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Editorial

The Devil is in the Details: Converting Good Research into Publishable Articles

In graduate school, we all learned about the major issues in conducting research: how to build a theory, how to design a study, how to collect data, and how to analyze data. What I'd like to address here is a related, but somewhat different, question, namely, how can authors convert good research projects into publishable articles? Knowing the former is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for the latter to occur.

If a paper is woefully inadequate theoretically or misses the broad side of the barn methodologically, no amount of work on manuscript preparation can salvage it. However, in many cases, authors fare less well in the review process than they might have otherwise because the paper has been poorly crafted.

Below I outline some of the most frequently mentioned concerns of reviewers and some ways of addressing potential problem areas before manuscripts are first submitted. Especially for those of you who are relatively new to the field, I hope these tips provide a useful bridge between "the big picture" provided by your research methods courses and the reality of publishing.

Title

Don't strain for the overly cute title, particularly if it brings up all sorts of unrelated phenomena and confuses the reader. For instance, consider the title "Working Together After Divorce: How Employees in Spun-Off Units Relate to Coworkers Left Behind." Metaphorically, the title waxes poetic. At the same time, though, the title gives the first impression of a study of divorced coworkers and may be entered in data bases accordingly.

If your title is over two lines long, you're pushing the envelope.

Make sure the contact information for all authors is correct and up to date. I've seen several instances where coauthors' names were spelled wrong and where the contact author is not made explicit. I've also had authors sheepishly admit that they gave me wrong e-mail addresses. Consequently, their long-awaited decision letters were waiting unnecessarily in vacant cyberholes somewhere.

Perhaps most importantly, make sure that the title accurately reflects the upcoming body of the paper. Your title conveys expectations to the reviewers of both your content and approach, and authors are always better served by being accurate and circumspect rather than by creating false expectations. Take the title “A General Model for Understanding Work Motivation” as an example. If the study is really about the effects of reinforcement schedules on responses to bonus pay, then you would be much better calling the paper “The Impact of Reinforcement Schedules on Reactions to Bonus Pay” so that reviewers perceive your glass as mostly full rather than mostly empty. In many cases, reviewers judge a paper by the author’s own yardstick.

Abstract

The number one problem with abstracts is too much approach, not enough arrival. Sometimes abstracts are so generically written that they do not pique the reviewers’ interest at all. Many read like this: “Topic A is increasingly important in the global marketplace. Drawing upon the literatures in B, C, D, and E, we present a general framework for understanding A. Data were collected from a wide variety of firms and several interesting patterns of findings emerged. The article concludes with a discussion of future research directions and implications for management practice.” Abstracts are your first chance to make a positive impression on reviewers; try to give the readers some concrete information to get them excited about your work.

There’s nothing mystical about number of words in an abstract. Nonetheless, a good rule of thumb is one-half to two-thirds of a page. Try to include your key words at the end of your abstract.

Introduction

The introduction is probably the hardest part of an article to write because its structure, length, and content can vary tremendously from paper to paper. However, there are some strategies you can take to improve the introduction to your manuscript. All things being equal, try to keep this section to no more than 3–4 pages. The main function of the introduction is to provide readers with a funneling framework: the general nature of the management problem being investigated, previous research on the management issue, and how your paper fills some niche or gap in that literature.

When you go into too much depth about your theory in the introduction section, reviewers invariably complain about the repetitiveness of the front end of the paper. It is fine to discuss your general theoretical perspective and what you are (and are not) going to be addressing. If you can, though, refrain from lengthy expositions of your theory until you get to the Theory section itself.

When in doubt, defer discussion of all methodological issues until the Method section. If you feel that your sample is particularly noteworthy or your methodology is particularly commendable, it is certainly appropriate to have one paragraph on these topics in the introductory section, but that’s about as much as reviewers want to see about methodology until later in the manuscript.

It's usually a good idea to end this section with an explicit statement of your goals for the paper—and then come back to those goals later in the Discussion section.

Theory

Without rehashing all the old debates about what theory is (and is not), there are some strategies I can suggest to authors so they can strengthen the theory section of their papers. At the beginning of this section, it helps if authors clarify whether they are trying to extend or fine-tune an existing theory, trying to compare or contrast different theoretical approaches to a problem, trying to investigate a specific phenomenon through using multiple theoretical perspectives, trying to investigate an already-documented phenomenon in a new setting, etc. In other words, reviewers will differ among themselves about whether they think you've made a contribution to theory, but it's the kiss of death if reviewers can't even figure out what you think the potential theoretical contribution of your manuscript is.

If your theory is relatively complex, try to include a figure. All things being equal, the text should follow the figure from left to right (or top to bottom). Some authors jump right into their moderator predictions and then ripple outwards towards antecedents and outcomes and it is hard to follow the logic flow in this way.

Another strategy that can help here is to label the arrows in the figure with the relevant hypothesis number. This serves two functions: it helps reviewers follow your theoretical arguments more carefully and it provides you, as authors, with a safeguard to make sure you've got all your bases covered.

