WERNER J. REINARTZ*

The author provides a guide for effectively communicating and organizing ideas in an academic marketing paper in a manner that allows reviewers to best see their merit. He argues that it is often not the central idea of a piece that falters, but rather the mechanical and stylistic expression of that idea. He posits a straightforward methodology for eschewing ambiguity and appropriately highlighting salient research against a backdrop that is clean and well constructed.

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Crafting a *JMR* Manuscript

What makes for a well-written marketing manuscript? As Ajay Kohli, former editor of *Journal of Marketing*, put it in a personal conversation, "You know a winner when you see one." So what makes for a winner? We conventionally think the merits of an article rest entirely on its ability to make a theoretical, methodological, or substantive contribution that "moves the needle" of thought in our field. But the ability of a review team to see these merits also critically depends on how well the manuscript is written. Many articles are rejected not because they lack great ideas, but because the authors have been unable to communicate their ideas effectively.

This essay does not seek to provide a general guide to academic writing (for such guidance, see Booth, Colomb, and Williams 2008; Purdue University 2014). Rather, it seeks to highlight some simple—but often overlooked—pitfalls in writing and positioning that often cause papers to falter when they are submitted for publication. The observations herein stem from my own experiences as an author, reviewer, and editor, as well as conversations I have had with other leading scholars in the field.

FIRST ESTABLISH THE RELEVANCE

Establishing the justification for studying a focal phenomenon comes first. The reader must be sold on the relevance and importance—the "so what?" aspect—of the study. Many elements of social sciences and human commercial interactions remain unknown, and descriptions of the motivation for many studies note that a particular problem has not been addressed in prior literature. But there may be a very good reason for the lack of previous study: impossible-to-obtain data, for instance, or data that are either too complex to tease apart or simply not interesting or relevant. A lack of research to date on a topic is, in and of itself, not a good reason to study that topic. The researcher instead must begin by developing and presenting a *substantive* reason that demonstrates why it is important to study the given topic. Once this point is established, a gap in extant research *then* makes the study even more worthwhile. The significance of the research is the best and most frequently used criterion for getting the reader through the door to start reading.

Along these lines, a simple, compelling way to start the paper is with an example; it is certainly not the only way, but a good example can illustrate the key problem vividly, quickly, and early in the text. Choose the example carefully to avoid generic or superficial scenarios. Show the particularities of both the company/customer scenario and the specific research problem. Immediately after the example, expand the viewpoint to discuss the problem that this specific situation represents. It is here that the class of problem can be generalized. For an applied discipline such as marketing, this section should mix conceptual and applied arguments and descriptions.

SPELL OUT THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

After piquing readers' interest, exposing the problem, and revealing the (managerial) relevance, the author needs to *explicitly* spell out the research questions. By "explicitly," I mean literally writing questions, in a pinpointed and obvious manner. The proper way to display them is by numbering or putting the research questions in a bulleted list. This observation comes from my many challenging experiences reading texts that did not do this, and trying to piece together what the authors were actually attempting to

Werner Reinartz is Professor of Marketing and Director of the Center for Research in Retailing (IFH), University of Cologne (e-mail: Werner.reinartz@uni-koeln.de). The author thanks participants at the 2014 Academy of Indian Marketing–American Marketing Association Sheth Foundation Doctoral Consortium and Rajesh Chandy for their comments.

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do with their research. If there are three parts to the research question, for example, it is not a good idea to spread them over several pages. Rather, readers appreciate having them presented in a *concise* and *structured* fashion, in one place. The guiding principle for all writing is to make it easy for readers to get an overview and to be able to understand the purpose of the text.

After presenting the research questions and associated explanations, authors should develop and elaborate *explicitly* on their intended contribution. The point is not to leave readers guessing what that contribution might be, should be, or could be; rather, authors must make their view of their contribution utterly clear. To this end, enumerating the contributions is the right approach: "First, our main contribution is . . .; second, we show that . . .; third, we establish that. . .." Then, it is of utmost importance for the discussion section to return to the exact same research questions and intended contributions stated in the introduction and reiterate how the study has addressed them.

PROVIDE A LITERATURE REVIEW WITH A PURPOSE

In literature reviews, virtually every reviewer appreciates brevity and focus over breadth. The review should be closely tied to the research questions, rather than giving a broad and unfocused overview. Then, the literature review needs to *lead to a conclusion* related to the present research and its contribution. Simply enumerating that author A has done something and author B has found something else is not useful. Rather, it should *lead* readers to the focal phenomenon and pinpoint what, and where, important gaps exist that require investigation. Thus, authors must undertake a *critical evaluation* of various sources. As knowledge evolves, a judicious weighing of the applicability and relevance of the results of all the cited studies is necessary. Readers want the authors' *analysis*, not just a blanket summary of sources. The literature review cannot be dismissed as a nuisance or hygiene factor; this section should significantly strengthen and support the authors' case.

LET REVIEWERS KNOW WHAT YOU KNOW

Not infrequently, the empirical phenomenon a paper seeks to address is hard to understand because the manuscript provides insufficient information. Space constraints permitting, authors should err on the side of giving too much descriptive information about the data rather than too little. It is still surprising to me how often simple correlation tables or mean/max/min descriptions are missing from submissions. Some of this information likely will be cut during the review process, but providing it in the first submission allows the review team to understand the empirical phenomenon in the first place. Without this basic understanding, reviewers must request more descriptive information, which gives them just one more reason to reject the paper. In this effort, it would not hurt to browse published articles to look for good examples of methodology and data sections.

