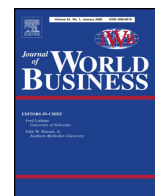




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Editorial

From the Editors: Publishing in the *Journal of World Business*[☆]

1. Introduction

Publishing in quality academic journals such as the *Journal of World Business* (JWB) is always challenging. As JWB is one of the most influential and top rated international management journals with a five-year impact factor of about 3, it receives hundreds of new submissions each year. Authors who want to improve their chances of publishing in JWB can save themselves time and frustration by ensuring that their manuscripts are in line with the journal's requirements. It is generally well-understood if a paper lacks theoretical grounding or makes significant methodological and research design mistakes, it will probably be rejected, often at the editor's desk (Bono & McNamara, 2011; Colquitt & Ireland, 2009; Eden, 2008). However, many times, an author may face rejection of his or her submitted manuscript not because of bad methods or research design, but because of major framing and organization problems – problems that are challenging but often avoidable or fixable.

This commentary outlines several frequently seen concerns with respect to paper framing and organization and how those problems might be avoided or otherwise solved before a manuscript is submitted. The focus here is on having a well-constructed introduction, and a clear research question and framing, though guidelines are suggested for other sections of the manuscript as well.

1.1. Research framing

There is much helpful work explaining publishing and research strategies, particularly focusing on methodology, research design, data analysis, epistemologies and ontologies (e.g. Cohen & Manion, 1998; Creswell, 2008; Kerlinger, 1995; Van de Ven, 2007). While good research design, methodology and data analysis are necessary for writing good papers, they are not sufficient (Cummings & Frost, 1985, 1995; Grant & Pollock, 2011; Huang, 2007; Huff, 1999, 2008). A paper may have a well-done statistical analysis, but if it lacks a clear research question, has a weak framing and motivation, and just wanders around a broad topic while failing to provide clear contributions, it will have a significantly reduced chance of acceptance (Grant & Pollock, 2011; Konrad, 2008; Rynes, 2002).

In my capacity as a senior editor of the *Journal of World Business* and in editorial capacities for other journals over the past dozen

years, I have overseen hundreds of manuscripts, and reviewed many more for journals, conferences, and edited books. Drawing on that experience and a number of helpful sources in management (e.g. Cummings & Frost, 1985, 1995; Daft, 1995; Huff, 1999, 2008), and allied social sciences (e.g. Huang, 2007; Machi & McEvoy, 2008; Zedeck, 2008) this paper provides a summary of several key items to which authors should pay particular attention, apart from the usual topics of methodology and analysis.¹ On this basis, four fundamental paper framing and organization issues are identified and discussed.² These include submitting papers according to the journal's aims and scope, having a cogent introduction, posing an answerable research question, and providing clear framing and contributions for the paper. This list, while not exhaustive, provides some essential guidelines and helpful hints for prospective authors while helping them avoid all-too-common problems in the paper-crafting process (Abrahamson, 2008; Ahlstrom, 2012b; Kilduff, 2007).³ In discussing these issues, examples of both successful and unsuccessful approaches are provided. Anonymity of the unsuccessful or problematic examples has been maintained by drawing on examples from a number of different management and international business journals (including JWB), modifying the topics somewhat, and in some cases, crafting a composite example from several discrete experiences.

2. A checklist for framing empirical papers

2.1. Aims and scope and past articles

A prospective author for JWB should first be sure to read the journal's aims and scope as well as several articles from the journal, particularly articles most relevant to the author's own work. This will help the author better understand the types of articles the journal generally seeks to publish and (importantly) what it does

¹ For authors who would like to know more about methodological issues, which are not covered in this paper, see Cascio's (2012) very helpful and interesting summary of methodological issues in international business.

² The focus here is on empirical papers, though the importance of clear research questions, introductions, and paper framing applies to all types of papers, from conceptual papers and reviews to simulations (e.g. Ahlstrom, 2011; Huff, 1999; Peng, Lee & Hong, 2014; Young, Tsai, Wang, Liu, & Ahlstrom, 2014; Zhao, Gu, Yue, & Ahlstrom, 2013).

³ Also helpful to authors, though beyond the scope of this commentary, is the work on the editorial and peer review processes in the organizational sciences by Yahuda Baruch and colleagues (Baruch, Konrad, Aguinis, & Starbuck, 2008; Baruch, Sullivan, & Schepmyer, 2006), and others (e.g. Bedeian, 2004; Daft, 1995; Hollenbeck, 2008).

