

HOW TO PUBLISH IN ACADEMIC JOURNALS: WRITING A STRONG AND ORGANIZED INTRODUCTION SECTION

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ABSTRACT

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 much time and frustration 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 likely be rejected. Researchers in the social sciences are typically well-trained in methods, statistical analysis, and research design. But many scholars have much less training on the situating, motivating, and organizing of manuscripts, particularly in the all-important introduction of the paper. Oftentimes, an author may face rejection of his or her manuscript not because of bad data or methods, but because of major framing and organizational issues with the paper, as well as a lack of clear contributions. These problems are addressed within the context of writing a clear research question and introduction section, which form the basis for the overall organization of the paper. Numerous helpful sources are also provided.

Keywords: Research, Academic writing, Journal articles, Research question, Paper organization, Publishing.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing and publishing good quality academic articles is a demanding task. Researchers face many challenges from getting the right data and analyzing it correctly to positioning the paper clearly and showing its contributions to current theory and evidence in its area. Authors who want to improve their chances of publishing in the business and allied social sciences journals can save themselves much time and frustration by ensuring that their manuscripts are well-designed and analyzed, as well as being properly formatted consistent with the target

journal's requirements. There is much research dedicated to helping researchers with many of the nuts and bolts basics of doing research, composing papers, and writing dissertations (e.g. Heppner and Heppner, 2003; Huff, 1999, 2008; Cummings and Frost, 1985, 1995). Sage Publications has also provided a great deal of work on research design and methods and other helpful support topics (e.g. Lewis-Beck, Bryman, and Liao, 2003).

Most authors understand that when a paper is not grounded theoretically or has significant methodological or research design flaws, it is

likely to be rejected from many, if not most, academic journals (Bono and McNamara, 2011; Colquitt and Ireland, 2009; Eden, 2008). Thus many authors (and doctoral programs) primarily emphasize data collection and methodology, which are certainly key subjects. And as an editor for management and international business journals for many years, most of the papers I handle as an editor or reviewer have good data and fairly well done statistical analyses. I seldom have to reject a paper outright over incorrect methods and research designs, though sometimes an author may be directed to a different method or analysis approach. Normally, though, authors do a fairly good job of handling data and methodology and our programs are pretty good in training this.

Where many authors seem to have a good deal more trouble with is other key issues important to the writing and submission of academic research. Broadly stated, many authors, particularly newer authors to the business and allied social sciences field commonly have difficulties with respect to the framing and organizing of their papers. More specifically, the problems that I regularly see are that papers often lack an unambiguous research question and purpose, are not positioned in the past literature, and have not been properly motivated (Ahlstrom, 2010). As a result, many papers I review have a poor focus and simply provide lists of literature and pedestrian analyses, and fail to contribute much of anything to the research in their domain (Ahlstrom, 2012, 2015; Ahlstrom and Bruton, 2014).

Thus this perspectives paper addresses these problems and provides some examples of good (and weak) research questions, introductions, and paper framing and organization. Although there is much good work explaining research strategies, particularly in terms of methods, research design, and data analysis (e.g. Kerlinger, 1995; Cohen and Manion, 1998; Creswell, 2008; Van de Ven, 2007), these are necessary but not sufficient for writing and publishing good papers (Ahlstrom, 2015; Cummings and Frost, 1985, 1995; Huang, 2007; Huff, 1999, 2008). This paper also provides readers (and prospective authors) with some exemplary research both from the micro and macro sides of management and suggests some helpful sources for learning more about this topic of paper framing and organization (e.g.

Ahlstrom, 2011a, 2011b; Ahlstrom, Bruton and Zhao, 2013; Huff, 1998).

OVERVIEW

Over the past 20 years, I have reviewed or handled as an editor, over two thousand manuscripts and discussed many more papers in numerous research courses and workshops. I have found that most manuscripts are not bad in that they cover a reasonably interesting topic and often provide some good data and analysis. Yet many papers, even some of the better ones, still have significant problems with their writing and organization that make the paper difficult to read and much more likely to be rejected (Ahlstrom, 2010; Konrad, 2008). More than half of all the papers I review, edit or otherwise vet for conferences and workshops have very serious problems with their organization and framing, particularly in the introduction. This hurts what could be otherwise good research and often causes leads to the paper's rejection (Grant and Pollard, 2011). Some of the main up-front problems with these manuscripts are discussed below with suggestions for improving them and helpful sources with more information and examples.

