

Getting a good start on your research: Writing up the paper's introduction

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Publishing research in quality academic journals is always challenging. To improve the odds of publishing in the better business and allied social science journals, an author needs to get the paper off to a good start. To do that, much attention should be devoted to the paper's introduction. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the introduction of some exemplary articles in the social sciences, primarily in the management and international business areas, and contrast those with some problematic examples. This research draws on a purposive sample and presents three of the exemplary article introductions for detailed discussion. Structural problems with the introduction are a major reason why otherwise good research can immediately run into problems with editors and reviewers. Thus, this paper contributes in providing guidance to authors in writing and organizing their introductions, from which they can also better organize and develop their full manuscripts and increase the odds of papers being accepted by good scholarly journals. Additional helpful examples and sources for authors are also provided and discussed.

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1. Introduction

How can authors improve their chances of publishing work in good academic journals? Writing and publishing quality academic articles is always difficult. Perspective authors face many hurdles, from getting and analyzing the data to grounding their work in theory and providing theory and empirical contributions (Datta & Jones, 2018). Research has shown that authors who want to improve their chances of publishing in the business and allied social science journals should ensure that their research is well-designed and analyzed, their papers properly formatted, and consistent with the target journal's aims and scope (Konrad, 2008; Ahlstrom, 2015b). For example, authors should obviously not submit a paper about managing working capital to a management journal. Just because a finance paper (or any other paper) has the word "management" in the title does not mean it is in the management domain.¹ If such a paper's

¹ Some papers with significant finance content may be suitable for a management journal. But usually such a paper should contribute to management research and practice, such as providing evidence

dependent variable is about finance or say, consumer behavior, then it will likely not be appropriate for a management journal (Ahlstrom, 2011a; Baruch, 2016). Similarly, a paper providing a number of “how-to” steps on an operational topic in manufacturing, for instance, will not be appropriate for most mainstream management journals, which generally do not publish such explanatory or training-type papers these days (Ahlstrom, 2010). On the other hand, papers on the performance of employees, teams, and individual firms would probably be appropriate for a management or international business (IB) journal, though would not be right for say, an economics journal, which would usually deal more with the performance of industries, firm clusters, or national economies as opposed to that of individuals or firms (Estrin & Bhaumik, 2016; Nelson, 1991).

Beyond getting the aims and scope right and submitting the paper to an appropriate journal (Ahlstrom, 2011a; Baruch, 2016), authors need to be concerned about a number of other things in trying to publish their work (Ahlstrom, Bruton, & Zhao, 2013; Clark, Wright, & Ketchen, 2016). It is generally understood that when a paper is not well grounded theoretically or has significant methodological or research design flaws, it is likely to be rejected from quality academic journals (Colquitt & Ireland, 2009; Daft, 1995; Eden, 2008). And fortunately, there are a number of resources dedicated to helping researchers with those important basics, both on the quantitative (e.g. Cummings & Frost, 1985, 1995; Heppner & Heppner, 2003; Huff, 1998, 2008; Kerlinger, 1995) and qualitative (Ahlstrom & Bruton, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Van de Ven, 2007) sides.² As longtime editors and reviewers for management and IB journals, we have handled numerous papers with good data and statistical analyses; only occasionally are papers rejected outright over incorrect methods or research design, though sometimes authors may be directed to different methods or samples (Boyd, 2016) or improved operationalization and definitions (Daft, 1995). We have found that authors are fairly well-trained in research design and methods and do a pretty good job with this in their papers.

Where many authors have problems is with the organization of the manuscript. More specifically, many papers we have handled that were submitted to conferences or journals suffer from a number of problems. That is, they do not have an unambiguous research question and purpose, are not positioned in the past literature, have not been properly motivated, and provide little discernible contribution to the relevant research domain (Ahlstrom, 2015a; Daft, 1995). As a result, these papers tend to be unfocused and provide little more than lists of literature, sprawling writing and analysis, and thus fail to contribute much to existing theory and evidence on their topics (Ahlstrom, 2010; Ahlstrom & Bruton, 2014). This problem of sprawling and unfocused writing often starts with the paper’s introduction. Authors need to compose a strong introduction section so readers will understand what the paper is about (and not about), and how it will contribute to theory and evidence in the field (Grant & Pollark, 2011). The introduction will also serve to outline the rest of the paper.

As such, the purpose of this paper is to draw on the content of some of the best journals in the management and IB areas and some other helpful sources to summarize some guidelines for writing the introduction of an empirical (including empirical-qualitative) paper for the management and IB literatures. This approach is developed from an overview of the commentaries of editors on this topic, several books about writing management and other exemplary papers (e.g. Clark et al., 2016; Fayolle, & Wright, 2014). the study of papers published in the top three management and IB journals and select

regarding firm governance or performance or improving management (not finance) theory (e.g. Ahlstrom, Cumming, & Vismara, 2018; Huang, Chen, & Kao, 2012).

