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www.emeraldinsight.com/2040-8749.htm

Received 3 February 2013
Revised 17 February 2013
20 February 2013
Accepted 9 March 2013

PERSPECTIVE PAPER

Turning good research into good publications

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide a basic list of items that many standard empirical papers need and to highlight some common and fixable problems, as well as some corresponding suggestions and solutions such that authors can turn good research into good papers that have an improved chance of publication.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is a conceptual study on publishing, though it draws heavily on two of the authors' experience as editors of major management journals and their past work on paper organization and research design. A number of helpful resources for authors have also been provided from the academic literature – both journals and books – so that this paper can be a helpful resource to authors in organizing and preparing their work to submit to an appropriate journal.

Findings – This paper's findings are listed as follows. First, prospective authors will gain a much clearer understanding of whether a journal is an appropriate outlet for their work by reading the journal's aims and scope. Second, a good Introduction is a crucial element of a paper and must contain key basic information such as the research question (or thesis statement), a mini-literature review that situates the paper in past work, a quick summary of results, and the paper's contributions. Third, in the Literature Review or Theory section, it is important to review the development of the more relevant literature in the chosen topic, the key empirical or case findings, and why the focal paper seeks to enter the field at this time. Fourth, in the Method section, authors should try to provide as much helpful descriptive data as space permits. Fifth, in the Results section, authors should present the results for each hypotheses one by one, but limit the discussion in that section to the results and some brief explanation. Additionally, the Discussion section should have four parts including the contributions, limitations of the research, future research, and any other unusual findings. Finally, many papers suffer from formatting problems or do not fit the aims and scope of the target journal. Authors should be careful to check on these issues before submission.

Originality/value – This paper is complementary to works on methods and research design in that it helps authors with the important step of organizing their papers to turn good research into good manuscripts with a better chance of publication.

Keywords Research work, Journals, Publishing, Paper organization, Research design, Editors, Reviewers

Paper type Viewpoint

The authors would like to thank Marc Ahlstrom of Burlington County College for his editorial and research assistance.

Nankai Business Review International
Vol. 4 No. 2, 2013
pp. 92-106
© Emerald Group Publishing Limited
2040-8749
DOI 10.1108/20408741311323317

Introduction

Research in the management and allied social sciences literature has identified a range of problems that authors commonly have in designing and conducting research, as well as publishing in the better journals (Ahlstrom, 2010a, b, c; Bono and McNamara, 2011; Cummings and Frost, 1985, 1995; Huff, 1999, 2008; Colquitt and George, 2011; Sutton and Staw, 1995). Past work on research and publishing is very helpful and has often focused on questions of methodology, data analysis, epistemologies and ontologies, research design among others (Kerlinger, 1997; Cohen and Manion, 1998; Creswell, 2008; Van de Ven, 2007). As longtime members of the editorial teams of management and international business journals, we have identified a number of common problems that lie outside of the more traditional methods and research design works on business and social science research that authors need to address. These problems hurt otherwise good research as they interfere with the reader's ability to see the specific value and contribution of the research. The purpose of this paper therefore, is to identify some of the most common (and fixable) problems that we have seen and to suggest ways in how good research can be turned into good, well-organized manuscripts that will have an improved chance of publication.

How to build and improve theory, how to design studies, how to craft hypotheses and collect data, how to run experiments and simulations, and how to do the proper statistics analyze data, are all key questions that confront researchers in any scientific field (Huff, 2008; Huang, 2007; Smith and Hitt, 2005; Van de Ven, 2007). Yet researchers in the business and allied social sciences field have generally studied these major research issues and usually understand proper research designs and the necessary statistics to get analyze data properly (Creswell, 2008; Cummings and Frost, 1985, 1995; Kerlinger, 1995, 1997; Van de Ven, 2007). Yet while good research design, methods and analysis are necessary for writing good papers, they are not sufficient (Grant and Pollock, 2011; Huang, 2007). In many cases, we have found that the research and statistical analysis can be done well, but sit inside an otherwise poorly crafted paper. A paper that has been poorly crafted and organized in that, for example, it has no research question and just wanders around a topic without committing to a specific one, no matter how good its research and statistical analysis, will have a significantly reduced chance of acceptance. These problems hurt otherwise interesting papers because they make it difficult to see their specific value and contribution. For other instructions and helpful information on writing for scholarly publication see Ahlstrom (2010a, d), Huff (1999, 2008) and Machi and McEvoy (2008).

