

Writing a Publishable Paper – Principles, Questions, Realities, and Stumbling Blocks

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper identifies what business faculty, new PhDs, graduate students, practitioners, and other scholars can do to improve the likelihood of publishing their research in academic journals.

Design/methodology/approach: Despite the fact that well educated scholars are generally well informed about management principles and theories, the success rate for obtaining acceptance of papers submitted to academic journals is typically well below 50% -- with some journals rejecting up to 95% of papers submitted.

Findings: This paper identifies principles important to writing an academic paper, questions to address to ensure that those papers achieve a high standard, realities that impact the publishing process, and stumbling blocks to overcome to get a publication accepted.

Originality/value: This article highlights the overlooked concept of flair factors in the selection process, identifies six factors that are vital for successful employee selection, suggests three tools to improve selection processes, and presents five propositions for practitioners and scholars.

Keywords: writing principles, academic publications, business writing, business research, publish or perish

1. Introduction

As a first-semester doctoral candidate several years ago, I submitted an abstract for a proposed paper to a conference – a requirement to earn an A in the course in which I was enrolled. To my surprise, I was not only invited to present the paper at that conference but was amazed when the paper was actually accepted for publication in a *Financial Times* Top 40 business research journal. That amazement turned to shock when three months after publication that same paper (Caldwell, Bischoff, & Karri, 2002) was cited by the *BOSS Financial Review* as one of the six “best articles on leadership from the past ten years” (Carlopio, 2002). Unfortunately, that anecdotal experience is not the norm for academic scholars who struggle to become published.

The purpose of this paper is to provide graduate students, new scholars, PhDs, and business school faculty with insights about how they can obtain a favorable response in getting their research published in academic journals – an often-daunting task which was somehow intuitive but extremely fortunate for me as a new doctoral student. For those who make the attempt, academic writing is challenging and there are no “by-the-numbers” menus, formulas, or checklists to follow in getting one’s scholarly research published (Jensen, 2017). In this paper I have identified key principles, questions, realities, and stumbling blocks which may help others as they seek to be published in quality journals.

The paper begins with a brief literature review summarizing the importance of academic publications for promotion and tenure. Following this review, the paper then identifies ten principles, seven questions, eight realities, and six stumbling blocks associated with getting business research published. I conclude with an acknowledgement of the limitations of this paper and a challenge to business scholars about its application.

2. Literature Review: The Importance of Academic Writing

There is little disagreement in academia that academic writing is important to contribute to “state-of-the-art” knowledge necessary to teach students and to keep them up to date with best practices and current thinking (Hasan, 2016). For the faculty of many highly ranked business schools, publishing in the top academic journals in their field is akin to the holy grail (Sangster, 2015). “Don’t worry about your teaching, but focus on getting published,” I

heard one department chair tell the faculty at a “Top 50” School of Business in the southern United States. I was only mildly surprised.

An EBSCO Host (2018) search of academic papers just with the title “Publish or Perish” generates a list of 4,644 separate citations in Business Source Complete alone! The debate about the relative importance of academic research and the need to publish in highly regarded journals has gone on for decades – and critics of academic research and its practical relevance have been many (Mintzberg, 2005; Caldwell & Jeane, 2007). Notwithstanding problems with the practical relevance of much academic research and its contribution to either teaching effectiveness or the real world of business, academics at many highly-regarded universities are obligated to publish academic articles to receive academic tenure or be respected in their fields (Hasan, 2016).

For many business schools, AACSB accreditation sets the standard of excellence and the requirements of their faculty. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) has been considered to be the international gold standard for accrediting business schools for many years (Buchy, 2013). One of its key accreditation requirements is that “(t)he school produces high-quality intellectual contributions that are consistent with its mission, expected outcomes, and strategies and that impact the theory, practice, and teaching of business and management” (AACSB, 2017, Standard 2). Academic writing is acknowledged as the means by which most business faculty members meet this intellectual contribution standard (Hasan, 2016). Faculty members who publish in their field of expertise should not only maintain the level of their own academic knowledge but also 1) provide students with source materials which facilitate teaching, and 2) demonstrate the teacher’s credibility as a subject matter expert (*The Economist*, 2007).