² Sage Publications has also provided a great deal of work on research design and methods and other helpful support topics, especially among its many research booklets (e.g. Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2003).

comparisons with manuscripts that were rejected. Although the focus is on business research, the principles apply to other empirical (and case study) papers in the social sciences.³ To help authors improve the introduction of manuscripts, this paper provides some examples of good (and weak) research questions, introductions, summarizing past research (briefly in the introduction) paper framing, organization and contributions.⁴ Although there is much good work explaining research, particularly in terms of methods, research design, and data analysis (e.g. Kerlinger, 1995; Cohen & Manion, 1998; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Van de Ven, 2007), methods and research design alone are not sufficient for writing and publishing good papers (Ahlstrom, 2015a; Cummings & Frost, 1985, 1995; Huang, 2007; Huff, 1998, 2008). The approach discussed here is not meant to be a formula for writing an introduction, but more of a guide (cf. Ahlstrom, 2011b; Ahlstrom et al., 2013). Its application can help authors accomplish one of the most important tasks in writing a research paper, that is, getting the paper started off well, and clearly positioned in the literature such that its contributions to theory, empirical evidence, and practice are made clear to editors, reviewers, and readers (Huff, 1998, 2008; Rynes, 2002).⁵ This also helps authors to establish a clear structure for the paper.

This paper thus contributes to the practice of doing research and especially writing papers for publication. It does so by examining some exemplary research from both the micro and macro sides of management while also suggesting some helpful sources on paper framing and organization (e.g. Abrahamson, 2008; Ahlstrom, 2011a, 2011b; Ahlstrom et al., 2013; Huff, 1998, 2008). Additional helpful hints for prospective authors that are often not detailed in books on methodology or thesis writing are also suggested (Clark et al., 2016; Kilduff, 2007). Research from the content analysis literature was also drawn on here in helping us summarize some key ideas and unpack the approaches to framing, structuring and constructing empirical papers in the management and social sciences (Duriau, Reger, & Pfarrer, 2007). This can also contribute to the work of editors and reviewers as they review papers and give feedback to authors and suggest helpful sources to improve their writing and research design (Ahlstrom, 2011b).

2. Organizing the introduction

Many of the thousands of manuscripts we have edited and reviewed over the years for journals, conferences, symposia, and workshops have generally been pretty good in that they covered interesting topics and provided good data and analyses. Yet many papers, even some of the better ones, also had significant difficulties with their composition and organization, making them difficult to understand (or

³ There are a lot of similarities between management papers and other papers in business and allied social sciences such as sociology and psychology. There are also similarities though some differences between management and economics papers. For some discussion of the similarities and differences between management papers and those in several other fields such as economics, psychology, and history, see Clark, Wright, and Ketchen (2016), Estrin and Bhaumik (2016) and Nelson (1991).

⁴ This research draws on content analyses conducted on empirical papers from *The Academy of Management Journal*, and two other top journals in management and international business (IB) (Duriau, Reger, & Pfarrer, 2007). This in turn directed us to the paper structure as illustrated through some exemplary work (Ahlstrom, 2019; Ahlstrom et al., 2013; Meyer, Estrin, Bhaumik & Peng, 2009). All examples from published papers are cited, while the negative examples from rejected manuscripts are changed somewhat to maintain anonymity.

⁵ Other more conceptual papers also can use a similar approach (e.g. Peng, Ahlstrom, Carraher, & Shi, 2017). Though they present little or no data, conceptual papers have similar broad structures including research questions, positioning and contributions (e.g. Dunbar & Ahlstrom, 1995; Peng, Li, & Tian, 2016).

see their value), and thus more likely to be rejected (Ahlstrom, 2010; Konrad, 2008). Perhaps reflecting a similar experience, editors at *The Academy of Management Journal* reminded authors in a series of editorials (some of which are discussed below) how important first impressions and framing are in a paper, among other related items (e.g. Corley & Gioia, 2011; Grant & Pollark, 2011).

The introduction, which in management and IB manuscripts (and in related social science fields), is usually 2-3 pages or about 5-7 paragraphs, often determines whether the readers will continue much further (Grant & Pollack, 2011). Some of the common manuscript concerns with respect to the introduction section and related organizational problems are discussed below with several key examples and suggestions for improvement provided. It is vital that authors get their papers off to a good start in the introduction and understanding how introductions in the top management and IB journals are organized is helpful in that regard. It should also be noted that a strong introduction also provides a helpful outline for the paper. Table 1 summarizes the paragraphs of the introduction in an exemplary IB article from the *Strategic Management Journal* (Meyer et al., 2009).

Position in the Introduction	Illustrative examples	Explanation for the examples
Research question	"What determines foreign market entry strategies?"	The <i>research question</i> is in the first sentence here and should be as early as possible. It clearly specifies the paper's topic.
Paragraphs 1-2	"In particular, institutions.... However, traditional transaction cost research..." "As a result, questions of how macro-level institutions...have been relatively unexplored..." "However, a new generation of research suggests that..."	The first and second paragraphs provide the <i>mini literature review</i> of the introduction, showing what has been done on this topic, but is also "not enough" to answer the question. In this paper, the importance of institutions is introduced, but much previous research is on micro-aspects or background conditions of institutions.
Paragraph 3	"Given these institutional differences, how do foreign firms adapt entry strategies...?" "Focusing on this key question, we argue that (1) (2)"	The paper's <i>main proposition</i> can often be found around the third or fourth paragraph of the introduction. That is, given this past research, now here is what the current paper is proposing.
Paragraph 4	"In essence, we advocate an <i>integrative</i> perspective calling not only for..., but also for..." "This article thus responds to the call issued by...for more integration"	The <i>motivation</i> for the paper comes from showing the foci and limits of the previous research and also recent calls for research on this topic in previous papers.
Paragraph 5	"We test our hypotheses by integrating unique survey data with archival data from..."	The <i>mini methods</i> part of the introduction mentions the type of study that is to follow.
Paragraph 6	"Overall, this article makes three contributions. First, we enrich an institution-based view of...strategy...Second...institutions moderate resource-based... Finally, we extend the geographic reach of empirical research on emerging economies."	The <i>contributions paragraph</i> for the introduction provides a brief summary of contributions to theory, empirical evidence, and research design (which is expanded on later in the Discussion section).

