

Successful Publishing in Academic and Scientific Journals: Framing and Organizing the Scholarly Paper

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Publishing in quality academic journals is challenging. Authors who want to improve their chances of publishing in management and allied business and social science journals can save themselves time by ensuring that manuscripts are consistent with the journal's aims and scope and what the field requires in terms of addressing unanswered research questions or improvements to current theory and evidence. It is well-understood if a manuscript lacks theoretical grounding or makes significant methodological or research design mistakes, it will probably be rejected. Researchers in the social sciences are typically well-trained in methods, statistical analysis, and research design. But doctoral programs and other masters-level research programs spend much less time on the situating, organizing, and writing of manuscripts and how they should be framed for publication. Oftentimes, an author may face rejection of his or her submitted manuscript not because of bad data or methods, but because of major framing and organizing issues. These problems are addressed within the context of writing clear introductions which form the basis for a complete and well-organized manuscript that will likely have an improved chance of publication.

1. Introduction

Writing and publishing good quality academic articles is quite challenging. Researchers face many pitfalls from getting the right data and analyzing it correctly to writing the results up and justifying the paper clearly. Authors who want to improve their chances of publishing in management and allied business and social science journals can save themselves much time and frustration by ensuring that their manuscripts are well-designed and analyzed, as well as being well-framed and consistent with the target journal's aims and scope. It is commonly understood if a paper lacks theoretical grounding or makes significant research design or methodological errors, it will probably be quickly rejected (Bono & McNamara, 2011; Colquitt & Ireland, 2009; Eden, 2008). Having been an editor for management and international business journals with editorial responsibility for nearly 15 years, I can say, this is true, but many papers are also rejected not based on faulty research designs or statistics, but because of major framing, design and organization problems. These problems though challenging are fully avoidable with a little care with respect to good paper organization.

Unfortunately, simple admonitions given by some editors and reviewers to simply "write better" are not particularly useful in that regard. Although there is much helpful work explaining good research strategy, particularly focusing on methodology, research design, and

data analysis (e.g. Kerlinger, 1995; Cohen & Manion, 1998; Creswell, 2008; Van de Ven, 2007), these are necessary but not sufficient for writing and publishing good papers (Cummings & Frost, 1985, 1995; Huang, 2007; Huff, 1999, 2008). To provide additional guidance to prospective authors, this paper discusses and summarizes several specific concerns regarding the framing and organization of academic research papers and provides some specific recommendations as to how problems in these areas might be avoided or fixed before a manuscript is submitted.

The focus of this paper is on the research question, writing a well-constructed introduction, and providing clear contributions to readers. A paper may have a well-done statistical analysis, but if it lacks a clear research question, is not properly motivated, and lack contributions, it will have a significantly reduced probability of acceptance (Grant & Pollock, 2011; Rynes, 2002). This is true not only for empirical papers (Ahlstrom, Bruton, & Zhao, 2013; Huang, 2007; Konrad, 2008), but also for case-based or other qualitative papers, as well as simulations and related work (e.g. Dunbar & Ahlstrom, 1995; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Maheshwari & Ahlstrom, 2004; Nair, Ahlstrom, & Filer, 2007; Yin, 2013; Zhao, Gu, Yue, & Ahlstrom, 2013). As such, this paper summarizes several key items to which authors should pay particular attention, particularly regarding the framing and organizing their papers.

Guidelines are thus suggested with helpful sources that can provide direction to authors in the writing process. This article will limit itself primarily to examining the organization of “standard” empirical papers in the management and international business field, though this discussion of paper framing and organization is relevant for allied social sciences manuscripts as well. Other types of papers such as qualitative and conceptual studies, and simulations are briefly discussed; helpful resources are suggested (e.g. Corley & Gioia, 2011; Christensen & Carlile, 2009; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Wang, Ahlstrom, Nair, & Hang, 2008; Yin, 2013; Zhao et al., 2013).

