014–2019.

"It was important to include a wide range of economic cycles to capture as many of the conditions that exist today," Kresnak said. "This allows us to get a better understanding of how and why different sub-asset classes performed."

THREE KEY FINDINGS

The team's research resulted in three key findings:

1. **Certain sub-asset-classes have consistently outperformed, and some have consistently underperformed.** Figure 1 (overleaf) shows how 13 common sub-asset classes in investors' portfolios performed over six periods when real rates rose. The sub-asset classes that outperformed on average also tended to outperform across the six periods. The same was true for those sub-asset classes that on average underperformed, as they consistently underperformed across the different environments when real rates rose.

"Although it is not a perfect relationship, there is a clear pattern that exists between rising real rates and sub-asset class performance," Kresnak said. "When real interest rates are rising, investors tend to prefer the certainty of more immediate cash flows in their equity portfolios, which is what we typically see in highquality value stocks, the best-performing sub-asset class during rising real rate environments."

The VCMM team found that the relationship between rising real rates and performance is stronger with bonds than with equities, given the more fixed nature of bonds' cash flows. "Equity cash flows are more uncertain, and performance tends to be influenced more by other factors, such as the business environment," he said. "In general, bonds tend to be adversely affected in a rising real rate environment."

2. Rising real rates hedge inflation.

Despite the current high inflation, it may not be advisable to overweight traditional inflation hedges such as Treasury Inflation Protected Securities and commodities, Kresnak said. "Traditional inflation hedges have typically underperformed when real interest rates rise, because policymakers are acting with the goal of bringing down inflation, and investors generally believe they will succeed," he said.

3. The growth environment is not a distinguishing factor.

Rising real rates typically are associated with improving economic conditions and higher inflation. But they can also rise because of excessive monetary tightening or deflation, which causes economic conditions to contract.

Figure 1. Prolonged and persistent periods of real rate increases favour some sub-asset classes

	1 FEB. 1975– 30 JUN. 1976	1 JUL. 1980– 31 AUG. 1981	1 JAN. 1983– 30 SEP. 1984	1 OCT. 1992– 31 DEC. 1994	1 SEP. 2002– 31 JUL. 2007	1 AUG. 2014– 30 APR. 2019
Above median relative returns on average						
High-quality value	Top quartile	Top quartile	Top quartile	Top quartile	Top quartile	4th quartile
International equities	Not applicable	Not applicable	2nd quartile	Top quartile	Top quartile	Top quartile
Emerging markets	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	4th quartile	Top quartile	2nd quartile
Value stocks	Top quartile	3rd quartile	Top quartile	2nd quartile	2nd quartile	3rd quartile
U.S. equities	2nd quartile	2nd quartile	2nd quartile	2nd quartile	Median	Top quartile
Small-cap stocks	Not applicable	Top quartile	3rd quartile	Top quartile	2nd quartile	2nd quartile
High quality growth	2nd quartile	2nd quartile	Median	4th quartile	3rd quartile	Top quartile
Below median relative returns on average						
Growth stocks	3rd quartile	3rd quartile	3rd quartile	3rd quartile	3rd quartile	4th quartile
High-yield bonds	Not applicable	Not applicable	4th quartile	2nd quartile	4th quartile	Median
Home prices	4th quartile	Median	3rd quartile	3rd quartile	4th quartile	2nd quartile
Commodities	Median	4th quartile	4th quartile	Median	3rd quartile	3rd quartile
Low-quality growth	3rd quartile	4th quartile	4th quartile	4th quartile	2nd quartile	3rd quartile
U.S. aggregate bonds	4th quartile	4th quartile	2nd quartile	3rd quartile	4th quartile	4th quartile

Sources: Vanguard calculations, based on data from the U.S. Treasury, the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Bloomberg, CRSP, Kenneth R. French's website, at mba.tuck.dartmouth.edu/pages/faculty/ken.french/data_library.html, Robert Shiller's website, at aida.wss.yale.edu/~shiller/data.htm, Standard & Poor's, MSCI, Dow Jones, and Russell, as of 31 December 2021. Past performance is no guarantee of future returns. The performance of an index is not an exact representation of any particular investment, as you cannot invest directly in an index