1. The early portions of the empirical paper

Drawing on a number of sources in management, and allied social sciences including economics and psychology (Cummings and Frost, 1995; Huang, 2007; Huff, 1999, 2008; Kerlinger, 1995; Klein and Zedeck, 2004; Machi and McEvoy, 2008; Sutton and Staw, 1995; Zedeck, 2008) as well as our own experience as editors (Ahlstrom, 2011; Bruton, 2009) this paper provides a summary of the key items to which authors should pay particular attention in preparing empirical papers to enhance their publishability. This list, while not exhaustive, does provide some hints on what editors want and essential guidelines for prospective authors, while helping them avoid common problems (Ahlstrom, 2012b; Baruch *et al.*, 2008; Huff, 1999, 2008; Kilduff, 2007). Specifically, we address eight areas that we and other researchers have found that authors often have trouble with in turning their research into publishable papers. These eight areas

are derived and summarized from past research on publishing empirical papers (Ahlstrom, 2011; Bono and McNamara, 2011; Colquitt and George, 2011; Cummings and Frost, 1995; Eden, 2008; Grant and Pollock, 2011; Huff, 1999, 2008; Van de Ven, 2007). For more detail on the topics in this paper, authors should see the cited works herein (also see Ahlstrom (2011) for an additional summary and review of some of these topics). We will next look at each of these seven areas in detail (Table I).

1.1 Aims and scope

Publishing in quality academic journals is always a challenging task; potential authors can save themselves time and frustration by ensuring that a submitted manuscript fits with the academic journal that they are targeting. One concern of many editors is that all too often, prospective authors do not bother to read the journal's aims and scope before submitting their papers for review (Huang, 2007). Similarly, many authors seem to not have read anything in the journal to which they are submitting. Yet these are very important initial steps in organizing a paper and preparing it for submission. By reading the journal's aims and scope, past papers in the journal, and the editors' lead articles in that journal (especially those that comment on the publishing process in their journal), prospective authors will gain a much clearer understanding of whether that journal is an appropriate outlet for their work (Ahlstrom, 2010a, c).

Consider examples from *Asia Pacific Journal of Management* (*APJM*), a journal for which two of the authors (Ahlstrom, Bruton) have worked as editors in recent years, and the present journal, *Nankai Business Review International* (*NBRI*). *APJM* seeks to publish original manuscripts on management and organizational research in the Asia Pacific region. *APJM*'s aims and scope focuses on what factors (both macro and micro) help to determine firm success in the management and international business areas. As an academic management and area studies journal, *APJM* focuses primarily on theory: theory building, theory testing, and theory improvement, but with solid contributions to empirical evidence, managerial practice and (sometimes) government policy.

In comparison, *NBRI* is narrower in its geographic focus than *APJM* (China vs Asia-Pacific), but is broader in its topical focus. More specifically, with Chinese business as the emphasis, *NBRI* aims to realize the following objectives: study the adaptation of American and European management theory in China as Chinese

Table I.
A checklist for perspective authors

Aims and scope	Be sure to carefully read the target journal's aims and scope
Title	Straightforward; short; clear; avoid long titles
Abstract	Concrete information; basic results and quick contribution
Introduction	Research question; situating the paper; brief contributions
Theory	Situate and motivate the paper through the literature review Summarize also with a figure or table if needed
Hypotheses	Justify each hypothesis separately. Do not create long lists of hypotheses
Method	Present the data first; present variables consistent with the hypotheses section
Results	Restate each hypothesis and present results, one-by-one; summarize with tables
Discussion	Start with contributions for theory, empirical or case evidence, practice, and other. Followed by limitations and future research and any additional unusual findings
Conclusion	Summarize paper quickly for readers who only read the introduction and conclusion
Format	Be consistent with the target journal

enterprises develop in a transition economy; study the relationship between Chinese enterprises' management practice and social evolution; and showcase management theory based on Chinese cultural characteristics.

