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EDITORIAL

What makes a good article? Generating an insightful manuscript

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this editorial is to provide guidance to *EJM* authors about the structure and presentation of manuscripts that are likely to be insightful and that will probably provide contributions to knowledge.

Design/methodology/approach – The approach is editorial advice based on the Editors' experience of receiving circa 500 manuscripts during their first year as Joint Editors of *EJM*, but which is also consistent with guidance in other leading journals.

Findings – Guidance is provided for authors when preparing and revising their manuscripts, which is also a basis for further discussion and exchange concerning the effectiveness of communicating research outcomes.

Research limitations/implications – The guidance is based on the views of the *EJM* Joint Editors, although it is consistent with other leading journals.

Practical implications – Hopefully, authors will find the guidance helpful, although the editors emphasise that it is guidance and not a strict prescription that must be obeyed.

Originality/value – Hopefully, the editorial provides more "food for thought" for authors.

Keywords Communication, Authorship, Research results

Paper type Viewpoint

In previous Editorials we have discussed the primacy of theory, the primacy of data and on being a successful and valuable reviewer. In this Editorial we discuss the ingredients of what makes an insightful manuscript that will make a contribution to a particular research domain. We were inspired to write this by our involvement in making the 2008 *European Journal of Marketing* Best Paper Awards. So perhaps before getting into the real "meat" of our editorial, it would be appropriate to congratulate the award winners for their excellent work. So, many congratulations to Terje J. Vaaland, Morten Heide and Kjell Grønhaug, for their article "Corporate social responsibility: investigating theory and research in the marketing context", which appeared in Volume 42, issue 9/10 (winner of the *EJM* best paper award), and Jill Sweeney, Geoffrey Soutar and Tim Mazzarol, for their article "Factors influencing word of mouth effectiveness: receiver perspectives", which appeared in Volume 42, issue 3/4 (highly commended). We would also like to thank Audrey Gilmore and David Carson for judging this award – given their main involvement in Volume 42's production.

Great papers like our award winners are vital to a journal like *EJM*, because an academic journal stands or falls in the long term on the quality of its published work. Journals which start off with high profile editors, editorial boards, and much publicity will not sustain a consistently high rating without good work, and in turn journals

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which start small can end up leading the field in their disciplines by way of publishing high-quality, ground-breaking research which is of interest to the discipline. Of course, it helps in this regard to have a large number of high-quality submissions, being reviewed by excellent reviewers, and it is particularly with the former in mind, that we write this editorial. The content of this editorial has been inspired by our own work with excellent colleagues, by our time as Editors of various journals and special issues, and also by conversations with our Editorial colleagues from the many excellent journals in marketing and business research. Most importantly, we have been inspired by the many failures we have had, and mistakes we have made, in the publication process. In fact, the most helpful lesson each of us ever learned was that the amount of success you have in publishing is proportional to the amount of times you fail. In other words, even those who you and I may think are amazingly successful in the publication process had many failures for each one of their great publications. Even more important is that this failure does not ever really stop – no matter how many times you publish you still also get rejected plenty of times!

As Editors we read many manuscripts presented in very many different writing styles and with many differing structures, some of which are very effective in communicating to the target audience and many that are ineffective. Writing an academic article is an exercise in effective communications, and although the objective is to clearly communicate the novel contributions of a piece of academic research, achieving effectiveness is not always easy. Therefore, the following is offered as suggested key issues to address when generating an academic article. Much of what we say is perhaps obvious, but in many of the manuscripts that we have reviewed in our tenure so far, these issues are not effectively addressed.

Perhaps the critical thing to realise first and foremost is that good research does not always make a good manuscript, and conversely, average research can often result in a good manuscript if written well. This is in some ways a rather sobering thought, and for many it is or will be a painful lesson. Most of us have done work which we thought was particularly brilliant, only to have it rejected from a journal for reasons which have more to do with the presentation than the actual content. The upshot of this is that a journal rejection is rarely a comment on your ability as a researcher. More often, you need to work on how you communicate your ideas. It should be heartening to know that this is a skill that is eminently learnable, but it must begin with the recognition that writing and communicating is a vital skill in its own right, and not just an afterthought.

Each section of an article can play a crucial role in acceptance or rejection – even though it is only particular sections, which may be specifically criticized. However, each of those individual sections also must make up a coherent whole – a concept, which will be familiar to those versed in hermeneutics. We sometimes like to think of an article not as a "report on some research we did" but as a "story". That story simply has to make sense as a whole. One thing, which may be helpful is to think of the reader when you write; the aim you have is to lead them to a particular destination. You must consider what that destination is, and how you will get them there. Each part of the manuscript must be ruthlessly evaluated as to whether it helps or hinders this goal – and if something doesn't help, then it hinders.