Table 1. Structuring the introduction section of empirical papers in management and IB (see Meyer et al., 2009: 61-62)

2.1 The research question

Seeking to avoid problems associated with an unfocused and wandering introduction, good papers often provide a clear and answerable research question in the first paragraph, and if possible, in the first sentence (or even in the paper's title) (Belostecinic, 2017; Peng, Lee, & Wang, 2005). A good research question leaves little doubt what the paper will cover while providing boundaries to what can be complicated research topics (Ahlstrom, 2015b). A clear research question also makes it easy for the editor and reviewers to understand what the paper will ask and answer and if that paper has something to contribute to the research in that area. The research question also helps authors minimize potential drift from their topic. Many manuscripts, however, fail to provide a clear research question and opening paragraphs that start to situate and motivate the research (Ahlstrom, 2010; Grant & Pollack, 2011). This is a problem because without a clear research question and framing of the paper up front, a paper will have a tendency to wander around a topic and not focus on a specific question with a sharp focus on the topic (Ahlstrom, 2010, 2012).

If the editor and reviewers do not quite see what the paper is asking, they may start to get frustrated and start looking for reasons to reject (Grant & Pollack, 2011). Thus, the research question should be clear, interesting, and address something that needs to be better understood because past research did not fully answer the question and answering it will provide some value to the field (Davis, 1971; Liu, Serger, Tagscherer, & Chang, 2017; Sparrowe & Mayer, 2011).⁶ Some papers may also have multiple research questions, often in more conceptual areas; these may be closely related questions around a theme (e.g. Ahlstrom, Nair, Young, & Wang, 2006; Ahlstrom & Wang, 2009; Eloranta, Ojala, & Valtonen, 2010).

2.2 Clear research questions

It is helpful as Albert Einstein is reported to have said, to start an inquiry such as a paper with a research question that is simple, straightforward and has a clear answer. For example, an exemplary introduction was written by well-known economics and IB scholars Klaus Meyer, Saul Estrin, S.K. Baumik, and Mike Peng (2009). For instance, in their well-cited article from the *Strategic Management Journal*, Meyer and colleagues (2009: 61) asked in the first sentence: "What determines foreign market entry strategies?" It is evident from the outset that the paper will identify and test the factors that explain different internationalization strategies for firms. It is important to note that Meyer, Peng and colleagues (2009) did not write that they would "examine" or "explore" internationalization strategies, which is the way many manuscripts we have reviewed are written. The Meyer et al. (2009) paper is asking specifically about the factors that impact firm decisions to select different internationalization strategies. It is also clear from the research question that it is not talking about other FDI issues such as firm performance, culture or any other tangential issues. This research question and the initial paragraphs of the paper limit the paper clearly to international entry strategy choices.

⁶ Although the manuscript's position in past literature is important, the research question does not have to be generated from existing literature. Some phenomenological research has research questions from phenomena that may be exploratory in nature and require some extra theorizing (Christensen & Carlile, 2009; Whetten, 1989; Young, Peng, Ahlstrom, & Bruton, 2003). Recent examples in international business research include global start-ups, virtual teams, and institutional transitions (Ahlstrom, 2015a).

The first two paragraphs of the Meyer paper (further discussed below) then quickly direct reader attention to the previous research on micro (transaction costs, individual incentives) and later macro (top management team and governance, institutions) factors, and their link to the research question. This is an enormously important part of the introduction and one that *many authors fail to do*. That is, it is important to engage the past research, albeit briefly in the introduction and avoid confirmation bias in the work (Kida, 2006). As soon as a reader sees a clear research question and an accompanying positioning (by summarizing of some of the past research), there will be little confusion about what the paper will ask and answer (Ahlstrom, 2015a, 2015b). Even a book about a comprehensive topic can have a single research question such as why nations may fail economically or about what caused the First World War (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Hamilton & Herwig, 2004).