Thus, each journal has a specific audience to which it primarily speaks – one more academic (*APJM*) and one more practitioner-oriented, though with academic rigor (*NBRI*). Authors should be careful not to send "how-to" or "practitioner papers" to an academic management journal such as *APJM* unless these are specifically part of the journal's aims and scope. *NBRI* might be more open to such papers, but the paper would have to have academic rigor, such as a paper from *California Management Review*, or *MIT Sloan Management Review*, just to name two journals with comparable missions. Similarly, if a journal does not publish shorter, "research notes" then authors should not submit short papers to that journal either (Colquitt and George, 2011). When we were editors at *APJM*, the journal used to regularly receive "how-to" papers written to managers, finance professionals, marketers, accountants, and even government officials. Such papers are clearly far from the journal's stated aims and scope and should not be submitted in the first place (the current editor of *APJM*, Michael Carney has stated this problem is continuing). It bears repeating: authors must be careful to read the journal's aims and scope as well as some recent articles in the journal so they understand broadly what the journal typically publishes and the types of topics that are part of the journal's current "conversations".

1.2 Title

Titles for articles should be fairly simple and straightforward. One common approach is a title that simply mentions a main variable or variable group, a condition or mediator, and the dependent variable. Authors should try to avoid bringing up all sorts of loosely related or overly complex ideas that are difficult to express in a title[1]. For example, consider the title "An examination of attitudes, values, culture, and corporate governance that impact firm competitiveness in Asia and the West". That title makes it seem as if the author is seeking to look at almost everything inside a firm: attitudes, values, culture, and governance in both Asian and Western firms. Although, the title gives the first impression of a study of corporate governance and culture, it is also including other issues such as values and attitudes – a very broad and ambitious topic. Setting aside the challenge of comparing multiple samples in multiple countries and at different levels of analysis, the topic is much too broad and complex to study in a relatively short paper.

Consider a simpler title about a study of corporate governance: "CEO incentives, risk-taking behavior, and acquisitions". The topic is clear in that it is about a limited set of governance variables (CEO incentives) and a very specific construct (risk-taking behavior) that impacts firm performance through acquisitions. The title suggests some practical content that many business people would be interested in (acquisitions and firm performance), while also implying a test and improvement theory of corporate governance and risk-taking.

Typically authors should strive for simple and clear topics and titles, and to shorten and simplify whenever possible. Consider a moderately long title: "Speed, competitive strategy, and its relationship with firm performance" (nine words). The title in a related version of that paper was shortened to: "Competitive speed and firm performance" (five words) and finally to "Competing on speed" (three words). And note that the word "competing" was able to effectively replace "strategy" and "performance", while the extra words ("its relationship with") were also cut[2].

1.3 The abstract

Abstracts should interest readers in the paper's topic. Many abstracts have the problem that they provide preliminary material but fail to give a quick summary of the paper's results. Too often abstracts read generally like this:

> This topic is important. There has been some research on this topic. We present a different theory and use a new method to present a general framework for understanding, and future research.

But this kind of abstract leaves out a quick summary of the results and why readers should care about the topic. Authors should avoid creating mysteries about their work; the abstract may be the only part of the paper people read as they scan numerous papers for the information, evidence or citations they need. Authors should try to give the readers some concrete information and basic results to get them interested. The abstract should probably be about two-thirds of a page, depending on the journal's requirements. Additionally, as part of the abstract the author must provide key words. Key words are important as many people search for articles based on key words. It is also good to think about the key words – the terms that will lead individuals to your paper are vital.