First impressions and the research question

First impressions in a paper are very important. The introduction, which in management and international business manuscripts is usually the first two to three pages (about 5-7 paragraphs) of the paper, often determines whether the readers will continue reading (Grant and Pollack, 2011). In particular, in their initial reading of a new paper, the editor and reviewers must understand what the paper will ask and answer and what it will contribute to the research in that area. If the editor and reviewers do not quite see what the paper is about (specifically, not generally) and contributes after having read the research question and the initial paragraphs of the paper, they are more likely to look for reasons to reject.

Many papers have significant problems with their research question and opening paragraphs (Ahlstrom, 2010; Grant and Pollack, 2011). This a problem because without a clear research question and clear framing of the paper up front, a paper will have a tendency to wander around a topic and not focus on a specific question with a sharp focus on the topic

(Ahlstrom, 2010, 2015). As such, papers are regularly rejected not because of faulty research design or statistics, but because of vague research questions and poor up-front framing (Grant and Pollack, 2011) making it very difficult to see the paper's position in the literature and why readers should care about it (Ahlstrom, 2010; Ahlstrom, Bruton and Zhou, 2013; Konrad, 2008).

To avoid problems associated with a problematic start to a paper and an apparent lack of focus, a paper should seek to provide a clear and answerable research question in the first paragraph, if possible in the first sentence of the paper, or even also in the paper's title or abstract (e.g. Belostecinic, 2017; Peng, Lee, and Wang, 2005). A good research question leaves little doubt what the paper will cover, while a lack of a clear research question makes it more difficult for readers to understand the manuscript's position in the literature. Although the overall manuscript's position in past research literature is important, the research question itself does not necessarily have to be generated from the existing literature, though it often is. Some research questions may arise from new phenomena that may be exploratory in nature and require some theoretical grounding (Christensen and Carlile, 2009).ⁱ The research question should be interesting and address something that needs to be better understood because past research did not fully answer the question or key aspects of the research (Davis, 1971; Konrad, 2008; Sparrowe and Mayer, 2011).

To highlight one exemplary research question and subsequent positioning of the research on a topic, social psychologist Amy Cuddy (2012, 2018) in her work on nonverbal communication started out her well-known 2012 TED talk (Cuddy, 2012) with a broad question asking about nonverbal communication or body language, social judgment and certain evaluative outcomes. After providing some brief answers and research about that general topic, professor Cuddy explained that much of the past research focused on the impact one's body language would have on other people with whom the person is communicating. And she quickly noted in her TED talk and in other research of hers (Carney, Cuddy, and Yap, 2010; Cuddy, 2018) that her focus was not on the impact of body language on the other party, but rather her question concerned how our nonverbal communication might influence

ourselves personally? Notice that this question is focused on the effect of body language not on others, but on ourselves – our physiological or psychological state. Indeed, Carney, Cuddy, and Yap's (2010: 1363) research question was: "Can posed displays cause a person to feel more powerful?"

It is important to note in this work that Amy Cuddy did not make vague opening statements such as "our work is going to examine nonverbal communication." Nor did she and her colleagues write that body language is important and we will reflect on its importance – which is the way many authors set up their papers and topic. As an editor and reviewer, I have read hundreds of manuscripts and dissertations that essentially did just that, typically starting off their papers by saying they were going to "examine a topic," or "explore an issue." And often that "issue" was quite broad (like HR in China, innovation in India, or mergers in North America, for example) such that it was quite difficult to discover the author's focus and how that work would differ from past research and thus contribute to knowledge and evidence in their area. Amy Cuddy and colleagues made it very clear the *specific part* of one's nonverbals they were studying was on the effect of nonverbals on one's own person, and that this research in turn *differed* from the previous work in this general area. This discipline of a clear research question is one that numerous authors fail to provide in their papers and the result is their research ends up being broadly "about" a topic with lists of cited articles and a jumble of variables that in the end fails to contribute much to research in their field. Such papers typically state "innovation is important" or "HR is essential to firms in Asia" or some general conclusion that is already well understood in the data. Cuddy and her colleagues did not conclude simply "nonverbals are important." The specific question Cuddy and her colleagues (2010) posed on posture and feelings of confidence led to specific conclusions about what type of body language mattered, how did it matter physiologically and finally, what were the evaluative outcomes for the person in question (in terms of job interviews). This differed considerably from past research on body language and contributed significantly in terms of theory, empirical findings, and practice.