More specifically, four fundamental paper framing and organization issues are identified and discussed below. These include submitting papers according to the journal’s aims and scope, having a clear introduction, posing an answerable research question, and summarizing the paper’s contributions to the field. This list is not exhaustive, but provides some guidelines and helpful hints for prospective authors that are often not detailed in books on methodology or thesis writing (Abrahamson, 2008; Ahlstrom, 2012; Kilduff, 2007). In discussing these issues, disguised examples of both successful and unsuccessful approaches are provided.

2. A summary for framing empirical papers

A prospective author submitting to a particular journal should first be sure to read the journal’s aims and scope as well as some articles from the journal, particularly those relevant to the author’s work (and try to cite that work from the journal also). This will help the author better understand the types of articles that particular journal generally seeks to publish and (importantly) what it does not publish (Ahlstrom, 2010). Professor David Lamond of Victoria University and longtime editor of the *Journal of Management History* calls this joining the journal’s conversation. A concern that I have, and one that I have heard voiced by Professor Lamond and indeed many editors is that too often authors do not bother to (carefully) read the journal’s aims and scope nor any of its published articles, and thus fail to join that conversation (Ahlstrom, 2012; Huang, 2007). By being clear about the journal’s aims and scope, and recent

articles and editorials (especially those that comment on the journal's current focus), prospective authors will gain a much better understanding of whether their work is appropriate for the journal.

Usually the journal's aims and scope will be on the journal's website with some accompanying explanation and examples. Additional journal guidelines that are helpful include format and style and other editorial issues such as does the journal accept empirical papers (such as the *Academy of Management Journal*) or is it confined to theory and conceptual articles (such as the *Academy of Management Review*). Some professional organizations such as the Academy of Management separate their empirical and theory journals. Others may publish both empirical and theory papers in the same journal such as *Asia Pacific Journal of Management* or the *Journal of International Business Studies*. Authors should read the journal's website carefully to understand its aims and scope and other key editorial issues.

Another aspect of a journal's aims and scope is what field is the journal actually in. That may sound too obvious of a point to raise, but when I was chief editor of *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, I received several manuscripts every week that did not fit at all with APJM's aims and scope. Usually these were written for another field such as economics, or a closely associated field such as operations management. Other times the articles read like textbook chapters or consultants' industry reports. As a case in point, though economics is certainly related to management for example, the focus of economics is usually at a more macro level than management with less attention paid to specific organizations. An economist might be interested in why the Japanese auto industry is very competitive, but would generally not care why Toyota is a superior performer to Nissan, unlike with management research (Nelson, 1991).

Just as authors should not send economics papers to management journals, they should generally not submit operations management papers to a mainstream management journal, such as a scheduling or supply chain management paper. Operations management and operations research (OM/OR) represent their own specialty area, which is (for the most part) separate from general management areas such as organizational behavior and strategic management. That is not to say that OM/OR is not important for management, it is just that the OM/OR journals have become very specialized and have many of their own models, theories, and methods, and they have a different set of problems to address. At one time, general management and OM/OR were taught together in doctoral programs and sometimes in the same management course (in the 1960s in the United States, for example), but this has changed in recent years. Similarly, prospective authors should not send macro papers (e.g. about strategy) to a micro journal that usually publishes OB and organizational psychology topics, unless it is written to utilize the models and advance theory and evidence in that particular (micro) area. Similar distinctions in other social science fields also exist.

Finally, in terms of aims and scope, authors should not submit "business magazine" type articles, consultant-reports, textbook chapters, or the literature review section from their thesis to an academic management journal. Academic management and international business journals (as well as those in economics, marketing and other allied social sciences) generally do not publish news reports or "how to" articles (Ahlstrom, 2010, 2012), unless that type of action

research is generally published by the journal and is able to advance theory in the field (Christensen & Carlile, 2009). Interested authors should look up work on action research to see how it is framed and where it is published (e.g. Eden & Huxham, 1996). Some good journals do sometimes publish action research, but its framing and contribution has to be carefully developed.