RESULTS ARE RESULTS; DISCUSSION IS DISCUSSION

The purpose of the results section is to *list and describe* the substantive effects and results—no more! The flow should be natural and straightforward, following the same sequence as either the hypotheses or the effects/parameters listed in the model specification. The effects might be briefly explained and interpreted, particularly if they contrast with expectations or are otherwise noteworthy. Otherwise, the results section should be as concise as possible. It is not an all-encompassing reflection on or contextual interpretation of the findings; that is the purpose of the discussion section.

The discussion is really the core of the manuscript. Here, everything comes together: key results are evaluated, contributions are formulated, and theoretical and managerial implications are derived. Authors should think carefully about which implications are truly salient and the order in which to present them. Overall, a well-thought-out, interesting discussion section can be the most powerful part of the entire manuscript!

BY ALL MEANS, DELIVER THE PUNCH

The main feature of a good, strong implication is that it spells out how the specific finding informs decisions and activities and *changes* current practices and viewpoints. In other words, it is *not* a rewording of the descriptive results. The implications tell researchers and customers/practitioners how they should go about their decision making *differently* because of these new insights. As Desai (2011) puts it, "*Who* can do *what* better after reading the paper?" It takes several rounds of creative thinking and repeated rewriting to develop and pinpoint the most effective verbal description of a solid, useful implication. Authors cannot be afraid of ruthlessly and brutally questioning their own beliefs and ideas to bring out one more, better iteration.

THE PROCESS OF WRITING AND WRITING STYLE

Beyond these very specific observations, some more general recommendations and thoughts pertain to the actual process of writing and writing style.

Start with an Outline

Before starting to write, authors need to have all their results available and, in principle, finalized. Although there may be a need for some follow-up tests and inquiries, the key results should be complete before the writing begins. The reason is that the position taken by the article and the persuasive tactics it uses depend on what the authors find, which then drives how the argument can be sold.

A natural question from novice writers is, "Where is the best place to start when writing a manuscript?" Different successful writers have different answers, but for me it is simple: start with a formal outline. This outline should contain an explicit statement of the research questions, which serve as the guideposts for the entire manuscript. If they are not clear or if they change over the course of the manuscript, there is no chance that readers can follow them. An outline helps develop the dramaturgy of the paper, laying out how the manuscript (and its sections) will evolve as it flows from the motivation to the research questions to the intended contribution to the *actual* contributions and implications. It is only after the authors have outlined these phases that the actual writing can start.

Establish and Maintain Consistency in Meaning and Writing

It is critical to define focal constructs early on to avoid forcing readers and reviewers to undertake guesswork. The definitions might appear as early as the introduction section; they should be clear in the theory section at the latest, as soon as the focal constructs are being discussed. Equally important is the need to adopt and maintain a consistent nomenclature for all constructs throughout the *entire* manuscript, rather than employing a range of alternative terms (perhaps in a misguided attempt to make the discussion seem more lively and varied). Different terms are confusing, so authors should be utterly consistent in using their chosen terminology.

Make It Easy for Readers to Follow

Your manuscript is a promenade, and you want readers to follow you, without ever getting lost or even stepping off the path. Literally, imagine yourself taking readers by the hand and leading them where you go. This metaphor is much easier to say and imagine than to do. Many authors even make it *difficult* for readers to follow their line of argument: sentences and paragraphs do not flow sequentially, the logic behind a claim does not make sense or is simply missing, and the discussion wanders without maintaining people's interest. With a specific audience in mind, authors can induce readers to follow them by generating and maintaining some minimum level of interest in the substance of the research and ensuring a consistently logical sequence. In this effort, the verification of a manuscript's readability and comprehensibility is one of the main reasons authors need to seek comments and feedback from fellow researchers. At some point, all authors become blind to their own writing—cannot see the forest for the trees—and getting frank assessments from qualified colleagues is the best way to find the path out of that forest.

Have a Professional Edit the Final Draft

Despite authors' best efforts to achieve these steps, we are often poor judges of our own work and its perception and reception by reviewers. In particular, a paper that features improper uses of the English language and myriad typos starts with two strikes against it. In addition to making the reviewer's job more difficult, it signals a lack of attention to detail that reviewers may suspect might spill over to more substantive parts of the manuscript. Fortunately, there is an easy fix. Before submitting a paper, have it professionally copyedited. This step is an absolute necessity if the author is not a native English speaker, but I strongly recommend it for *all* authors. The better the grammatical exposition of a paper, the better your chances reviewers will recognize its scholarly potential.

SUMMARY

An academic manuscript is a complex product; it is the sum of many interconnecting parts. The substantive findings are always at its heart, but the way the findings are communicated is no small factor in determining a manuscript's eventual success. If you assume a research paper is just an objective report, think again. A journal article is intended to be a persuasive presentation of findings, not a history of activities. As Ladd (1987) puts it, and forcefully, "Research report—not a report of research." Do not underestimate the power of a well-written manuscript! A seasoned writer might regard some of the observations and advice extolled here as obvious, but their compilation might prove to be of benefit, both to novice writers and as a reminder to experienced ones. Obviously, there are many different ways to produce a successful, convincing manuscript. I trust this compilation serves to highlight some common pitfalls and suggests appropriate ways to address them.

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