[☆] Editor-in-Chief's (Jonathan Doh) Note: As described in my editorial in JWB 50-1, we will periodically publish short "From the Editors" commentaries on some aspect of international business. This first article, by Senior Editor David Ahlstrom, is on a very important topic: Publishing in the *Journal of World Business*.

not publish (Doh, 2015). A concern that I have, and one that I hear voiced regularly by editors is that too often, authors have not looked at the journal's aims and scope nor have they read much in the journal to which they are submitting their work (Ahlstrom, 2012b; Huang, 2007). By reading the journal's aims and scope, past papers in the journal, and the recent editorial articles in that journal (especially those that comment on the journal's focus), prospective authors will gain a much clearer understanding of whether their work is appropriate for the journal (Colquitt and George (2011)).⁴

JWB's current guide for authors (<http://www.elsevier.com/journals/journal-of-world-business/1090-9516/guide-for-authors>) contains a checklist of information needed for authors. The guidelines are very helpful and range from format and style issues to manuscript submission and the journal's focus. The journal's focus is further detailed in the "author information pack," which has a link near the top of the guide-for-authors webpage. The first page of the author information pack states that the journal welcomes a range of theory building and theory testing papers in the management area insofar it relates to international business, and including both "macro" and "micro" topics. Manuscripts may focus on a single country or small group of countries, but submissions should reflect some cross-border or comparative dimensions, or explore and advance other issues affecting international business, consistent with the global scope of the journal.

JWB generally does not publish manuscripts that are primarily about macroeconomic, and public policy issues, though papers with economic or policy implications are certainly welcome (e.g. Ramamurtia & Doh, 2004; also see Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Vargo & Morgan, 2005). JWB also does not publish finance papers that are written primarily for an academic finance audience. For example, research on dividends that primarily addressed investor return questions would probably not be a good fit for JWB. However research on dividends or other "finance variables" that helped to address a clear corporate governance topic might be of interest to the journal (cf. Huang, Chen, & Kao, 2012; Mar & Young, 2001). In addition, JWB does not publish "how to" papers that provide steps to managers about topics such as quality control, data envelopment analysis, or reengineering, for example. Implementation issues can certainly be relevant, but the framing of the paper and its grounding in theory would be quite important in writing such a paper, as noted below.

2.2. The paper's introduction

After being fairly sure the paper and its analysis fit the journal's focus, an author should understand that the paper's introduction is perhaps its most crucial part. A poor or confusing introduction can significantly hurt the chances of otherwise good research getting published (Grant & Pollock, 2011; Konrad, 2008). I have heard more than one editor say that papers often get rejected because of deficient or confusing introductions. This is because a weak introduction will make it difficult to see the paper's focus and its contributing value to the journal and the field. As Grant and Pollock (2011: 873) remark:

...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? There are different approaches to writing introductions such as starting with a

surprising question or even a little story, but in simplest terms, a good introduction is often essentially a miniature version of the paper itself. That is, the introduction contains most of the key sections of the paper briefly summarized in about six to eight paragraphs or about two to four pages (Konrad, 2008). This is somewhat different from journals in psychology or economics that may count everything up to the methods or the model as the "introduction" (including a theory or literature review section). In management, however, the theory or literature review section is separate from, and generally follows the introduction directly, or it may come after a short background section.

The introduction should explain what research question the paper will ask and answer, what research has been done before on or around this question (often called "situating the research"), and why the research is needed in terms of past research and its limits (often called "motivating the research"). In addition, the introduction should state briefly the paper's main proposition or hypothesis (not all of them, just a quick summary), how the paper will answer the question (very brief methods) and what the results contribute, the latter of which should be expanded on in the paper's discussion section (Ahlstrom, 2011; Konrad, 2008; Meyer, Estrin, Bhaumik, & Peng, 2009). Grant and Pollock (2011: 873) further note:

The introduction provides the interpretive frame that shapes how reviewers read a manuscript during the review process. 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.

In short, the introduction tells readers what question the paper will answer, where the paper fits, why it is needed, and what it adds to the understanding and application of its topic.⁵

2.2.1. The research question

A key element of a paper's introduction is the research question. A paper should have a clear and answerable research question, posed as early as possible, and one that will catch the reader's attention (Grant & Pollock, 2011). Perhaps most importantly, a good research question or thesis statement should leave little doubt in the reader's mind what the paper will and will not cover.⁶ 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 the literature is important, the research question itself need not necessarily be generated from the extant literature. Some research questions may arise from (often new) phenomena that require some theoretical grounding and may be exploratory in nature. Recent examples of this would include virtual teams, offshore outsourcing, and global start-ups.⁷

It follows that without the discipline of a clear research question (or thesis statement), a manuscript can often wander around a topic without really dedicating itself to addressing one question and its subsidiary points. The question should also be interesting and address something that needs to be better understood, which the literature review will later reinforce (Davis, 1971; Konrad, 2008; Sparrowe & Mayer, 2011). Once the topic of interest has been selected, it is helpful for authors to read on the topic to further refine the research question or to identify unaddressed questions. The question should be focused but not

⁵ For some particularly helpful examples of well-constructed introductions, see Meyer et al. (2009) and Sun, Peng, Ren and Yan (2012).