Other good research questions and well-framed opening paragraphs papers are

instructive in this regard. For example, well-known international business scholars Klaus Meyer, Mike Peng and colleagues coauthored several papers with clear and instructive research questions. For example, in one paper for the *Strategic Management Journal* (Meyer, Estrin, Bhaumik and Peng, 2009: 61) they asked in the first sentence: “What determines foreign market entry strategies?” It is very clear from the outset that the authors want to inquire about the factors that determine the different entry strategies for a global firm. In another paper Peng and Su (2014: 42) also provide a clearly stated research question: “How does cross-listing impact the scope of the firm?” It is important to note that Meyer, Peng and colleagues did not write that they would examine entry strategies or firm scope. The Meyer et al. (2009) paper is clearly asking about the factors that determine the strategic approaches firms use to enter new markets. This research question first directed attention to micro (transaction costs, individual incentives) and macro factors (top management team and governance, resources, institutions) and the paper was clearly positioned in studying resources and institutions as direct effects on international market entry strategies. As soon as a reader sees a clear research question such as the preceding, there is little question about what research the paper will discuss and utilize (Ahlstrom, 2015).

Overly broad questions

Unlike the articles by Amy Cuddy, Klaus Meyer, Mike Peng and colleagues noted earlier, many papers’ research questions are too broad to be answerable in an average length paper. For example, consider another research question that I commonly seen (in various forms): “what human resources (HR) factors lead to competitive advantage.” Given the breadth of HR concepts and research today on topics ranging from compensation and benefits to pay for performance to selection and training, feedback and many others, such a research question is very broad and the study would be hard to limit to something answerable. Usually a very broad study such as this ends up being a long laundry list of concepts (and hypotheses), across an unwieldy range of subtopics. And reviewers naturally will ask why the author chose this list of HR items (such as selection, and training) and not another set of HR

concepts, for example. This is because the author in this example, failed to limit the research question to a logically narrow topic that addressed one key aspect of HR as Cuddy and colleagues (Carney et al., 2010) did with nonverbal communication or Meyer et al. (2009) did with market entry strategies. Amy Cuddy was able to limit the question and its subsequent framing to be about nonverbal communication in an area that had not been well studied, that is, the impact of a person’s body language on his or her own feelings of power and confidence. Papers with an overly broad research question and opening paragraphs often continue to reflect that lack of focus throughout the paper and range far and wide across HR, innovation, or other topics and not contributing much to the literature that is not already well known. It is very helpful for an author to limit the study to an answerable research question that will focus and limit the study. For graduate students and fairly new authors, I would add that the discipline of a carefully worded research question is essential to writing a paper that will contribute to the literature (Ahlstrom, 2010, 2015).

WRITING THE INTRODUCTION

After the research question has established the topic and provided some boundaries to the paper, the first part of the paper’s introduction section is also very important. The first paragraphs of the paper serve to *position* or *situate* the paper in the past literature – much the way Meyer et al. (2009) positioned their paper in the resource-based and institutional theory literatures in terms of the direct effects these have on market entry strategies. As such, readers should know where your paper fits with respect to other, related research on your topic. In addition to situating or positioning the paper, the opening paragraphs provide crucial *motivation* for the paper, that is, why is this topic needed. Situating and motivating your paper (in the first 2-3 paragraphs of your introduction) is a very important step in organizing your paper and showing its contribution to readers.

For a fairly standard empirical (or case-based) paper, usually right after the research question is posed -- hopefully in the first sentence or certainly around the first paragraph of the introduction -- then the other most relevant research that addressed the main question

needs to be briefly summarized. This clarifies the positioning of the paper in past literature (which is usually expanded upon in the literature review section of the paper). This short summary of past research that addressed the research question will then lead to the need (motivation) for the current study (Grant and Pollock, 2011). That “mini-literature review” in the introduction is usually about 2-3 paragraphs.

A recent article by management scholars Yunshi Liu, Yi-Jung Chen, and Linda C. Wang (2017) in *Asia Pacific Journal of Management* is instructive. Though not stated in the first sentence of the paper, their research question asked if family firms can innovate. The paper’s introduction noted that the research on this topic could be arranged into macro versus micro factors, as well as internal and external forces. The introduction noted that there is an extensive literature on the micro side – both internal to the firm and external (decision-making, psychology factors, and culture issues), and also on the macro-external side (e.g. formal institutions, government policy).ⁱⁱ But there was less work on the macro-internal (unabsorbed organizational slack, family ownership) as well as other measures of innovation beyond the standard R&D intensity (Liu et al., 2017; Su, Ahlstrom, Li, and Cheng, 2013). This less-explored area (macro-internal influences on innovation) provided a good position or entry point for their research on family firms. In addition, Liu, Chen and Wang (2017) utilized a lesser-known measure for innovativeness – royalty payments – which proved a helpful theory contribution, that is a newer way of measuring innovativeness based on (lower) levels of royalty payments made by a firm.