Unfortunately, some department heads and deans in non-accredited business schools actually communicate to their faculty members that “publishing in academic journals is not important and is not recognized in evaluating faculty performance” (Anderson, 2017). Lesser level accreditation bodies like the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP) do not require business faculty to be active in publishing or making an intellectual contribution in their fields of specialization (ACBSP, n.d.) – despite the fact that the body of knowledge in many disciplines literally doubles as quickly as every thirteen months and that exponential expansion increase is due to improvements in technology and the internet (Schilling, 2013). Not only has the need for business faculty to publish increased but so also is it vital for practitioners to collaborate more fully with scholars to identify how to best implement this new information (Caldwell, 2014).

3. Ten Principles of Academic Writing

A priority of many business scholars is to use the insights that they have acquired from their own academic studies to add to the body of knowledge in their area of research focus. Most top-rated business schools make publishing in top journals a condition for obtaining academic tenure (Brusa, Carter, & Hellman, 2010). Despite the strong desire of many faculty and their academic institutions for instructors to be published scholars, the reality is that many PhDs struggle to write well enough to have their research published (Jensen, 2017).

A thoughtful review of journal articles and commentaries about how to become a published scholar identifies ten frequently-cited principles. These principles are helpful as a beginning point for getting started in writing a publishable paper, although they are just a starting point.

- 1) **Target your journal.** Writing any effective paper begins with keeping the end in mind, and a key issue is to realistically identify the journal in which you wish to have your research published. Several elite journals routinely reject 95% of the papers submitted to them and demand extremely high standards for the work submitted. Knowing your target journal and its expectations and becoming familiar with its content are important steps in the publishing process.
- 2) **Review author guidelines.** Author guidelines precisely identify requirements for publishing in a journal and describe what the journal emphasizes in the types of research published. Failing to follow these guidelines exponentially impacts how reviewers assess papers submitted.
- 3) **Focus your topic.** A paper’s topic significantly affects whether the paper has any chance of being published. Too broad a topic is unmanageable and incapable of being covered in a journal article. A topic must have practical value and real-world application for many journals but all topics must contribute a new insight rather than simply summarizing a previously addressed subject.
- 4) **Emphasize the value.** Successful papers identify why the paper adds value in addressing its topic and demonstrates that added value within its content. The relative value of a topic is related to its importance in its field as well as to society. Management scholar, Henry Mintzberg noted that many publications fail

what he called “The Bill and Barbara Test” -- a review of recent publications by two of his practitioner friends who found many current publications irrelevant (Mintzberg & Caldwell, 2017).

- 5) **Follow the template.** The universal template for any academic paper requires 1) an appealing introduction, 2) a clear statement of purpose and direction, 3) an up-to-date literature review, 4) a precise framing of the subject or findings, 6) a relevant and integrating conclusion. Papers that fail to follow that template rarely get published.
- 6) **Balance the discussion.** Thoughtful papers address more than one side of a topic or issue. Treating differing perspectives clearly and identifying their significance strengthens the credibility of an academic paper.
- 7) **Avoid overstatement.** Publishable academic papers present evidence, interpret its significance, and suggest opportunities for further research. Their summaries and conclusions are carefully framed and avoid misrepresenting results and inferences.
- 8) **Stay on track.** Well-written research stays on topic. Avoid irrelevant intellectual side trips and the inclusion of subject matter which confuse the focus of the paper. Successful research presents content in a logical manner and in context with related research (Berman, 2017).
- 9) **Acknowledge limitations.** Recognizing the context and application of your paper and the boundary limits of your research demonstrates an understanding of the nature of the topic and the realistic limitations of what you can reasonably infer from your study.
- 10) **Listen to Reviewers.** Journal papers are assigned to reviewers selected, in most cases, because they are familiar with the subject matter of your topic. Paying close attention to reviewer comments and addressing each comment effectively is essential when revising and resubmitting a paper. Only rarely do editors approve papers that do not adequately address reviewer comments (Linville, 2017).