The introduction has a pivotal role, as it needs to engage the reader with the manuscript's content, and convince the reader about the value of its contributions. This may sound obvious, but it is very often missing to a greater or lesser extent in manuscripts that we receive. It needs to concisely justify what was done and why it is important that this was done. There needs to be a compelling theoretical rationale that concisely justifies why the research was carried-out. Often this is missing in a manuscript, or the reader is simply told by the author(s) that " this is interesting", or that "research has not been done in this area". Of course, the latter is very often true, but alone this is not a reason for conducting the research project, nor of reading it for any other reason than general interest. Something may not have been done before because it is not important, or is unlikely to advance our knowledge. For publication in a top-level scholarly journal it is the duty of the authors to present a compelling rationale as to why conducting the research makes a theoretical contribution, not just a practical one. Yet too often introductions are too long and tend to ramble, the rationale is obscured, or the reader gets bored, or the authors lose sight of their objective. Such issues are often the result of authors' lack of confidence in their work as much as a lack of ability to get their points across. If the authors are aware of, and confident in, their contribution, the introduction is usually concise and clear. Of course, it is up to the Editor and reviewers to present their opinion on whether this is compelling or not, but at least in this situation they have a chance to evaluate your work on its merits. Both of us have had the benefit of working with wonderfully-skilled colleagues, and a consistent topic of discussion about publication has been the introduction of the work, so we really cannot stress its importance enough.

Removing the introduction from consideration, probably the most common weakness of manuscripts that we receive is inadequate or non-existent theory development, which is why we devoted a previous editorial to the importance theory development (see Vol. 42 No. 9/10). We are by no means the only Editors or scholars to call for the improvement in theory development in marketing, and even within wider organizational research such calls are commonly raised. Yet although progress is being made – and we have certainly seen it over the course of the last year at *EJM* – it still sometimes seems that we think more about our methods than our theories. When theory is considered, it is often in the context of individual hypotheses rather than overarching explanations for human or organizational behavior (etc). In such cases there is no obvious reason as to why these hypotheses are being generated, and how they fit in with what we know already. Sometimes there is a long literature review and (less often) a synthesis, followed by research questions, which purportedly arise from this review, but no actual development of the theoretical base. New insights and hence potential contributions are generated from advancing current knowledge, and therefore a good article will build-on or develop the current theory base, so that new or enhanced research questions can be generated, that will potentially provide new insights. The research questions must be clear and well argued in their justification, and be appropriate as objectives, propositions, hypotheses, or models. When manuscripts are conceptual without any empirical work, then the total value of the manuscript is obviously dependent on theoretical development. Sometimes we receive manuscripts that are just a literature review and synthesis, and while they may be technically well done and accurate, are unlikely to make a significant contribution to advancing knowledge within the particular domain, commensurate with publication in a major journal.

However, in our experience most authors are most worried about their methodology section being criticised. Interestingly, we would tend to agree that it is most often the methodology, which receives the most strident criticism from reviewers. Yet it must be remembered that all methods are open to criticism, and in this sense, the methods are the easiest part of a manuscript to criticise. We would wager that a good reviewer could find something to criticise in any empirical paper published in any journal! What this means is that sometimes methodological criticism masks theoretical flaws. In other words, a reviewer may dislike the theory or some other part of the work, or they may even just have "a feeling" that there is something not right. These issues are sometimes expressed by significant methodological criticism, because theoretical criticisms may be far more difficult to express. While of course this is not ideal since it leaves the author without advice on some key issues, it is important to realise that this may happen sometimes. The converse of this is that an author should always focus on getting the theory right, since reviewers are often more sympathetic to what they perceive as methodological flaws if they are enthusiastic about the theory. What may with a poor theory be perceived as a "fatal methodological flaw" may be seen as merely a "weakness" with a good theory – which can make the difference between rejection and revision.

Considering the methodological section itself, often this is weak because the method is not clearly explained. Very commonly the reasons for adopting a particular method are not well argued. Sometimes (and we have both been guilty of this at various times), the authors are obviously trying to hide what they perceive as weaknesses in their method. When reading this section, good reviewers will be questioning the method, and therefore it is the duty of the authors to ensure that appropriate and adequate explanations are given. The data collection and data analysis method employed in your work have critical implications on the interpretation of your findings, and thus the reader should be given full details. In particular, sample selection needs to be clearly explained both for quantitative and qualitative work, and any possible implications for the results need to be articulated. If appropriate, attention needs to be given to operationalising and measuring the concepts in the theory, and the reader needs to be convinced about the reliability and validity of these measures. In both quantitative and qualitative contexts, clear details need to be given of the data analysis methodology to avoid the unfortunate implication of the "black box" (data goes in, results come out). This also helps your work influence future work. Do not leave out important information in the anticipation that reviewers will disagree with your method on principle, good reviewers recognise that there are always some limitations in the research methods that we employ, but it is the duty of the authors to demonstrate appropriateness of their method, given the research questions that they have developed.