2.3 Avoid overly broad questions that do not lend themselves to theoretical lenses

This discipline of a clear research question and positioning is a problem that our work suggests that numerous papers suffer from in that they fail to provide a clear positioning. Papers can end up being broadly “about” something with a jumble of loosely connected citations and a laundry list of variables and hypotheses which fail to contribute much of anything to research in the field. Such papers typically start out by stating, for example: “Internationalization strategies are important” (or some general declaration) and proceed to tell stories and discuss theories about internationalization that fail to limit the paper to an answerable question. Another broad research question, which is not really a question, is when the authors state they want to “examine innovation in Europe,” or “explore FDI into China.” Broad purpose statements such as these convey very little information to the reader. A little more focused but still very broad is a research question that we have commonly seen (in various forms): “What human resource (HR) factors lead to sustainable competitive advantage?” Given the breadth of HR concepts and research today on topics ranging from compensation and benefits and pay for performance, to selection, training and feedback, the ensuing study hard to limit to something answerable in a research paper (Cooke & Kim, 2018; Jackson, Schuler, & Werner, 2012; Uen, Ahlstrom, Chen, & Tseng, 2012).

A general example of this is a type of paper we have regularly seen submitted to the journals in management, IB, and entrepreneurship and small business areas. Usually this paper will not have a research question but will have a general thesis statement such as proposing to “explore organizational structure and strategy in Asia,” or “investigate the determinants of foreign direct investment (FDI).” That is, no question will be posed at all, so the paper will be loosely about organizational structure, FDI (or HR, innovation, motivation or many other general management topics). Lacking a clear research question, this type of paper usually will provide a long list of items (many things can be determinants), in the process listing what is already well-known, while failing to control for extraneous influences. Such papers, though perhaps having good data and methods, usually cover well-explored ground and thus contribute little to knowledge or theory in a particular area (Corley & Gioia, 2011).

Usually a very broadly framed study such as this ends up being a long list of cited works, concepts (and hypotheses), across an unwieldy range of subtopics. And reviewers naturally will ask, when they see this type of manuscript, why the author chose this list of HRs (or innovation or decision-making) items and not a different list. This is because the paper in this example, failed to limit the research question to a logically narrow topic, and use a theory lens that addressing one key aspect of the topic, as Meyer et al. (2009) did with macro-institutions and market entry strategies. Papers such as this FDI study example look like they are scholarly and comprehensive, and authors are often puzzled when the paper is rejected. Yet such studies are often atheoretical, and fail to contribute to theory and empirical evidence, especially if they are researching well-trodden paths (Daft, 1995).

A recent line of research on the possible (harmful) overuse of mobile phones illustrates why

having a well-framed question and a theoretical lens is helpful. Researchers working on that question had become frustrated that the current theory in computer (over)usage was not helping in explaining the problem of mobile phone overuse, especially by young people. Then researchers hit on the idea that a different literature in the addiction area may be helpful. That is, people became attached to their smartphones such that they experience separation anxiety when they do not have them (Cheever, Rosen, Carrier, & Chavez, 2014). Researchers then applied theory on drug abuse (substance addiction), but that theory did not provide robust explanations either. But researchers did not give up, they then sought to compare smartphone addiction with gambling, that is as a non-substance addictive disorder. Although not in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) as of this writing, this line of research has proved helpful with understanding smartphone addiction and in helping to manage this difficult problem, which left untreated, may even lead to vision and other health problems (Kardefelt-Winther, Heeren, Schimmenti, van Rooij, Maurage, Carras, Edman, Blaszczynski, Khazaal, & Billieux, 2017; Van Deursen, Bolle, Hegner, & Kommers, 2015).

Papers with an overly broad research question and introductory paragraphs that fail to position the research and ground it theoretically can often continue to reflect a lack of focus throughout the paper (such as ranging far and wide across HR, innovation, or other topics, for example) and would thus not contribute much to the literature as the work on non-substance addiction has done with mobile phone overuse. It is very helpful for an author to limit the study to an answerable research question that will focus and limit the study. For graduate students and other new authors, it should be emphasized that they need to take time to create a carefully worded research question, and get feedback on it, so they can start the process of positioning (and thereby limiting) the paper (Ahlstrom, 2015b). Sometimes the question can be clarified with a follow-up point about it in the introduction. And, it can be appropriate to start an empirical paper with a brief description of the phenomenon that is being studied to set up the question (emphasis on brief here). This is particularly the case for inductive empirical papers that do not have a lot of theory to guide them or are phenomenological in nature (Ahlstrom, 2015a). Generally, it is not necessary to use a couple paragraphs (or pages) to explain a research question in the management and IB area; questions should speak for themselves with just a little brief explanation in the introduction.

One final point worth making regarding research questions is that authors should try to commit to a question and not wonder away from it early in the paper. For example, one manuscript with which we are familiar asked an early research question about managers' attitudes toward a type of medical information. Yet shortly thereafter in the introduction, another question was raised about researching the information accuracy of that information. While that is certainly a valid line to pursue, those are two very different research questions, and the first one is probably more appropriate for a management study, while the accuracy of medical information would be for a different discipline and journal. Later, the authors raised a third "research question" about how managers sought out their information about healthcare programs and tested its accuracy, which is still a different question from the first two. Authors should take care to not to have differing research questions or thesis statements in the paper, and to not wander away from their original question. If a study starts out with a "how" question, for example, readers will probably be expecting a process study or a study that forensically unpacks a series of events or steps. But later if the paper were to shift to a regular variance (hypothesis testing study) that would have demanded a completely different research question (Van de Ven, 2007). This is why authors should try to put the research question in the first paragraph and first sentence if practicable, and then commit to that question, regularly referring back to it as the question is addressed and answered in the paper.