2. The introduction

Although the title and abstract are certainly important, the introduction is perhaps the most crucial part of the paper. A poor or confusing introduction can hurt the chances of otherwise good research getting published. We have heard more than one editor say that papers often get rejected largely based on having a deficient or confusing introduction. What is a good introduction? There are many approaches to writing introductions, but in simplest terms, a good introduction is often essentially a miniature version of the paper itself. That is to say, it contains most of the key sections of the paper (in brief) (Grant and Pollock, 2011). It must also be carefully and tightly written; authors should try to keep this section to no more than three-typed pages. The main function of the introduction is to explain to readers what research question the paper will answer, why the research is needed (in terms of past research), what the paper itself will study, what are the results (briefly) and what they contribute. In short, the introduction tells readers what the paper is about and why the paper is needed. If a paper is technically sound and has good data, but simply confirms what is already well known, the paper may not be meeting these tests, unless the paper can convince the editor and reviewers that a replication is needed (more will be said about contributions below)[3].

2.1 Research question

A key element of the introduction is the research question. A paper should have a clear and answerable research question or thesis statement in its introduction (Ahlstrom, 2010a; Huff, 1999). A good research question or thesis statement leaves little doubt in the reader's mind what the paper will cover. On the other hand, 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 follows that without the discipline of a clear research question (or thesis statement), a manuscript can often wonder around a topic without really dedicating itself to addressing a specific question or topic. In some papers, we have found that it is possible to read all the way to the results without knowing what the author is specifically writing about. For some papers we have reviewed, a research

question may appear (too) late in the hypothesis section or even land in the methods, and may actually differ from much of the early part of the manuscript. Sometimes this will be presented in the form of "research objectives", which are often stated too broadly and much too late. A research question should not be so complex that it required ten pages of text to prepare readers to read it.

Instead of a research question, however, many papers we review do not have a research question, thesis statement or even research objectives. Rather, they state that they are "examining a problem", "investigating an issue", or "exploring a topic". These statements are fine in themselves, but they are not research questions, nor are they substitutes for research questions. When there is no research question it is not uncommon for a paper to wonder around a topic without committing to it, somewhat akin to Porter's (1980) strategic concept of a "stuck in the middle" positioning. The authors of such papers commonly write that their paper will, for example, "investigate innovation in China", or "examine human resources in India". Those statements are extremely broad and can be about almost anything loosely related to those general topical areas. While they are not wrong in themselves, they are not research questions and do little to limit the subject and clarify the topic of interest.

In contrast, consider several good research questions (and carefully framed papers) from the management and international business literature. Meyer *et al.*(2009) coauthored a paper in the *Strategic Management Journal* (*SMJ*) that provides an excellent research question:

RQ1. What determines foreign market entry strategies?

Other research by Peng (Su *et al.*, 2009) even used the paper's title to first raise the research question:

RQ2. How do internal capabilities and external partnerships affect innovativeness?

In both cases, there is no ambiguity about what is being asked and what will be answered. Whatever the case, authors should be careful to ask a clear, concise, and interesting research question (Davis, 1971)[4].

2.2 Situating the paper

Following the research question, the introduction should also contain a short summary of the background of the topic. This short summary, often coming right after the research question, is basically a "mini-literature review" in that it provides a quick thumbnail literature review that situates the paper in past literature. The mini-literature review also helps to motivate the topic by situating it in the past literature and showing why the current paper is needed. This mini-literature review should be expanded in the Literature review section of the paper. It is fine to discuss general theoretical perspectives quickly in the introduction and what you are going to be addressing (Grant and Pollock, 2011; Meyer *et al.*, 2009), but authors should avoid lengthy explanations of theory and its evidence until the literature review section.