⁶ Depending on the paper's topic and research design, it may instead have a thesis (purpose) statement instead of a research question. The key is that readers will understand specifically what the paper is about.

⁷ Thanks to JWB's Editor-in-Chief Jonathan Doh for this observation and examples.

⁴ Another helpful source on publishing of which authors should be familiar is the *APA Publication Manual*.

too narrow. But a more common problem is that the research question may be too broad, such as the factors that lead to firm growth, a question which needs careful refinement (Ahlstrom, 2010; Coad, 2009). If a research question is too broad, the researcher will be inundated with information that will be hard to integrate into a model or some other organizing framework within the limits of a standard research paper.

For many manuscripts I have read over the years at *JWB* and other management and IB journals 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 that they were “examining a topic” or “investigating an issue.” These statements are fine in themselves, but they are not research questions and as a result, fail to define and limit the paper properly. I have handled numerous manuscripts that stated, for example, that they would “investigate innovation in China,” or “examine human resources in India” Those statements are very broad and can be about almost anything loosely related to those domains. And the manuscripts reflected that lack of focus as they would then sport over a dozen hypotheses that ranged far and wide across these broad topics but in the end would fail to contribute anything of substance. Usually the papers would conclude with statements like “innovation is important” or “human resources are essential to firm success.” The authors were usually surprised their papers were rejected in these cases. They would ask: “Aren’t human resources essential for firms” and “isn’t innovation important to study?” I would respond that they are, but the paper failed to contribute anything to that domain and just restated what has long been known (Ahlstrom, 2014). Such problems often originate partly with an overly broad research question and a poorly framed study.

Another example of a broad research statement in a paper I handled mentioned that it would explore some success factors in global business. Since the paper seemed to have some interesting data, but was much too broad in its initial form, I sent the paper back to the authors and asked them to refine the question considerably and focus it on a theory-driven research question that would limit the topic to something answerable in a thirty-page paper. The authors then sent back a revised manuscript with a (slightly) refined question about the factors that lead to the success of the multinational enterprise. This was not much of a refinement as the revised research question remained so broad that it would be difficult to answer within the confines of a conventional research paper. That it had over a dozen hypotheses covering everything from strategy and innovation to employee satisfaction, selection and training confirmed my reservations about the paper’s extreme lack of focus. While firm success factors represent a very important topic to management and international business, a paper needs to address an element of firm success (or other focused topic) that has been neglected or is not well understood (Abrahamson, 2008; Huff, 1999).

Another paper that I received had a much more focused research question: “What factors contribute to the acceptance and use of evidence-based management (EBM) among global managers?”⁸ This question was addressed by undertaking primary data collection. It could also have been addressed using an exploratory methodology using interviews with the relevant managers. At about the same time, I received another paper with a very similar research question, though not quite the same. That question asked: “How do global managers implement evidence-based practice in their day-to-day work?” This second research question of “the how” of implementation differs from the first EBM question about its acceptance in that the second author had searched for evidence

of EBM implementation, rather than the factors that might contribute to the acceptance and use of EBM. Both papers used different data and data collections strategies, and the specific research questions helped the authors to answer their own question and not drift into each other’s questions. Note that if the research question were simply about “examining EBM in global firms,” the ensuing paper would likely be much more unfocused compared to the actual EBM papers and would likely wonder around the EBM topic in global firms while contributing little to it. Recent research in *JWB* by Fang Lee Cooke and her colleagues (Cooke, Saini, & Wang, 2014) illustrate similar understanding and implementation questions with talent management and provide a helpful example for prospective authors.

Other good research questions (and carefully framed papers) from the management and international business literature are instructive. As noted above, Klaus Meyer and colleagues co-authored papers with clear and interesting research questions. One is (Meyer et al., 2009: 61): “What determines foreign market entry strategies?” A second paper (Cui, Meyer, & Hu, 2014: 488) in *JWB* 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) in *JWB* also provides a clearly stated research question: “How does cross-listing impact the scope of the firm?” In these cases, there is no ambiguity about what is being asked and what will be answered. Good places to find potential research questions and to see what the field is thinking about include review papers and books, as well as in the future research section of empirical papers (Oetzel & Doh, 2009; Peng & Zhao, 2012). Commentary papers can also suggest important research avenues; recent commentaries on goal setting by Ed Locke and Gary Latham (Latham & Locke, 2009; Locke & Latham, 2009), for example, provided several such important and interesting questions that could extend that key line of work. Hayton, George, & Zahra, 2002 in a paper in *Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice* provided a long table listing articles on national culture and entrepreneurship, with their research questions and summarized findings, which authors should also find helpful.⁹ Regardless if an author gets a research question from review papers and future research sections of published articles or identifies unaddressed research topics, an author should be careful to ask a clear, concise, and interesting research question, and one that can help to extend knowledge in the field (Davis, 1971).