2.4 After the question: Establishing the paper's position in the initial paragraphs

After the research question has established the topic and provided some boundaries to the paper, the first part of the paper's introduction section -- the first two to three paragraphs -- is also very important. For a fairly standard empirical paper in management and IB, usually right after the research question is posed, the most relevant research previously addressing that question needs to be briefly summarized. This clarifies the positioning of the paper in past literature (which authors would later expand upon in the literature review section of the paper). This short summary in the introduction of past research that addressed the research question will then lead to the motivation for the current study (Grant & Pollock, 2011). Thus, the first paragraphs of the paper serve to position or *situate* the paper in the past literature, using a sort of brief literature review in the introduction (see Table 1). This "mini literature review" shows briefly what other research (or categories of research) have been done on (or around) your topic. It also shows how the past research was unable to fully answer the question or did not cover some things that the new paper now addresses. It is important to just summarize this research and not go into detail about particular papers, at least not in the introduction. This also helps authors avoid a confirming evidence trap of an only citing work supporting their main propositions (Kida, 2006; Nickerson, 1998).

For example, Meyer et al. (2009) positioned their paper in the resource-based view (RBV) and institutional theory literatures in terms of effects on firm market entry strategies. As such, readers could see where the paper fits with other, related research on the topic. In addition to situating the paper, the opening paragraphs also help to provide crucial *motivation* for the paper, that is, why is this research needed. Situating and motivating the paper in the introduction is a very important step in organizing the paper and showing its contribution to readers and is a step that is often overlooked or poorly executed by authors. Following their clearly stated research question about the possible causes of foreign market entry strategies, Meyer and colleagues (2009) briefly summarized previous relevant research (e.g. transaction costs and the RBV) with respect to market entry choices. That is, their first paragraph very quickly summarized the literature that had started to address their question in the past, mostly in terms of firm characteristics themselves and then the need to minimize transaction costs (Buckley & Casson, 1976; Anderson & Gatignon, 1986; Hill, Hwang, & Kim, 1990). But in the middle of the first paragraph, a *key word appears* (Duriau, et al., 2007). That word can be found in many introductions of papers. In the Meyer et al. (2009) paper it is the word "while" (as in "however"). That is, this key word signals that some good research has been done and has started an inquiry into this topic, but it is "not enough" to answer the research question the authors are asking. This leads to a transition of "what else" is needed, in the rest of the first paragraph and immediately after. Thus, in the latter part of paragraph one, Meyer et al. (2009) tell us that "what else" is needed. It is the case that "context" is also needed to explain internationalization strategies, not just firm characteristics or internal resources, as one might expect. But then, what type of context (geography, culture, technology, institutional)? That type is suggested in paragraph 1 but then serves to provide the transition to the next paragraph, where the key context is explained more fully.

2.5 The second and third paragraphs: Rounding out the mini literature review

In the second and third paragraphs of the introduction, the paper continues to introduce research that helps to answer the research question and covers issues not addressed by the research mentioned in the first paragraph. In the Meyer paper, paragraph one focused on the early research on *internal factors* such as firm characteristics and costs influencing international strategies. In the middle of that first paragraph, the importance of the (external) *context* in explaining internationalization strategies was introduced. This research complemented the internal factors discussed in the first sentences. The type of context needed to explain internationalization strategies is mentioned right away in the latter part of paragraph one, that is, the institutional context. Although the Meyer et al. (2009) paper doesn't mention

this -- other work by Peng, Sun, and Blevins (2011) does -- that around that time, the biggest recipient of FDI from China was the British Virgin Islands (excluding Hong Kong which is not really FDI for China). Given the small size of the Virgin Islands this suggests the importance of institutional factors, perhaps tax laws, and incentives for roundtrip investment that encourages such a seemingly unusual internationalization strategy.

Thus, in paragraph two, Meyer et al. (2009) mention previous institutional research around FDI topics. The authors briefly summarize the early institutional literature relevant to their topic and then show how past research on their topic started to address their research question, but again suggest something was lacking. Meyer et al. (2009: 61) illustrate this in commenting how the previous (representative) institutional research on market entry strategies had left something unexplored:

“In particular, institutions – the ‘rules of the game’ – in the host economy also significantly shape firm strategies such as foreign market entry (Peng, 2003; Wright et al., 2005) ... However, traditional transaction cost research (exemplified by Williamson, 1985) has focused on micro-analytical aspects such as opportunism and bounded rationality. As a result, questions of how macro-level institutions, such as country-level legal and regulatory frameworks, influence transaction costs have been relatively unexplored, remaining largely as background.”

Thus in paragraph two and into paragraph three, Meyer et al. (2009) show that institutional theory is also important in explaining internationalization strategies, but macro-level institutions at this stage are particularly important, as micro-institutional factors had been studied previously, as they note in paragraph two (Anderson & Gatignon, 1986; Hill et al., 1990; Williamson, 1985). And not just as background conditions, but as direct effects to the international market entry strategic decisions. Thus after three paragraphs in the Meyer et al. (2009) paper, readers understand that the research question is asking about the factors impacting firms’ international market entry strategies, and how other studies have covered basic factors such as firm characteristics, resources, and micro-institutional aspects including transaction costs, but external context needed more scrutiny. The authors then showed that little work had been done on the more macro-institutions and particularly on their direct effects (rather than indirect or background effects), and they chose to position their paper accordingly.