For a good model of this mini-literature review that serves to situate and motivate the paper, again consider the *SMJ* article by Meyer *et al.* (2009). Right after their research question asking about the factors that yield firms' various foreign market entry strategies, the authors provide a succinct overview of transaction cost and some relevant strategic management theory that helped to explain firms' foreign

market entry. Transaction cost research (Williamson, 1985) focused on micro-institutional aspects such as opportunism and bounded rationality. Yet questions of how macro-level institutions, such as country-level legal and regulatory frameworks, and enforcement regimes have been relatively under studied and have largely remained in the background (Meyer *et al.*, 2009). However, as the authors then stated, research suggests that institutions are much more than background conditions (Peng, 2003). Thus, their paper was set up well by the research question (i.e. the factors that determine foreign market entry strategies) and was then quickly well-situated in the literature (i.e. the importance of not just micro-institutional forces such as transaction costs and characteristics, but also macro-institutional forces such as the rule of law, tax regimes, enforcement, and other commercial conventions). Finding the past research insufficient, they remarked on what their paper would do to extend research and improve theory, partly by including more macro-institutional variables as direct variables in their study.

One thing to immediately note in this discussion of research questions and framing in the introduction is that authors need to *know the literature* that led to and motivates the paper's topic so it can be quickly summarized (in the introduction) with the manuscript properly situated in the past literature and how it adds to that literature. It is important at this point to note a common problem that we have often seen in our editing and reviews for journals, that is, the common problem of stating "very little research has been done on this topic". It is our experience that such statements are usually wrong. If an author writes that in the introduction, it is important for that author to be as certain as possible that this statement is correct. For example, one of us reviewed a manuscript which claimed "only a little research" had been done on the manuscript's topic. As if to validate that statement, the authors then only cited a couple of papers in their introduction's literature review (from the early 1980s!) that did little more than raise questions about that topic. Yet in fact, numerous articles and even some best-selling books had actually been written on that particular topic – in any case there was certainly a lot more than "a little research" (or just one main paper) on that topic[5]. Authors need to do the literature review with care to show they know the literature and also how their paper then fits with the current research stream (Ahlstrom, 2010c; Machi and McEvoy, 2008). It is best not to write "there has been little research on a topic" unless one is pretty certain this is the case.

Similarly, just because there has been little research done in China on your topic does not mean there has been "little research" on that topic; it is still important to cite and position your paper in the past research. An author who wants to write about a well-known topic, but in a new research site for that topic (e.g. China), must show how a paper would contribute to theory, empirical evidence, and practice – especially theory (Tsang and Kwan, 1999). At the same time, it should also be noted that just because there is not much research on a topic does not imply its worthiness to be studied. It may be that there are some assumptions made in the field that have not been explored and tested. Or the field may have overlooked the topic. As always, it is important for authors to show they know the literature in a field and how their paper can contribute to the field. For scholars in the management field, this usually means summarizing relevant research in management but perhaps also some research in the public administration area, or even economics, sociology or psychology, depending on the topic and research question.

2.3 Contributions
Another vital part of Section 2 is a summary of the paper's contributions. We have regularly heard editors comment that many papers are rejected (and we have rejected many papers ourselves) because of low contribution to existing research and state of knowledge in the field (Huang, 2007; Rynes, 2002). For example, a paper that covers some fairly well-known ground such as work motivation may find it more difficult to state clearly what it is adding to theory and (empirical) knowledge than a paper on a newer domain. Some authors try to sidestep this problem by stating their contributions in overly brief and general terms or by not providing any contributions at all. Such approaches are usually not acceptable at the better journals (Bartunek *et al.*, 2006). At a minimum, authors should provide the theoretical, empirical (or case) and practical contributions of their work. Other contributions may be included at that time, such as contributions to research design or methods, if a new or different approach was used in the paper, for example. It is vital that authors recognize that for most high-quality journals there must be theoretical contribution from the research (Geletkanycz and Tepper, 2012).