Make sure you use consistent terminology both within the Theory section and between the Theory and Method section. That is, if you label a term "strategic decision" in one place, then don't subtly change it to "strategic allocation" or "strategic direction" in another place. Consistency in language usage is valued highly by reviewers but is probably not as salient an attribute to authors as it could be.

It almost invariably helps to put the relevant hypotheses after the paragraphs that justify them rather than to put a long list of hypotheses at the end of the Theory section.

Method

Although there are occasionally good reasons to vary the order, it is almost always preferable to present the data on the population and the sample first. More and more reviewers are asking for additional data about firms where data were collected or about employees from whom data were collected. Try to provide as much helpful descriptive data as space permits.

Probably the number one complaint from reviewers about the sample section is the discussion of sample sizes. Often the sample size is reported differently in various places in the Method section; how the original sample got winnowed down to a smaller number than the sample used is unclear, etc. Help the reviewer see who's in the sample and how they got there.

Always include a correlation matrix with the means, standard deviations, and alphas of all the independent, dependent, moderator, mediator, and control variables.

If you are not using well-known scales, it's usually a good idea to put the items from your scales in an Appendix.

It will greatly aid your cause to clarify when data were collected from firms and/or individuals. Were all the data collected at one point in time? If not, which data were collected at Time 1 and which data were collected at Time 2? This is particularly important for those studies using any type of time series or time lag analyses.

Go through the descriptions of your measures in a systematic order that is consistent with your Theory section. In many cases, the best order is: independent variables, dependent variables, moderating or mediating variables, and control variables.

If you perceive there is going to be some doubt about your measures (either because they're new or because of concerns about multicollinearity), it helps to include some relevant data analyses to address these concerns (e.g., confirmatory factor analyses) here as well.

Results

Again, since the analyses will vary from study to study, I'll highlight some of the most recently-raised objections from reviewers. For those authors presenting interaction effects, please report the form of the interaction in a figure if possible; also make sure that the axes are labeled with the appropriate metrics and the interaction is plotted to scale. For those authors using multiple regression, most 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 some cases, that might mean putting the hypothesis number in parentheses in front of your independent, dependent, or moderating variables.

An increasing number of reviewers have expressed concerns about authors' use of median splits, that is, cases where the authors convert a continuous variable into a dichotomous variable based on a median split. Another variant is when authors split their sample into four groups by using a quartile split. Almost always, reviewers react negatively to subgroup analyses and request to see continuous data treated as such.

For those authors using qualitative data analysis, it's 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, don't get so caught up in complicated data analyses that you forget the basics. First, present the most obvious and straightforward analyses that are appropriate; then, as necessary, conduct additional analyses to tease out potential reasons for your results.

Discussion

In many ways, this is the most important section of the paper. You've had the reviewers read 20+ pages by now; you have to bring it all together at the end. The most critical task here is helping the reviewers see the forest for the trees. What do we know now we

didn't know before hand? Why might the results have come out the way they did? How do the results inform our theoretical understanding of a phenomenon or our methodological approach to studying some topic?

In most cases, the section should have three or four parts, depending upon the nature of the study: (1) a brief summary of the results, a discussion of the pattern of findings, and some treatment of unexpected or non-significant results; (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) implications for management.

Six pages here are usually enough; reviewers get antsy plowing through overly lengthy discussion sections.

Miscellaneous

Every paper has an occasional typo or formatting error; that is no big deal. However, when the spelling errors are numerous (including some in the title), the formatting errors egregious, and the fluency in English laborious, then reviewers are often turned off by the manuscript. Wherever possible, please try to submit the paper in the format and style the reviewers want to read it.

At least at JOM and several other major journals, manuscripts are no longer rejected if they exceed the requested page limits a little. That being said, sending in a 140-page manuscript (I actually received one this long) isn't a strong selling point for your article. Try to stay roughly within the page constraints. In any event, don't play around with super-small fonts and tiny margins because it makes reviewers unnecessarily cranky!

If you're submitting a paper with coauthors and you've gone back and forth with each other during a manuscript's preparation, please make sure you edit carefully to ensure that the same font and format are used throughout the paper and that all visible track changes and strike-outs have been eliminated.

Inevitably, an author will forget a reference or a reference will be incomplete (most often, the pages of a chapter in an edited volume). Again, that's not a big deal. However, when those problems become numerous and distracting, they can hurt the reviewers' perceptions of a manuscript. An extra proofreading of the references wouldn't hurt.

Finally, the references should be exhaustive rather than exhausting. If you have more than 5–6 pages of references, you should consider how to prune down your list.

A Short Concluding Note

Undoubtedly, each reviewer and each reader will have a somewhat different list of what turns them on (and off) to manuscripts. What I've tried to do here is highlight some of the components of manuscript preparation which are relatively easy to fix and yet, singly or collectively, can significantly increase a paper's chances of hitting the hurdle for a request for a revise-and-resubmit. Many times, a reviewer's decision about whether to reject a paper despite 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. Help yourself by helping the reviewer follow why you did the study, who you studied, what you found, and how it matters.

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