Management journals also generally do not publish manuscripts that are primarily about macroeconomic, and public policy issues, though papers with economic or policy implications are certainly welcome (e.g. Ahlstrom & Ding, 2014; Lohrke, Ahlstrom, & Bruton; 2012; Ramamurti & Doh, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Vargo & Morgan, 2005). Finance papers that are written primarily for an academic finance audience are probably not appropriate for a management journal; research on dividends and investor returns is such an example. However research on dividends or other “finance variables” that addressed a clear corporate governance (or other management) topic may be a good fit for a management journal (e.g. Cumming & Walz, 2010; Huang, Chen & Kao, 2012; Mar & Young, 2001).

A number of manuscripts are desk rejected because they do not fit the aims and scope of the target journal (Ahlstrom, 2010). Prospective authors should take care to read the journal’s aims and scope (focus) carefully. That is not to say that a paper must be an incremental addition to existing research. Many journals welcome unusual samples and novel theories, but they have to be carefully framed. Submitting papers about macroeconomics or Data Envelopment Analysis to a management journal is a likely prescription for a desk rejection of the manuscript.

3. The manuscript’s introduction

After being confident that the paper fits the journal’s focus, the paper's introduction is a key part of the paper. A mediocre introduction can hurt the chances of otherwise good research getting published (Grant & Pollock, 2011). I have regularly heard editors say that submissions are often rejected because they cannot quite figure out what the paper will actually do. This is because many authors just loosely start a paper with what the paper is “about” (e.g. “this paper is about HR in India”) but do not commit the paper carefully to answering a specific research question. This makes it tough to see the paper’s focus and its contributing value to the journal (and the field). As Adam Grant and Tim Pollock (2011: 873) point out:

...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.

What constitutes a good introduction? As noted it should motivate and situate the paper in the existing stream of research in its domain, particularly around its specific research topic (Ahlstrom, 2015). Though there are different approaches to writing introductions such as starting with a surprising question or with a little story -- the “that’s interesting” approach (see Pillutia & Thau, 2013), in simplest terms, a good introduction essentially summarizes the paper, that is, it is a “miniature version” of the paper. Thus the introduction should provide a research question (as early as possible) and then follow to summarize most of the key main sections of the paper briefly in about six to eight paragraphs or about three to four typed pages (Konrad, 2008). This is somewhat different from journals in psychology or economics that may count

everything up till the methods or the model as the “introduction” including the literature review section. These journals do, however, have an introductory section that motivates and situates the paper, even if it is not clearly labeled and set apart from the subsequent literature review (or model) sections. In management, the literature review section is separate from and (usually) immediately follows the introduction section.

The introduction should explain what research question the paper will ask and answer, what research has been done before on this question or topic (often called “situating the research” that is, how past research tried to answer this question), and why the research is needed in terms of past research and its limits (called “motivating the research”). In addition, the introduction should state briefly the paper’s main proposition or hypothesis (summarized), how the paper will answer its research question (very brief methods) and what the results contribute, (again briefly; longer contributions should be presented in the discussion section, right before the conclusion) (Ahlstrom, 2011; Meyer, Estrin, Bhaumik & Peng, 2009). Grant and Pollock (2011: 873) add:

The introduction provides the interpretive frame... If reviewers are intrigued by the research question, appreciate its importance, and understand how the study advances understanding of the topic, they are more likely to look for reasons to recommend revision.

The introduction tells readers what question the paper will answer, why the paper is needed based on the past research, how it will do the research, and what it adds to the topic. Further examples are provided in the next sections.

3.1 The research question

An important component of a paper’s introduction that should never be neglected is the research question or thesis statement. A paper should have a clear and answerable research question or thesis statement, posed early, in the first paragraph if possible (Grant & Pollock, 2011). A good research question or thesis statement leaves little doubt in the reader's mind what the paper will and will not cover. The lack of a clear research question makes it more difficult for readers to understand the manuscript's objectives and its position in the literature. It should be noted that although the overall manuscript's position in past research literature is important, the research question itself does not absolutely need to be generated from the existing literature (though it commonly is). Some research questions may arise from new phenomena that may be exploratory in nature and require some theoretical grounding (Christensen & Carlile, 2009). Recent examples of this include offshore outsourcing, global start-ups, virtual teams, and institutional transitions (Ahlstrom, 2015; Peng & Quan, 2009).