The results section should be engaging as it provides the initial answers to the research questions, yet it is often extremely dry. While we recognise that some of this is unavoidable in order to provide appropriate details as discussed above, it is vital for the authors to keep in mind the link between their objectives and these results. Sometimes we find that this section is quite long, being packed with descriptive statistics, and the results of statistical tests, many of which are not relevant to addressing the research questions. In this type of presentation the results germane to the research are often obscured by such an information overload. Reviewers should not be impressed simply by your methodological expertise, so it is vital to only report those results, which are directly relevant to your research questions. In other manuscripts the opposite is apparent, with little relevant information reported. Remember, the readers and reviewers need to see an appropriate set of results from your work. This helps to evaluate it of course, but also helps research to evolve in that your work is then able to be compared with prior work. A good article should firstly justify the appropriateness of the analysis that has been carried out, and the analysis results should be clearly reported, even if they do not reach levels of significance that were hoped for. This section should only report the results that help to answer the research questions, and where possible should report tests which enable comparison with other work. Do not select only the test results, which support your model, where contrary evidence is available. The same basic advice is appropriate to qualitative work, try to avoid digressions, despite the appeal of interesting asides. Although this may seem obvious, we sometimes find that the presentation is such that these answers are not immediately apparent.

The role of the final major section, often called the discussion, is to clearly demonstrate the contributions that this work has made to the field. In many cases this section is one of the hardest to produce effectively, yet it plays a key role in evaluating a manuscript. In weak manuscripts the final section simply restates or summarises the results. There needs to be a clear discussion about how the results contribute to knowledge and often managerial practice (but in the case of *EJM*, not solely practice), with a demonstration that there has been consequential added value to the literature. A good article will interpret the results, discuss their importance and their implications, and relate these results back to the state of knowledge in the field. What do we know now that we didn't know before? What are the debates in the literature, which are now closer to being resolved? How do these results influence our interpretation of prior theory? At the same time, there is an opportunity for the authors to speculate on the results, particularly with respect to suggesting further research directions. This part of the paper is also important, and can have a surprisingly large influence on how useful your work is to other scholars, and consequently how much it is cited. Finally, a good article will present research limitations, and these need to be honest but not "over-the-top". Most reviewers are aware of the limitations of various methods, and it is important that the author does not look like they are paying "lip service" to such limitations, but instead discussing them honestly and accurately. These limitations can often feed through into the direction for future research.

At the end of the manuscript, it is sometimes beneficial to end on a "high note". One should always like the reviewer to finish reading with a powerful, punchy conclusion. Yet often a manuscript will "tail off" and end not with a bang, but with a whimper. Authors are well advised to try to end with something, which clearly gives the feeling that reading that manuscript was beneficial, and with some inspiration. While this can be hard, it is worth the effort in our opinion.

So if those are the parts that make a good manuscript, how should one go about learning how to write such a piece? It is hard to give significant advice in this area since the needs of all parties will be different. Some individuals will need to work on their writing quality *per se*, others on their argument construction, others on their way of presenting their work and structuring it, etc. The key is to identify one's weaknesses honestly, and take steps to solve them. We cannot stress highly enough the value of working with others, who are experienced in the publication process. Within your faculty, try to get advice from those who are publishing well, set up seminars in your department or school where draft papers are analysed, or just offer to participate in some way in a writing project. There are also regular academic writing seminars run by various bodies and organizations, so look at the websites of such institutions. While this may sound rather self-serving, offer to review for a journal. Editors are always happy to have more reviewers, and reviewing papers is almost uniformly praised as a way of learning more about publishing and writing good papers. But ultimately, the best way to improve is to practice, and to get and evaluate feedback on your work. If you really can't find anyone to work with, then just write, submit to good journals, and take the feedback seriously. While we can all look at the successful scholars in our field and think of the ways they must have achieved that success, it is almost always due to practice and learning – as a famous golfer once said "the more I practise, the luckier I get".

Apart from these rather general observations, we can also offer some more practical hints and tips for authors who aspire to get their work published in *EJM*, and we would also imagine that these ideas stand for submissions to most top journals:

- If you want to get published in a journal, read that journal and mould your style to the journal. Most journals tend to publish work of a certain type, so if you want to be there too, it helps to write like that.
- Make sure you follow the format guidelines of the journal. This is of especial importance if you are resubmitting after rejection from another journal. If you do not reformat the paper this says to the Editor "I am not really that interested in your journal". Not a good start.
- Review articles if you can. Participation in the publishing process helps you gain an insight into it.
- Talk to those whose publications you have respected. Most academics like to talk at conferences, so offer to buy them a drink or a coffee at a quiet time and chat to them. Although do not be offended if they are too busy.
- Realise that there is a lot of tacit knowledge in the publication process, which needs to supplement your research skills. You need to learn this if you have not had the benefit of working with experienced and successful colleagues. As a result, take every chance you can to engage in this process.
- If you want to publish, you have to write, and not be afraid of being rejected. You do not have to like it (we do not), but you do have to deal with it positively, and learn from it.

Ultimately, these points are all about being committed to the publication process. To publish in a top journal takes commitment, not just to doing great research, but to learning how to publish it. The publication process is different from the research process, and also different from the process of writing for your own enjoyment. Understanding this distinction is the first step along the way to becoming consistently successful in publishing your work. We wish you luck, and look forward to seeing your work submitted to *EJM*.

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