It is again important to note that Liu and her colleagues did not write that they were “examining innovation in family business.” Nor did they say that little research has been done on family business and innovation in Taiwan, which would have been completely wrong. Much research has been done on family business and innovation including a major meta-analysis recently (Duran, Kammerlander, Van Essen, and Zellweger, 2016). That is another major mistake commonly committed by authors: writing that “not much research has been done on a topic” when in fact much work has been done. It is very important for authors *to know the research* on the topic and provide a summary up front of the most relevant research

regarding their research question and then show how their manuscript fits with (extends or contributes) to the past research on this topic, and how that past research was inadequate in some way or perhaps not answering the question they have posed, as in the earlier examples (Carney et al., 2010; Meyer et al., 2009).

Meyer and colleagues’ (2009) paper is once again instructive. After their research question asking about the factors leading to various foreign market entry strategies, Meyer and colleagues briefly summarized previous transaction cost research and other strategy theory explaining various foreign market entry strategies. In doing so, they argued how micro-institutional approaches (transaction costs) need 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 other market managing institutions (Ahlstrom, Young, Nair, and Law, 2003; Rodrik, Subramanian, and Trebbi, 2004) in explaining firms’ international market entry decisions. In positioning their paper clearly in past literature, it was also easy for Meyer et al (2009) as well as Liu et al (2017) to provide summary contributions to theory, empirical evidence, and practice at the end of their respective introduction sections.

Initial paper organization problems and ways to avoid them

A paper that lacks a well-organized introduction will often lack a research question, and simply identify a topic such as innovation or human resources or perhaps a particularly theory that the paper will “examine.” Such problematic papers will usually start to summarize why the topic is important and mention some studies about it. These studies will often be rather broad and simply identify the topic and, unlike Cuddy’s work or in the Meyer et al (2009) article, say little specific about it. After that, such a weakly-organized paper will usually start discussing its approach to studying, for example, innovation in a particular country, for example, and then state “little research has been done” on innovation in

that particular country. Then the paper will usually tell readers what it will do over the next 25 pages or so. Generally, no contributions to theory, empirical or case evidence, practice or policy will be mentioned, making it difficult for readers to understand what they should be learning from the paper.

I have seen this type of paper many times over the past 20 years. This problem with this very common approach to writing a research paper is that readers will not be clear on what question the paper is trying to answer, and how it differs from other research on the topic. Although the author may know how his or her paper is different, this will not be apparent to editors, reviewers, and other readers that are not as familiar with that line of research. Amy Cuddy (2012, 2018) made it crystal clear that she was studying the aspect of nonverbal communication (posture) that impacted one's own physiological state (hormone levels), which in turn affected an evaluative situation (job interviews). If Cuddy had just said "body language is important" and "not much research has been done on body language and evaluative outcomes" and "here is what we are studying," the paper would have left the reader questioning about what else has been done on body language, and what are those authors adding to that research. Many, manuscripts I read fail to position themselves in the literature and thus do not provide clear contributions to the literature on their topic.

In summary, in terms of situating and then motivating the paper, authors needs to summarize the contributing literature in the introduction, immediately after the research question. That is, what other research has addressed this question, which is essentially a "mini-literature review." In the paper's second paragraph and third paragraphs, it is helpful if the authors show how past research on their topic is lacking something or does not quite answer the research question at hand. Meyer et al. (2009: 61) again comment how the previous research on market entry strategies lacked something, which they needed to study:

"In particular, institutions—the 'rules of the game'—in the host economy also significantly shape firm strategies such as foreign market entry (Peng, 2003; Wright et al., 2005)... However, traditional transaction cost research (exemplified by Williamson, 1985) has focused on micro-analytical

aspects such as opportunism and bounded rationality. As a result, questions of how macro-level institutions, such as country-level legal and regulatory frameworks, influence transaction costs have been relatively unexplored, remaining largely as background."