The Meyer et al (2009) paper is thus very well-situated in that it focuses primarily on macro-institutional factors, and resource-seeking activity common to globalizing firms (Ahlstrom, Levitas, Hitt, Dacin, & Zhu, 2014), as opposed to just cost-minimization strategies and other more micro factors. Again, the authors are not saying the previous work on micro-institutional approaches and cost minimization was wrong, but rather it was limited and needed to be complemented by macro-level institutional variables and resources (benefits) seeking as opposed to just cost savings. Thus their paper was situated primarily in terms of the direct effects of resource seeking and macro-institutional forces, such as the rule of law and other market managing institutions (Ahlstrom, Young, Nair, & Law, 2003; Rodrick, Subramanian, & Trebbi, 2004) in explaining firms’ foreign market entry decisions.

Thus, after the first three paragraphs of very careful research and writing, the paper’s positioning -- *its GPS* of ‘resources plus macro-institutional factors’ -- is established. A final positioning point given here also is that their research is done in the context of emerging economies, which had not been done much in the past. Thus, the position of the Meyer et al. (2009: 62) paper is well-stated by the end of paragraph three when the paper’s research question is repeated and broadened a little to reflect the enhanced positioning of the paper as follows: “Given these institutional differences, how do foreign firms adapt entry strategies when entering emerging economies? Notice that institutional theory and emerging economies are now added to the “enhanced research question.” That is, the authors started with a fairly basic question and now, after discussing some literature, have they expanded that question somewhat.

This is a good strategy in writing paper, that is, to start out with a research question that is

specific but fairly short, and after some positioning of the paper, the question can be restated and broadened slightly, as in this example. This follow-up question around the end of the paragraph three of the introduction is also a good check that authors can have regarding their own work, to be sure they are not drifting from their original question. The paper is well-motivated by this clear positioning in past research, but also, just to add to its justification, next in paragraph four, readers are reminded that several previous publications recommended more research on resources and institutions, and also developing institutional definitions and hierarchies further. Thus, in paragraph four, Meyer et al. (2009: 62) add:

“In essence, we advocate an integrative perspective calling not only for explicit considerations of institutional effects, but also for their integration with resource-based considerations. This article thus *responds to the call* issued by Meyer and Peng (2005), Peng (2001, 2003, 2008), Wright et al. (2005), and Yamakawa, Peng, and Deeds (2008) for more integration between institutional and resource-based views” (emphasis added).

It bears repeating here that the first three to four paragraphs in quality business (and social science) papers are very crucial. They provide a research question or questions that help limit the paper’s topic and minimize potential drift into tangential issues, which is very easy to do even in a moderately complex topic. The research question also helps the reader understand the exact topic and what to anticipate though sometimes a reader may also be surprised a little, which is fine if the author is able to do that without confusing the reader (Cialdini, 2005). Those paragraphs also must serve to “teach” the reader (and the reviewers) about the topic. That is, about the research that has been done before on or around the research question, which in turn will lead to a needed topic in the literature that has not yet been covered but will be in the current paper. This is also why it is good to avoid writing, “not much research has been done on this topic.” That statement is often wrong and will give editors and reviewers reason to doubt if the authors really know the literature, unless the phenomenon is really that new and unusual. Something has usually been done on or around most topics, and authors must learn that work and teach readers about it. In showing how past research started to answer the question, this also helps an author show how his or her paper continues to answer the topic and fills in areas that were not known before. It bears stating here also that just because research has not been done in a particular country on a topic, does not mean that “no research has been done on that topic.” It is incumbent upon authors to learn the literature in their area, and not just research from their countries.

3. Other well-positioned papers

Another exemplary research question and subsequent situating of the research on a topic at a more micro level, social psychologist Amy Cuddy (2012; 2018; Cuddy, Schultz, & Fosse, 2018) in her work on nonverbal communication started out her well-known 2012 TED talk and other research with a broad question asking about nonverbal communication or body language, social judgment and certain evaluative outcomes. After providing some brief answers and research about that general topic, Cuddy explained that much of the past work, with the exception of some older research, tended to focus on the impact that one’s body language would have on other people with whom the person is communicating. She noted in the TED talk and elsewhere (Carney, Cuddy, & Yap, 2010; Cuddy, 2012) that her focus was not on the impact of body language on the other party, but rather how our nonverbal communication might affect ourselves – our physiological and psychological states. Indeed, Carney, Cuddy, and Yap’s (2010: 1363) research question was: “Can posed displays cause a person to feel more powerful?” And the research generally has suggested ‘yes, they can’ though some debates remain about how substantial those effects are (Cuddy et al., 2018).