Authors should also repeat and expand their contributions from the introduction in the discussion section. Once again, the article by Meyer *et al.* (2009) is a good model. They follow their Section 5 with Section 6, the first subsection of which is Subsection 2.3 (Meyer *et al.*, 2009, p. 74). The paper's contributions clarify its impact on the scholarly conversation on the field in general (Meyer *et al.*, 2009; Young *et al.*, 2008). Interested authors should look for further discussion on some of the important topics summarized in further work on contributions (Ahlstrom, 2012; Rynes, 2002).

3. Literature review and theory
Well-organized papers will often expand on each part of the introduction in the paper's subsequent sections. Recall that a literature review should summarize the relevant work in that domain and situate the paper in the past literature. Thus, near the beginning of this section, it helps if authors clarify whether they are trying to fill in a limitation of past theory explanations such as in the Meyer *et al.* paper (sometimes called "extending a theory") trying to compare or contrast different theoretical approaches to a problem, trying to investigate a specific phenomenon through using multiple theoretical lenses, or trying to investigate an already-documented phenomenon in a new strategic research site, such as with a new moderator.

It is important to review the development of the more relevant literature in the chosen topic and why the paper is entering the field at this time. So if an author is writing about a topic where not much has been written, it is usually easy to situate the paper in the limited past literature. But if the topic is a very rich one, then it is important to take care that the extensive literature is summarized in a representative manner. It is best to be careful about saying a major literature such as personality research or power and influence is "wrong", as such a paper would meet a lot of very skeptical reviewers who know that literature well. Instead, try to show how the paper adds to or improves that literature (see Machi and McEvoy (2008) and Ridley (2008) for more explanation of the literature review).

A related problem in reviewing the literature and framing a paper is when the paper simply gives readers a tour of a well-understood literature, constructs hypotheses with little or no variation on the well-tested variables from that literature and confirms hypotheses about something that is already very well known (Ahlstrom, 2010c). Just testing what is well known without providing clear contributions is likely to lead to

rejection in good academic journals. The literature review has to tell readers what is known about the topic, but then it must set up a new paper's entry to the literature and what that paper can add. This is true even for replications (Tsang and Kwan, 1999).

After the relevant literature is reviewed and the paper is situated in that literature, a key element of the theory section in an empirical paper surrounds hypothesis development (Sparrowe and Mayer, 2011). This section should usually be placed after the review of relevant literature. If a theory is relatively complex, a figure summarizing it may be helpful. This helps reviewers follow the theoretical arguments carefully and it provides a framework to guide the development of the hypotheses. Usually, after a well-written literature review and subsequent introduction to the paper's theory lens, in an empirical, variance paper (Van de Ven, 2007) it is good to justify the hypotheses, one-by-one. Although there are exceptions, generally authors should avoid putting a long list of hypotheses at the end of the literature and theory section, as readers will struggle to connect the hypotheses with the relevant evidence earlier that justifies them. Also very helpful in terms of how to develop hypotheses based on theory, was a paper by Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan (2007) in the *Academy of Management Journal* where there is a model depicting a range from developing hypotheses based on inductive or logical speculation and basic case evidence, all the way to grounding predictions with existing theory. Authors should have a look at these arguments for creating and justifying hypotheses in their papers.

4. The methods

Although there are occasionally good reasons to vary the order, it is usually good to present the data on the sample or population first. Reviewers often ask for additional data about firms such as where the data were collected or about the group of employees from whom data were collected and about when. Try to provide as much helpful descriptive data as space permits and provide a summary table. Always include a correlation matrix with the means, standard deviations, and alphas of all the independent, dependent, moderator, mediator, and control variables[6].

It is often good to go through the descriptions of your constructs and measures in the order generally consistent with your theory section. Thus, it is common to discuss independent variables, dependent variables, mediating variables (the mechanism by which the independent variables operate), moderators and other control variables. If there is some concern about your variables and their measures, either because of a new scale, multicollinearity or other problems, it helps to include some the needed data analyses to address these problems (additional statistical tests, confirmatory factor analyses).