2.2.2. Situating the paper

Following the research question, the introduction should contain a short summary that situates the paper in past literature and shows the need for the current study (Grant & Pollock, 2011), which is something I call the “mini-literature review.” It also serves to motivate the paper in that the need for the paper emerges from it. Again Meyer et al. (2009) are instructive. After their research question about the factors leading to firms’ various foreign market entry strategies, they briefly link previous transaction cost research and other relevant strategic management theory to foreign market entry strategies. In doing so, they argue how micro-analytic approaches such as transaction costs should be complimented by macro-level institutional variables, such as country-level regulatory frameworks and enforcement regimes that had previously been relatively less explored. Thus their paper was set up by the research question about different foreign market entry strategies and then well-situated in terms of the importance of macro-institutional forces such as the rule of law and levels of enforcement. The summarized contributions to theory, empirical evidence, and

⁸ To maintain anonymity of the papers, the research questions in this example have been modified somewhat from the original ones.

⁹ Each chapter of Shane’s (2008) important book *The Illusions of entrepreneurship: The costly myths that entrepreneurs, investors, and policy makers live by* is titled with a question.

practice (in the introduction) easily followed once the paper was so effectively situated and motivated. Likewise, the introduction by Jonathan Doh and colleagues (Bunyaratavej, Hahn, & Doh, 2008) in their paper on location efficiencies for services offshoring is instructive in how a topic can be situated and motivated.

This means that an author needs to know the literature that led to and supports the paper's topic or otherwise provides some background or theoretical grounding. Authors should also be careful not to state that there has been little research on a topic unless they are pretty certain this is the case. Just because there has not been much research on a particular topic in China, for example, does not mean there is little research (in general) on that topic (Bruton, Ahlstrom & Yeh, 2004). Even exploratory topics should be situated in some supporting literature (Machi & McEvoy, 2008; Ridley, 2008).

2.2.3. Contributions

Another vital part of the introduction section, which authors would also expand upon in the paper's discussion section, is a summary of the paper's contributions. A paper that covers some very well known ground such as work motivation and incentives, for example, may find it difficult to state clearly what the paper is adding to the theory and empirical evidence on this topic.¹⁰ Some authors try to sidestep this problem by stating their contributions in only brief terms, if at all. Such an approach is usually not acceptable at the better journals (Bartunek, Rynes, & Ireland, 2006; Geletkanycz & Tepper, 2012). At a minimum, authors should provide the theoretical, empirical (if applicable) and practical contributions of their work (Rynes, 2002; Ahlstrom, 2012a). In addition, *JWB* insists that authors provide a strong and separate managerial relevance (practical contributions) section. Yet many papers I have handled or reviewed lack the words "contributions," "contributes," "implications" or other synonyms, and therefore fail to convey their value. Editors and reviewers are often forced to hunt for the paper's contributions and their good-faith efforts may fail. As a result, they can easily reach a verdict that the paper has no contributions and recommend rejection. Konrad (2008: 13–14) clearly summarizes this key concern:

... without a clear statement of 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 to the literature based on the paper alone.

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). Authors should also see how past papers in *JWB* frame the managerial and related practical implications which are of particular importance to the journal (e.g. Ahlstrom, Levitas, Hitt, Dacin & Zhu, 2014). Regarding conceptual or review papers, their primary contributions will usually be to theory though they also should have some relevance for management (Ahlstrom, Chen, & Yeh, 2010; Ahlstrom & Wang, 2009; Klein & Zedeck, 2004).¹¹

3. Conclusion

This paper has provided a summary of important items with respect to framing and paper organization and highlighted several

key problems and potential solutions along with some helpful resources on these topics. As all journals have target audiences and ongoing research conversations, prospective authors must be careful that their paper fits with the target journal's aims and scope. The introduction and framing of the paper is also very important. Authors need to be sure that editors, reviewers and readers see what the paper is specifically about and what it contributes to the literature without having to do their own literature searches to figure out where the paper fits and if it is adding to the literature (Geletkanycz & Tepper, 2012; Konrad, 2008).¹² *JWB* welcomes papers with good data and analysis but they also need to be well situated and motivated, explain what was found, and importantly, why the results matter and are relevant to managers.

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¹⁰ This is not to say that no new research is needed on incentives and motivation, it is just that a paper would have to be carefully situated in that extensive literature (Pepper & Gore, 2014).

¹¹ For guidance on writing up other sections of the paper including methods and results see Zhang and Shaw (2012) and Ahlstrom, Bruton and Zhao (2013).

¹² Although replications are perhaps less common in management and international business, they have a relevant place and can make important contributions (Tsang & Kwan, 1999).

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