But what is most important to note about this work here is its fine framing. That is, Amy Cuddy did not start her papers with vague opening statements such as “our work is going to examine body

language.” Nor did she and her colleagues write that body language is important and we will reflect on its importance – which is the way many authors set up their papers. Cuddy et al. (2018) made it quite clear that they were studying the aspect of nonverbal communication (posture) that impacted one’s own physiological state (primarily feeling of confidence and competence), which in turn might impact an evaluative situations such as job interviews. This is a very clearly stated in their situating and motivating of the paper. If Cuddy had just written “nonverbal communication is important and not much research has been done on nonverbals and here is what we are studying,” the paper would have left the reader questioning about what else had been done on nonverbals, why is body language potentially important, and what those authors are adding to the past research, that is, the “why” of their topic. Many, journal submissions fail to ask clear questions and position themselves in the literature and thus are not able to provide clear contributions to the literature on their topic. In positioning their paper clearly in past literature, it was also easy for Cuddy to provide summary contributions to theory, empirical evidence, and practice at the end of the respective introductions, and later in their discussion sections.

A recent article by management scholars Yunshi Liu, Yi-Jung Chen, and Linda C. Wang (2017) in *Asia Pacific Journal of Management* is also helpful in this regard. Though not provided in the paper’s first sentence, their research question asked if family firms could innovate. The question is interesting because of the mixed responses to that question in the past (e.g. Chrisman & Patel, 2012). The paper’s introduction noted that the research on this topic could be arrayed by macro and micro factors, as well as internal and external forces (there are many ways to organize the past research on a topic, but internal versus external and macro versus micro are common organizing frameworks in the social sciences). The introduction added that there is an extensive literature on the micro side – both internal to the firm and external (decision-making, psychology factors, and culture issues), and also on the macro-external side (formal institutions, government policy) impacting family firm innovation.⁷ But they found that there was less work on the macro-internal (unabsorbed organizational slack, governance, family ownership) as well as the utilization of other ways of measuring innovation beyond the standard R&D-related measures (Liu et al., 2017; Su, Ahlstrom, Li, & Cheng, 2013).⁸ This less-explored area (macro-internal influences along with some new approach to measuring innovation) provided a good position or entry point for their research on family firms. Liu, Chen and Wang (2017) utilized a lesser-known measure for innovativeness of royalty payments, which proved a helpful theory contribution as well, that is a newer way of measuring firm innovativeness. This differentiated the paper somewhat from other papers that looked at macro-internal forces.

It is also good to note once again that Liu and her colleagues (2017) did not say they were “examining innovation in Asia” or “exploring innovation in family business.” They were fairly specific in their positioning and their focus in that the Liu et al (2017) paper argued that there were macro and micro factors influencing innovation in family firms, and also factors internal and external to the firm. They stayed away from discussing goals, cognitive factors, culture and other decision influences that had been well-studied with respect to innovation in different settings and stuck to their macro-internal factors position (e.g. Duran, Kammerlander, Van Essen, & Zellweger, 2016; Wang, Ahlstrom, Nair, & Hang, 2008).

⁷ Liu et al. (2017) could have produced a 2x2 table to depict the previous literature on innovation and family business but chose not to as the research was fairly easy to describe and other previous work had already provided a very detailed summary of that research (Duran et al., 2016).

⁸ Some may take issue with the limited attention allotted by Liu et al. (2017) to that particular part of the literature, but the point is the positioning of the paper is made very clear, even if some finer details regarding the extent of past literature on micro-internal factors could have been further discussed.

Nor did they state that “very little research has been done on this topic,” which would have been utterly incorrect. Quite a lot of research has been done on family business and innovation including a major meta-analysis (Duran et al., 2016). As noted, it is very important for authors to know the literature, both the historical development in key areas, as in the Meyer et al. (2009) example, and some of the most recent work and meta analyses, as in the Cuddy et al. (2018) and Liu and colleagues (2017) work. This is essential to situate and motivate the paper. And this will help authors show how their manuscript fits with (extends and contributes to) the past research on this topic as in the earlier examples mentioned (Carney et al., 2010; Meyer et al., 2009).

4. Contributions: Finishing strongly

After framing the paper clearly through a research question and subsequent positioning it the past literature, in the next 2-3 paragraphs in the introduction, the paper should specify your own study; its major proposition, the summary design of the research -- a sort of mini methods section -- and finally its expected contributions. Again, the Meyer et al. (2009) paper is very helpful (Ahlstrom et al., 2013). But more can be said here regarding the last part of the introduction -- the contributions paragraph in the introduction. This is important because the author is showing the editor and reviewers, and subsequent readers what they will learn and understand after reading the paper. Authors must realize that the intent of a paper is not to show readers what you know, but to help them better understand the topic, literature, and what the paper contributes to knowledge and practice.

What are contributions? Other papers have covered this in more detail (Ahlstrom et al., 2013; Corley & Gioia, 2011; Geletkanycz & Tepper, 2012; Rynes, 2002), but it is helpful here to provide some definitions and examples as contributions are an important part of the introduction section as well as the Discussion section later in the paper. First, contributions are not restatements of what the authors did in the research. One paper stated that the authors sampled 1000 people in the villages of Southeast Asia. That may be interesting, but just the action of travelling to villages in Southeast Asia is not a contribution. Perhaps gathering a sample from rural Southeast Asia may form the basis of a contribution (probably an empirical one, as a novel sample that helps add to the knowledge about a topic), but the authors must explain this, that is, why is a sample from rural Southeast Asia a contribution. Another “contribution” one of us read is that a paper combined two data sets and ran a new SEM on the data using more advanced techniques available in MPlus. Again, a contribution is *not what you did*, but what was found and learned, and importantly, why it matters. Perhaps the use of MPlus where it had not been used before could be a methodological contribution, but this should be explained to readers, and the introduction section may not be the place for a long methods explanation (this would better be explained in the Discussion section of the paper). Also, a contribution is not a general statement such as “we collected a sample of 2500, got significant findings, and have contributed to the literature.” What you did in your study is not a contribution. Also, do not just “contribute to the literature.” Be specific about how your findings tell us something that we did not know before, that is, they contribute to (improve) theory (and what theory), empirical evidence, and practice, in your area of work.