Lacking the discipline of a clear research question or thesis statement, a manuscript can wonder around a topic without really addressing one key question or subtopic. The question should also be interesting and address something that needs to be better understood, which the literature review will later address in more details – often linking readers from the current literature to the hypotheses or main ideas of the focal manuscript (Davis, 1971; Konrad, 2008; Sparrowe & Mayer, 2011). After the topic of interest has been selected, it is helpful for an author to read on the topic to further refine the research question or to identify unaddressed questions. The question should be focused. A common problem is that the research question may be too

broad, such as the factors that lead to good HR systems or those that yield competitive advantage (Ahlstrom, 2010). If a research question or thesis statement is very broad, the researcher will often just write up lists of information which will be hard to integrate into an organizing framework that can answer the question within the limits of a standard research paper. It is a good bet that if the author cannot summarize and simplify the literature reviewed, then the readers cannot either.

For many manuscripts I have read it seemed that the authors did not take the necessary time to discuss and refine the research question. Instead of a research question, those manuscripts simply stated things like they were “examining HR in China” or “investigating innovation in India.” These statements are fine in themselves, but they are not research questions. I have handled numerous manuscripts that stated, for example, that they would “reflect on innovation in China,” or “examine human resources in India” Such statements are very broad and can be about almost anything related to those topics. The papers reflected that lack of focus as they would often have about a dozen hypotheses that would range far and wide across HR, innovation, or other topics. Usually the papers would conclude with statements like “innovation is important” or “human resources are essential to firm success” essentially not contributing anything to the literature.

The authors of these and other similar manuscripts were usually surprised their papers were desk-rejected. They would ask: “is not innovation essential for firm performance?” I would answer that it certainly is, but that their paper failed to contribute anything to that domain and basically just revisited well-known literature and hypotheses. This problem originated partly with an overly broad research question such as “innovation is important” and a paper that went on to just list past research and provide conclusions that have long been understood.

Good research questions and the well-framed papers from which they are from are instructive in this regard. For example, Klaus Meyer, Mike Peng and colleagues co-authored several papers with clear and interesting research questions. One (Meyer et al., 2009: 61) is: “What determines foreign market entry strategies?” A second paper (Cui, Meyer & Hu, 2014: 488) asked: “What factors contribute to the level of SAS [strategic asset seeking] intent in internationalizing EE [emerging economy] firms? Research by Peng and Su (2014: 42) also provides a clearly stated research question: “How does cross-listing impact the scope of the firm?” It is important to note that Meyer and colleagues (2009) did not write that they would “examine entry strategies.” With a clear research question, there is no ambiguity about the focused topic of the paper (Ahlstrom, 2015).

To find potential research questions and to see what the field is currently discussing, authors should read theory and review articles such as those published in the *Journal of Management*, *Academy of Management Review* and other leading journals in their respective fields, as well as checking the ‘future research’ sections of empirical papers (Oetzel & Doh, 2009; Peng & Zhao, 2012). Commentary papers can also identify important future research avenues. For example, recent papers on goal setting by Locke and Latham (Latham & Locke, 2009; Locke & Latham, 2009) in the *Academy of Management Perspectives* provided several such important and interesting questions that could extend that important line of work. Hayton, George, and Zahra

(2002) in a paper in *Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice* provide a long table listing articles on culture and entrepreneurship, complete with their research questions and summarized findings. In economics, the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* and the *Journal of Economic Literature* provide helpful perspectives-type papers and reviews (e.g. Bloom & Van Reenen, 2010; Spolaore & Wacziarg, 2013). Other journals in psychology (e.g. *Emotion* and *Emotion Review* in that discipline) provide helpful review articles and theory papers (e.g. Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011; Li, Ahlstrom & Ashkanasy, 2010). Many fields and sub disciplines have journals that provide regular perspectives and reviews papers (e.g. Ahlstrom, Lamond, & Ding, 2009), which are a good source for possible research questions and a summary of the extant literature in a specific topical area (Latham & Locke, 2009; Locke & Latham, 2009). Regardless of the source, review papers, future research sections or unaddressed research topics that need theory development, authors should survey the literature and develop concise research questions based on that literature (Davis, 1971).