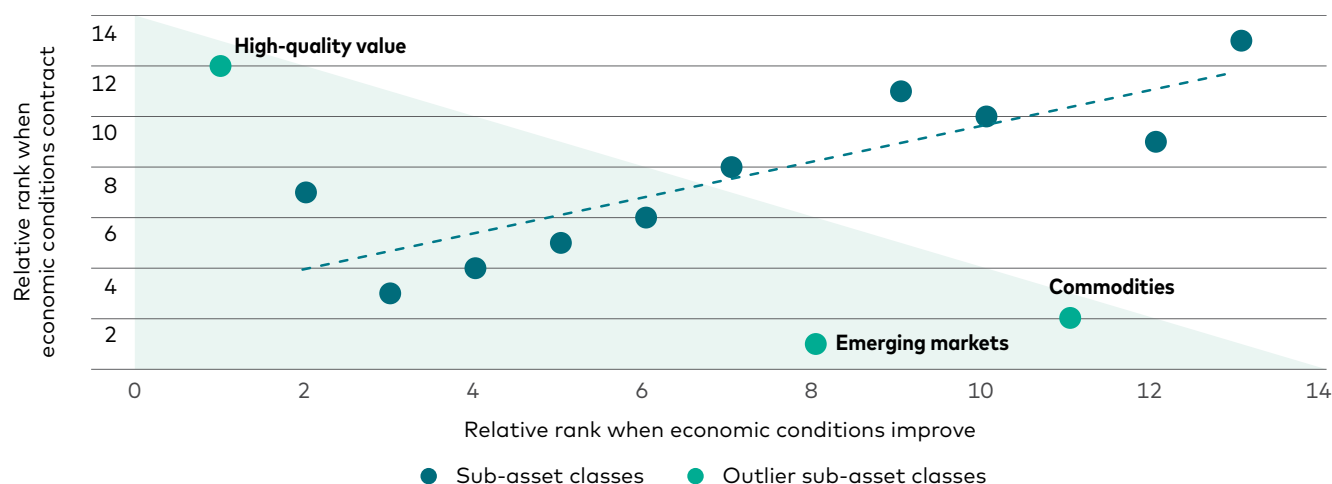
Figure 2 compares performance in a rising real rate environment when economic conditions are contracting and when they are improving. It clearly shows a positive slope for most sub-asset classes, suggesting that relative performance is similar whether the economy is expanding or contracting, as long as real rates are rising. If economic conditions were a key driver of relative performance, we would expect the dots to be positioned along the solid diagonal line sloping downward.

The analysis revealed three notable outliers—emerging markets, commodities, and highquality value. Vanguard research shows that valuations for emerging markets stocks are sensitive to the economic environment².

Commodity returns also depend heavily on the economic cycle, because demand is higher when the economy is growing. And highquality value stocks tend to outperform when economic conditions are strong, because investors are less willing to pay a premium for growth when it is plentiful.

The analysis also looked at sub-asset class performance during periods of rising and falling real interest rates (**Figure 3**). The negative slope in the chart below suggests that changes in real rates are a significant factor in explaining relative performance.

Figure 2. Economic conditions don't matter for most sub-asset classes when real rates rise



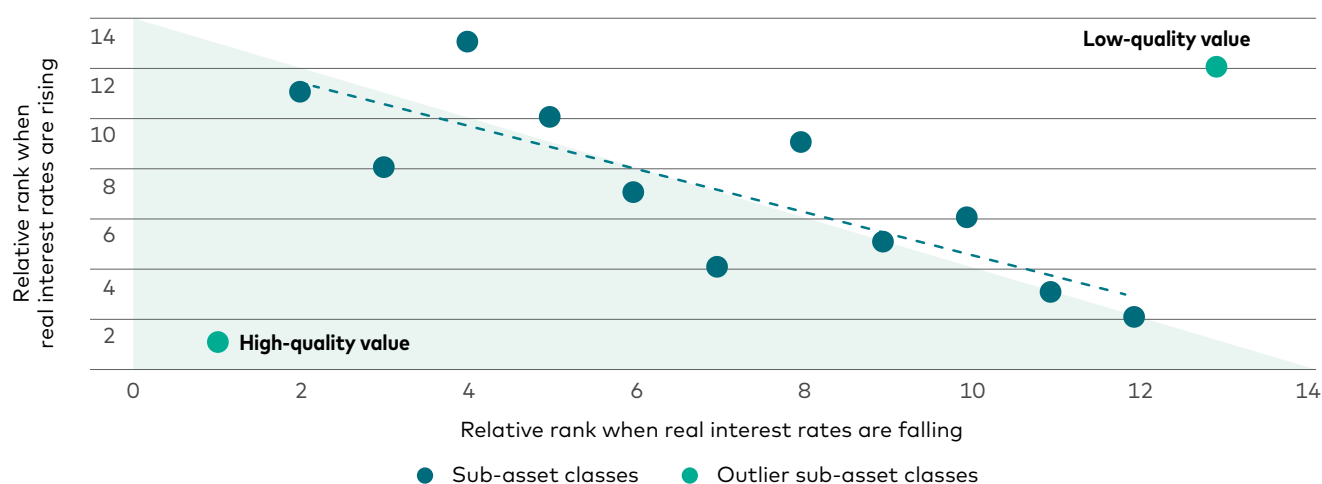
Notes: Each dot represents a sub-asset class listed in the first chart. The dots are plotted based on their historical relative performance rank when economic conditions are expanding and when they are contracting. Past performance is no guarantee of future returns. The performance of an index is not an exact representation of any particular investment, as you cannot invest directly in an index.

Source: Vanguard calculations as of 31 December 2021.

Kresnak added that many sub-asset classes that stand to gain in a rising real rate environment have been out of favour for years. As real rates increase, the risks are that active investors will stick with the best active decisions of the past decade and that passive investors will fail to rebalance.

“The opportunity is that the sub-asset classes that stand to gain the most from normalizing policy are more attractively priced precisely because they underperformed in the last decade,” he said. “In that sense, both active and passive investors stand to benefit.”

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Source: Vanguard calculations as of 31 December 2021.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT



Brent Giles
Partner / Director

Certified Financial Planner

07 4924 9100
brentgiles@kennas.com



Thomas Cleary
Representative

Financial Planner

07 4924 9100
tomcleary@kennas.com



Caitlin Stewart
Representative

Financial Planner

07 4924 9100
caitlinstewart@kennas.com