5. Results

Since the analyses will vary from study to study, we will highlight some of the most recently-raised objections we have seen from reviewers and editors, as well as from our own work with journals. Generally speaking, it is best for authors to present the results for each hypothesis, one-by-one. That is, after some preliminary information about the study's results, the paper should restate the first hypothesis, and then provide the results for that hypothesis with minimal discussion. Then the paper should move onto the next hypothesis, restate it, and give its results and so on. It is best to not force readers to turn back in the paper to the hypothesis section to find what each hypothesis said and then to flip forward again to the results. And although tables summarizing the

results are helpful, authors should never write "for my results, just see the table". Well-written papers give readers a summary of the results, along with any other important result-related information to take note of. discussion of the results should be minimal and taken up in Section 6.

For authors presenting interaction effects, it is good to report the form of the interaction in a figure if possible; also make sure that the axes are labeled with the appropriate metrics and with plots to scale. For authors using multiple regression, reviewers want to see control variables entered in the first step, independent variables in the second step, and interaction effects in the third step.

Where possible, try to guide the readers to see where the results relevant to each hypothesis are in the tables (Zhang and Shaw, 2012). In some cases, that might mean putting the hypothesis number in parentheses in front of the independent, dependent, or moderating variables. An increasing number of reviewers have also expressed concerns about authors' use of median splits, that is, cases where the authors convert time or a continuous variable into a dichotomous pair of variables based on a median split. Another variation is when authors split their sample into four groups by using a quartile split. Reviewers often react negatively to subgroup analyses and request to see continuous data treated as such. If a paper needs to do median or quartile splits, or divide other data (such as time) into segments, it should provide justification and (if available) citation for that action (Peng, 2012).

For authors using qualitative data analysis, it is especially critical to report who did the coding and how the coding was done (how the categories were established, what the convergent validity of the coding was, etc.). Perhaps most importantly here, it is good to avoid getting so involved in complicated data analyses that the basics are neglected (Bansal and Corley, 2012). First, present the most obvious and straightforward analyses that are appropriate; then, as necessary, conduct additional analyses or tests to identify other possible reasons for the paper's results. Also, if there were any, a discussion of the pattern of findings, and some treatment of unexpected or non-significant results. Robustness tests that provide an alternative approach to the data can go toward the end of the results section.

6. Discussion

In many ways, this is the most important section of the paper. The most important task is helping the reviewers see what the paper contributes to the literature and the field (Geletkanycz and Tepper, 2012). What do we know now that we did not know beforehand? How do the results improve our understanding of the theory and its variables? Or does it provide a new methodological or research design approach to studying the topic? In most cases, the section should have four parts, depending upon the nature of the study:

(1) the paper's contributions to theory, contributions to empirical or case evidence, and contributions to practice (and other contributions such as research methods or policy);

(2) a discussion of the limitations of the research (not every minor problem which occurred, but the major potential threats to internal and external validity);

(3) directions for future research; and

(4) any other unusual findings that you would like to comment on that did not fit easily into the results section.

Four to five pages here are usually enough for this section (Meyer *et al.*, 2009).

Note that many papers we have reviewed lack the word "contributions" or "contribute" and therefore fail to convey that they contain any contributions. Editors and reviewers are often forced to hunt for the paper's contributions. Their good-faith efforts may fail and they may give up if they cannot identify them or the contributions are spread around different parts of the paper. As a result, they can easily reach a verdict that the paper has no contributions and will recommend rejection. Every paper has some contributions, and papers compete on the magnitude of contributions, but it is the authors' responsibility to clearly articulate what their contributions are in the discussion. A paper's contributions should also be an expansion of the brief contributions in the introduction. We recommend that authors start the discussion with a subsection header labeled "contributions" so there is no question about what the paper is contributing. At a minimum, there should be at least one paragraph per contribution.