3.2 Situating the paper in past literature

One more important part of the introduction that authors should take care to provide, is a short summary of past research that starts to answer their research question (to the extent of the current literature). This will lead to the need for the current study (Grant & Pollock, 2011). That mini-literature review (usually 2-3 paragraphs in the introduction, and longer in the main literature review section of the paper) serves to motivate the paper in that the need for the paper emerges from it. Meyer and colleagues' (2009) paper is again helpful in this regard; after their research question about various foreign market entry strategies, they link previous transaction cost research and strategic management theory to the various foreign market entry strategies. In doing so, they argue how micro-institutional approaches (transaction costs) needs to be complimented by macro-level institutional variables (regulatory frameworks and enforcement regimes) in studies on market entry strategies and related research. Thus their paper asked about different foreign market entry strategies and was in turn *situated* primarily in terms of the *direct effect* of macro-institutional forces, such as the rule of law and market managing institutions (Rodrik, Subramanian, & Trebbi, 2004), on firm decisions. Moreover, the (brief) contributions to theory, empirical evidence, and practice in their introduction followed once the paper was so effectively situated and motivated (Meyer et al., 2009).

In summary, in terms of situating and then motivating the paper, the author should know the literature that led to the paper's topic but fails to fully answer the research question, or perhaps was not robust enough. It follows that authors should also be careful not to write that there has been "little research" on a topic unless they are fairly sure of this. Just because there has not been much research on a particular topic in China or India, for example, does not mean there is little research in general. A topic must be properly reviewed and the key literature summarized - briefly in the introduction to situate and motivate the paper, and more fully in the literature review section later (Ahlstrom, 2012). Authors should be sure to not skip this important step in writing up their work. Even exploratory topics should be situated in to some extent in some past and supporting literature (Machi and McEvoy, 2008; Ridley, 2008). Few topics are 100% new such that nothing relevant has preceded it.

3.3. Contributions

Finally, an important part of the introduction (which will be expanded on later in the paper's discussion section), is the contributions subsection. This is usually one to two paragraphs in the introduction, and perhaps three to four paragraphs in the paper's discussion section, before the conclusion. Again the Meyer et al. (2009) paper is helpful as it provides a long paragraph at the end of its introduction (2009: 62) summarizing the paper's contributions. At a minimum, authors should provide the theoretical, empirical (if applicable -- case studies certainly qualify) and practical or managerial contributions of their work (Ahlstrom, 2012; Rynes, 2002). Many papers I have handled or reviewed lack the words "contributions," "contributes," "implications" or other rough equivalents, and thus fail to convey value-add to the field. Editors and reviewers are often forced to hunt for the paper's contributions which they may not find. This often leads to a rejection of the manuscript. Konrad (2008: 13-14) writing in the fine book *Opening the black box of editorship* clearly summarizes this:

... [If a paper lacks] contributions up front, my experience as an editor has been that I'll read through the whole paper and wonder, what is new about this? ... Specifically, it is the author's job to put the reader in a position where s/he can judge the value of the contribution[s] to the literature based on the paper alone. (emphasis added)

It is important to underscore that point. The paper should make it clear to the editor and reviewers that the authors understand the literature, have situated the paper, and provided contributions. Readers should not have to search around background material to figure out if the paper is providing some novel or otherwise valuable contribution.

As a further example, there is a lot of research in business about the value and limitations of family business (Ahlstrom, Young, Chan, & Bruton, 2004; Bloom & Van Reenen, 2010; Gedajlovic, Carney, Chrisman, & Kellermanns, 2012). A manuscript that sought to study innovation in family firms must acknowledge the debates and reviews there and show how the manuscript clarifies that work and what it adds. A paper on a well-studied topic that just summarizes what is already known and produces obvious hypotheses, even if it is well-done, is likely to fail to contribute much to a topic. The twentieth paper on a topic does not contribute as much as the first few papers, so the authors have to work to show the readers their contribution.