Each of these ten principles has practical application for scholars who wish to improve their chances of having their research accepted in quality journals.

4. Questions to Address

Effective papers address important questions that merit explaining but that are often implicit. In his highly-regarded paper written while editor of the prestigious *Academy of Management Review*, David Whetten (1989) identified seven questions that he suggested publishable academic papers should examine.

- 1) **What's New?** The paper should provide a new insight or introduce a new perspective.
- 2) **So What?** The paper topic must be sufficiently material in its contribution to society and organizations.
- 3) **Why So?** The logic of the paper should be linear, sound, and compelling.
- 4) **Well Done?** The paper should be well-reasoned and complete rather than superficial.
- 5) **Done Well?** Proper format, correct grammar, smooth transitions, and clarity of presentation all are needed.
- 6) **Why Now?** The timeliness of the topic as a current issue can make the topic extremely important.
- 7) **Who Cares?** Your topic needs to be one that others care about and that has practical value.

These seven questions address content, logic, and significance of issues as well as the clarity of writing -- and each of those factors contribute to a favorable review (Lussier, 2010). As authors review their papers prior to submitting them for publication, considering these seven questions and how well they are addressed can assist those authors to improve the quality of their own writing.

5. Realities to Accept

Scholars frequently complain that reviewers are too rigid, fail to understand the significance of their submitted research, and give preference to well-established colleagues from “name” schools. As in any context, the academic review and publishing process varies from journal to journal and variability occurs in the timeliness and quality of reviews. Max DePree (2004, p. 11), the former CEO of Herman Miller Furniture and highly-regarded author of several management texts, is often quoted for his observation that the first task is to “define reality.” The following are eight practical realities related to publishing in academic journals.

1. **Journals are Political** – Organizations of all types “pursue their self-interest” – one definition of what it means to be political. People everywhere see the world through their own individual lenses and we all have inevitable biases. Journal editors tend to be highly regarded scholars themselves, and their biases reflect their personal histories, their values, and their life experiences (Clapham, Meyer, Caldwell & Proctor, 2014).
2. **Editors are Well-Intended** – Editors, especially new editors, want to “make their journals better.” Darden’s Ed Freeman (2016) took this “upgrading” approach to the highly-regarded *Journal of Business Ethics* – despite the fact that the journal was already a *Financial Times* Top 40 business research journal. In doing so, Freeman brought in “top scholars” that no longer accept papers from many of the journal’s most frequently published authors from prior years (Warnick, Rodrigo, Albrecht, & Stephens, 2014).
3. **Reviewers are Imperfect Volunteers** – Those subject matter experts asked to review articles submitted to journals are busy faculty members who also are heavily involved in their own research. They are asked to perform the often-challenging task of reviewing complex papers intended to offer new insights about their own field of expertise. The complexity of that task is sometimes time consuming and reviewers, like everyone else, may make mistakes.
4. **New Concepts Threaten** – When asked to review a paper, reviewers who have invested a considerable amount of time researching a field may find that their own research stream is threatened by a new idea proposed in a paper that they are asked to review. Unfortunately, the natural human tendency is for reviewers to be particularly critical of new ideas that conflict with their own assumptions (Harvey & Broyles, 2010).
5. **Progress Can Be Slow** – The process for publication review, revision, resubmittal, approval, and publication can be gnawingly slow – taking as long as five years in some rare cases (Michalos, 2012). The review of papers can be complicated by a host of challenging issues, particularly when a new idea is introduced and it is difficult for editors to find a competent reviewer with the time and willingness to review a paper that challenges well-entrenched academic opinions.
6. **Mistakes are Inevitable.** In the update to his famous classic, “On the Folly of Rewarding A While Hoping for B,” Steven Kerr (1995, p. 14) notes that “the paper almost didn’t see the light of day” and had originally been rejected by the Eastern Academy of Management. Kerr (1995, p. 14) noted that reviewers were “disturbed at the tone of the manuscript and its suitability for an academic audience.” Notwithstanding that initial uncertain review, Google Scholar (2018) confirms that the paper has been cited by other scholars more than 2,000 times and is used frequently whenever managerial decision-making is taught.
7. **Feedback is Valuable.** Reviewer feedback can provide an excellent source in improving the quality of a paper. Even if a reviewer is not totally familiar with your research topic, his or her comments and questions can provide valuable insights about writing that needs polish, clarification, or removal within a paper. Rather than being defensive about reviewer feedback, pay attention to the comments and assess how your paper can be improved.
8. **Options Always Exist.** Although your paper may receive a negative review from one journal, that feedback does not mean that your paper is unpublishable. “Finding a home” for a paper is a common phrase used by authors who have had their research rejected by a preferred journal but who then submit the paper to a different journal that may provide a more positive response.