7. Formatting

Many papers we have edited or reviewed suffer from major formatting problems. Sometimes the capitalization of the title is odd or the fonts are too small. Sometimes authors leave multiple colors or tracked changes in their submissions, especially their resubmissions. Papers should not be submitted with poor formatting such as single spacing, small (less than 12 point) or other odd fonts, colors, tracked changes and so forth. If the journal does not number paragraphs in its articles (1.1, 1.2, 2.1, etc.), authors should not use that in their submissions. If it does, then certainly format the paper that way. Likewise, format the abstract in the way the journal does. Authors should also use the journal's references format. If the journal uses conventional "name and date" references, then the manuscript should also do that. We have received submissions that used all numbered footnotes for references, which was not what the journals we were editing (*APJM* and *AMP*) used.

It is important to be careful about the authors' names in the citations. Most citation formats have the surname (family name) of the author first, followed by his or her first (given) names. Usually that order is followed for subsequent authors, but sometimes it is not – authors should check which format is used. But at the start of a submitted manuscript or published article, usually the name order (in English-language books and most other European languages) is the given name followed by surname (sometimes with middle name or middle initial). Authors should be careful about the rendering and spelling of names in their submissions and in the references section.

Authors also need to be careful to provide tables and figures at the back of the paper and indications in the text where the table or figure should go. Check the instructions for authors but generally, tables and figures should not be embedded in the text of the paper. That will be done by the journal typesetters later if the paper is accepted. Formatting also applies in the letters you write to the editors. Several times authors have misspelled our names in sending us cover letters. One author inserted "the" in front of one of our names ("The Garry Bruton"). Another author wrote one of our names incorrectly in a letter and in the paper as "Ahlstrom David" (instead of David Ahlstrom). Another author kept calling one of us "Professor Christopher" (Christopher is one of the present author's middle names – unused for publishing). Such sloppiness creates a bad impression in the eyes of editors and reviewers, especially because it so easily can be fixed (Huang, 2007; Feldman, 2004).

Conclusion

Many editors and reviewers would like to see the basics of a paper done well and the information properly organized and labeled. This article has provided a simple checklist of items that many standard empirical papers need while highlighting some common problems and suggesting solutions. Several helpful resources for authors have been provided from the academic literature; authors should look up some of the cited articles (many from *Academy of Management Journal*, others from *SMJ*, *APJM* and *NBRI*) and books. Finally, it is important to remember that oftentimes, a reviewer's decision about whether to reject a paper despite its potential merit or to recommend a revision is based, at least in part, on his or her perception of the author's ability to rework a manuscript professionally. A paper's chances can be improved by helping the reviewer and readers follow why a study was done, what was studied, what was found, and what it contributes to theory, empirical evidence, and practice in the field. This will help reviewers and editors decide whether good research can be turned into good publications.

Notes

1. There are many approaches to writing a title. Usually it is best to keep the title short, simple and easy to recall, sometimes with a memorable expression like "iron cage" (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) or "camping on seesaws" (Hedberg *et al.*, 1976).
2. Thanks go to Mike Peng of University of Texas at Dallas for that example.
3. Replications have traditionally not been well-accepted in the management and allied business areas, though they probably should be more common. Authors should check with the editor of their target journal if a replication is acceptable. Generally speaking, the replication should make some contribution to the evidence and knowledge in the field. If a well-known theory is simply tested (replicated) in a new research site, such as China, that may be contribution enough for the target journal which may want to build evidence, particularly new empirical evidence, about the validity of theory in that research site. See Tsang and Kwan (1999) for more discussion of the potential types of replication and their possible contributions.
4. The better journals in management and the social sciences will usually have a clear research question posed very early in an article. See www.utdallas.edu/~mikepeng/ for several good examples of papers with clear research questions often stated early in the article – sometimes in the first sentence or even the title.
5. Needless to say, the paper was desk rejected.
6. If a paper is using well-known scales, it should provide citation for these, if not, then the items from the scales or instrument should be placed in an Appendix.

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