In the next paragraph, they show that macro-level institutions are important and not just as background, but as direct effects to the key international market entry strategic decision. Thus after three paragraphs, readers understand that the paper's research question is asking about what factors influence firms' international market entry decisions, and how other studies have covered basic factors such as firm characteristics, resources, and micro-institutional aspects including transaction costs. But little work has been done on more macro institutions and particularly as direct effects in a large sample study. Thus, the Meyer et al (2009) paper is very well-situated in that it focuses primarily on macro-institutional factors, and other benefit seeking activity common to globalizing firms such as looking for key resources (Ahlstrom, Levitas, Hitt, Dacin, and Zhu, 2014), as opposed to cost-minimization strategies and other more micro (such as behavioral) factors. The position of the paper is quite clear, and this clear position leads easily to the last paragraph of the introduction -- the contributions to theory, empirical or case evidence, and practice.

Similarly, the Liu et al (2017) paper mentioned earlier similarly provided a clearly stated position in the introduction when it showed how there were macro and micro factors influencing innovation in family firms, and also factors internal and external (to the firm). The position in the literature they found that had been less studied was the "macro-internal" area, that is, "macro" topics such as corporate governance and ownership, and internal, strategic decision-making. They stayed away from discussing goals, cognitive factors, culture and other decision and behavioral influences that had been well-studied on family business and innovation (Duran et al., 2016; Wang, Ahlstrom, Nair, and Hang, 2008). Poorly organized papers would try to cover many of those topics instead of answering the research question and staying within the boundaries specified by the question and the positioning of

the paper. As the examples from Amy Cuddy (Carney et al., 2010), Meyer et al. (2009, and Liu et al (2017) all show, each paper provided a clear research question (or thesis statement), then quickly and briefly summarized past research that addressed the question broadly, and then showed why their paper was different and required a different approach. That research and different approach (e.g. using royalty payments as an innovation variable in the Liu et al. {2017} article) contributed to theory, empirical or case evidence, research methods, and practice in the given research domain.ⁱⁱⁱ

CONCLUSION

In summary, a good academic research paper needs to get off to a good start in the introduction. In the introduction, the paper should provide a clearly stated research question or thesis statement – hopefully in the first sentence of the paper (and in the title, if feasible), a summary of some past literature that started to answer the question, and some brief background for the study (Ahlstrom et al., 2013). The introduction should show how that past research – usually summarized briefly in the first two or three paragraphs of the paper -- though helpful, is not enough to answer the current paper's question. This establishes a need for the paper, which can be further reinforced by pointing out that others have called for work on this particular research area (see Meyer et al., 2009: 62). This careful situating and motivating of the paper will facilitate the paper's contributions to theory, empirical or case evidence, and practice, which should also be summarized in the introduction (e.g. Hitt, Ahlstrom, Dacin, Levitas, and Svobodina, 2004; Liu, Wang, Zhao, and Ahlstrom, 2013; Meyer et al., 2009). This outline to the introduction helps to keep the paper well-ordered and reduces repetition problems where the paper's purpose or results gets restated repeatedly, with little thought to how those results should be organized in terms of summary findings and subsequent contributions.

A well-framed and organized introduction section represents a very important part of a research paper. It provides a map to editors, reviewers (and readers) in terms of what the paper will cover and why it matters. As Adam Grant and Tim Pollock (2011: 873) 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.

Good introductions not only clearly position the paper, but they also make writing the full paper much easier. Academic real-estate in terms of journal space and the time of editors and reviewers is scarce, and authors should be careful to write papers that are well-organized and can contribute helpful findings to a field of study. That implies an author should be able to frame his or her topic in terms of a research question, a summary of past relevant research, and an explanation of why that research was not quite enough to address the question, and hence the need for the author's paper (Ahlstrom and Wang, 2009; Meyer et al., 2009). The introduction should further show why the paper can answer the initial question posed (and briefly how it will do that) and finally how it contributes to theory, evidence, and practice in the field. A well-written introduction is essentially a microcosm of the whole paper, and if well-written and organized, will make the writing of the full paper a much smoother task, and one that will produce helpful knowledge to the both research and practice in the field (Abrahamson, 2008).

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Endnotes

ⁱ Recent examples of this include global start-ups, virtual teams, and institutional transitions (Ahlstrom, 2015).

ⁱⁱ Liu et al. (2017) could have produced a 2X2 table to depict the previous literature on innovation and family business but chose not to as the research was fairly easy to describe and other previous work had already provided a very detailed summary of that research (Duran et al., 2016).

ⁱⁱⁱ The topic of “contributions” in a research paper is a very rich one and will be dealt with in subsequent work on this topic. For more information on what are contributions and how to write them see Ahlstrom (2012), Bartunek and Rynes (2010), Corley and Gioia (2011), Rynes (2002), and Whetten (1989).

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