Experienced scholars who publish frequently recognize that the review process for academic journals consists of equal parts science and art. Recognizing that even papers now considered as “classics” in business management were once negatively reviewed (Kerr, 1995) and recommended for rejection confirms that the review process can often be subjective, off-target, and incorrect. Keeping that reality in mind can enable scholars to remain positive, despite receiving a negative review or rejection from a journal.

6. Stumbling Blocks to Avoid

Many frequently recurring errors are made in papers that have been submitted for publication that can be major stumbling blocks that damage the credibility of the paper and virtually guarantee strong criticism from reviewers. The following are six examples of those stumbling blocks which typically generate a distinct negative response (Munter & Hamilton, 2013).

- **Inadequate research.** Many papers fail to adequately research their topic and either do not define key constructs or define them incorrectly. Papers that fail to provide a well-summarized description of terms and variables that are germane to their subject are not publishable.
- **Out-of-date citations.** Citing only sources that are older than five years raises questions in the minds of reviewers about whether the author of a paper is current in understanding the topic being addressed. Sources that are seminal in a field may merit inclusion in a paper, but efforts should otherwise be made to update citations so that they are current.
- **Failure to document.** Key ideas, definitions, and assertions of fact require a citation and the failure to cite a source raises questions about the credibility of the research and the abilities of the researcher. The assumption that the reviewer is informed and accepts the assertions made in a paper is inaccurate and typically results in a reviewer comment to properly document key ideas.
- **Circular reasoning.** Circular reasoning involves logic in which premises are equivalent to the conclusion. Definitions that are circular and that are not carefully worded are not useful in a research paper.
- **Incomplete explanation.** Explanations which are presumptive as to facts or that are incomplete are inadequate and are a major substantive problem in academic research. Logic used must be linear and analysis needs to be thorough.
- **Rushing to publish.** Prematurely submitting a paper without carefully reviewing it, double-checking that all sources are referenced, and proofreading and editing the paper several times typically results in reviewers catching errors that exist in the paper that could easily have been resolved. Sloppy grammar, punctuation errors, misspellings, and omitted words undermine the credibility of a paper being reviewed (Ohara, 2014).

7. Conclusion

It is an honor to be published. Being able to add to the body of knowledge, to contribute an insight that clarifies a concept, that challenges previously held assumptions, or that suggests a better way to understand a business principle enables scholars to give back to their profession and to affirm the importance of the pursuit of excellence. Writing a published paper with students also provides the opportunity to involve them with the opportunity to be recognized for their contribution to the academic community and can motivate them to continue in that important purpose. Unfortunately, the push to publish and the desire for journal editors to “upgrade the quality” (Freeman, 2016) of their journals make it challenging for new scholars to be published – and experiences like the one described at the beginning of this paper are increasingly unlikely to recur as a result.

As business faculty, newly minted PhDs, graduate students, and practitioners share their knowledge with others they add value to the learning process and provide opportunities to more closely examine practical issues that can benefit the larger community. By applying the principles, addressing the questions, acknowledging the realities, and avoiding the stumbling blocks identified in this paper, those who seek to share their scholarship with others can improve the probability that their intellectual contributions will be acknowledged in a world increasingly dependent upon the proper application of knowledge.

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