Thus, a contribution is, in simple terms, “this is what we found or collected, this is what we learned and, most importantly, this is what it means (for theory, for empirical and case evidence) or where it helps (for methods and /or practice in this given domain). The contribution should be specific in that the manuscript has tested and improved a specific theory, not theory in general (Corley & Gioia, 2011). Similarly, a paper does not just “contribute to the research.” What research? The past empirical and experimental findings in the field? That is, a paper that got a certain empirical result such as the negative effect of changing the CEO in SE Asia during a firm turnaround is an empirical contribution to that line of research (Bruton, Ahlstrom, & Wan, 2003). Some papers also contribute to practice, and also to research

design or methods. A methods contribution may be new approach used to analyze the data, particularly within this domain. Similarly, a manuscript could contribute by providing a new summary of a field (Bartunek, & Rynes, 2010; Bjørnskov, & Foss, 2016; Corley & Gioia, 2011; Geletkanycz & Tepper, 2012; Tomizawa, Zhao, Bassellier, & Ahlstrom, 2020).

Authors should try to provide one paragraph at the end of the introduction on contributions, and later, in the Discussion section, a longer contribution subsection (see Meyer et al., 2009). For many manuscripts we have edited and reviewed, rather than explaining its contributions, the paper will instead tell readers its “list,” that is, “first we do this, second we do that, third we do this” and so forth. This is not necessary if the paper is well positioned and contributions stated (Ahlstrom, Bruton, & Zhao, 2013; Li, Ashkanasy, and Ahlstrom, 2014). It is much more important to have contributions in the introduction than a list of what the paper will do. Lacking contributions to theory, empirical evidence, and practice, it will be difficult for readers to understand what is different about the paper and what they should be learning from the paper (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Geletkanycz & Tepper, 2012; Konrad, 2008).

5. Conclusion

In summary, a good academic research paper needs to get off to a good start. The introduction should provide a clearly stated research question or thesis statement, a summary of some past literature that started to answer the question, and some brief background for one’s own study (Ahlstrom et al., 2013; Clark et al., 2016). The introduction should show how that past research -- usually summarized briefly in the first two or three paragraphs of the paper -- though helpful, was not enough to answer the paper’s question. This established a need for the paper, which can be further reinforced by pointing out that others have called for work on this topic (Meyer et al., 2009: 62). This careful situating and motivating of the paper also will help to clarify the paper’s eventual contributions to theory, empirical evidence, and practice, which can be summarized at the end of the introduction (e.g. Hitt, Ahlstrom, Dacin, Levitas, & Svobodina, 2004; Liu, Wang, Zhao, & Ahlstrom, 2013; Meyer et al., 2009).

This structure of the introduction, as illustrated by the Meyer et al. (2009) and other exemplary papers is quite common in empirical papers in good management and IB journals (Ahlstrom, 2019), and also functions as an outline for the rest of the paper, thereby facilitating its write-up (Ahlstrom et al., 2013). A paper that does not have a well-organized introduction or clear research question, will often be just “about” a general topic (such as innovation, FDI, or human resources). Such problematic papers will usually be overly broad and simply identify the topic, and unlike Cuddy’s work or in the Meyer et al (2009) paper as discussed here, will say little specific in terms of positioning and motivating the paper.

In contrast, a well-framed and organized introduction section represents a very important part of the paper. It provides a map to editors, reviewers and readers in terms of what the paper will cover and why it matters. As Adam Grant and Tim Pollock (2011: 873) remind us in *The Academy of Management Journal*:

“...first impressions matter. Although it is typically the shortest section of an article, the introduction (i.e., the opening few pages, before the literature review) determines whether or not readers will continue reading.”

Academic real estate in terms of journal space and the time of editors and reviewers is scarce. Authors should be mindful of this and hence take care to write papers that are well-organized and can contribute helpful theory and findings to a field of study. That implies an author should be able to frame his or her topic in terms of a research question, a summary of past relevant research, and an explanation of why that previous research was not quite enough to address the question -- thus the need for the author’s paper (Ahlstrom & Wang, 2009; Meyer et al., 2009). The introduction should further show the paper’s main propositions, briefly how it will answer in terms of methods, and finally how it contributes

to the field. A well-written introduction *is essentially a microcosm of the paper*, and if well-written and organized, will make the writing of the rest of the paper a much easier task, and one that will produce useful contributions to knowledge for the field (Abrahamson, 2008; Ahlstrom, 2015a). And the paper will have an improved chance of being published in the better journals of an increasingly competitive and crowded academic field.

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