This is to say, just confirming well-known hypotheses is generally not a contribution (but see Rodrik and Subramanian {2003} for a brief but informative discussion of the robustness of a topical area). Additional guidance on contributions to theory is available from a number of fine works in management (Colquitt & Ireland, 2009; Corley & Gioia, 2011; Whetten, 1989). For contributions to practice, helpful works include Bartunek and Rynes (2010), and Peng and Dess (2010). Although conceptual or review papers are beyond the scope of this paper, their primary contributions are likely theory-based though they can have some relevance for practice (e.g. Ahlstrom, Chen, & Yeh, 2010).

4. Discussion

This paper has provided a summary of important items with respect to framing and paper organization, as illustrated primarily by the organization of the introduction section. The

introduction of a paper is a microcosm of the full paper and contains, in brief, a summary of most of the subsequent sections. If a paper's introduction is well framed and organized, and the past research briefly summarized, the situating and motivating of the paper as well as the contributions will follow relatively easily. This is not to downplay the difficulty of reviewing a great deal of past research, examining theoretical lenses carefully, and positioning a paper within that research stream. This takes quite a bit of effort, along with trial and error (and comments from colleague, conference participants and reviewers), but getting the introduction correct is well worth the effort. As all journals have target readers and "research conversations," prospective authors must be careful that their paper fits with the target journal. Authors need to be sure that editor and reviewers see what the paper is about and what it contributes to the literature without having to do their own search to figure this out (Geletkanycz & Tepper, 2012; Konrad, 2008). Authors should avoid writing papers "reflecting on" a given topic, or "examining an issue," rather a specific research question should be asked and systematically answered in a paper.

4.1 Limitations

This paper has focused on framing and organizing empirical papers in the management area, with an emphasis on the components of the introduction, which forms the basis for the structure of the rest of the paper. Other disciplines were mentioned, such as the economics and psychology and these principles and guidelines are broadly consistent with these and other fields (Huang, 2007; Zedeck, 2008), though there are differences also. For example, as noted, psychology articles may consider the "introduction" to be everything up to the methods section (and many psychology articles that run multiple experiments will have multiple methods sections). Economics papers often have fairly short literature reviews and thus devote more time to modelling or mathematical expressions that require a significant amount of space in a paper. Some sub disciplines like industrial relations used to discourage outside literature in the introduction, confining it to the literature review section. Though there are differences among the various business and allied social science disciplines, the general principle of providing a research question, summarizing some past literature that (partially) answers that question, and then proceeding to your own study, and providing contributions, is fairly universal, though it may be packaged somewhat differently in different disciplines. This paper has focused on management and international business and authors should compare the summary contained herein with their own fields to see to the extent this pattern holds and how these objectives are (otherwise) achieved.

5. Conclusion

In summary, a good academic research paper generally should, in its introduction section, have a clearly stated research question or thesis statement, a summary of some past literature that starts to answer the question and provides background for the study (Ahlstrom et al., 2013). The introduction should also state the paper's own approach to answering the question, in the form of a summary hypotheses and a brief statement of the methods to be used or data gathered (e.g. Bruton, Ahlstrom, & Wan, 2003; Hitt, Ahlstrom, Dacin, Levitas, &

Svobodina, 2004). Brief results and summary contributions should follow (e.g. Meyer et al., 2009). Authors would in turn expand on these sections (from the introduction) in the subsequent main body of the paper. This outline helps to keep the paper well-ordered and helps reduce repetition problems where the paper's purpose is restated multiple times and results are sprinkled throughout the results section, discussion section, and conclusion, with little thought to how those results should be organized in terms of contributions or summary findings.

A well-framed and organized introduction section is a very crucial part of the paper (Grant & Pollock, 2011). It provides a clear road map to readers, not to mention the journal editor and reviewers of what the paper will cover and why it matters. And it follows that a good introduction makes writing the full paper much easier. Academic "real-estate" is valuable and scarce, and authors should take care to write papers that are well-organized and can fill that scarce space and contribute helpful findings and knowledge to a field. That means an author should understand his or her topic, research it as fully as possible, state that topic or research question clearly and then show why the paper answers the initial question posed and adds value (contributions) to the field.

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