

# ***AMR Writing Theoretical Papers: A Workshop from the Editors***

***Organizer: Roy Suddaby, University of Alberta***

***Session Coordinators/Presenters:***

***Belle Rose Rags, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee***

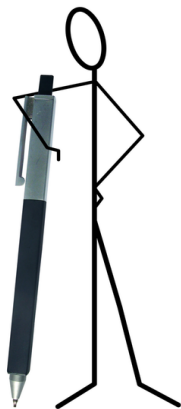
***Cynthia E. Devers, Michigan State University***

***Ingrid Fulmer, Rutgers University***

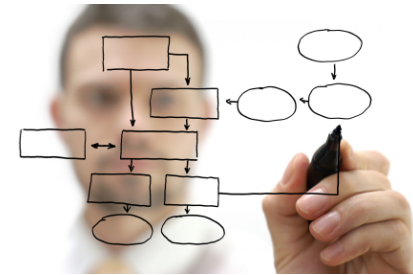
***Neal M. Ashkanasy, University of Queensland***

***National Academy of Management Meetings.***

***Lake Buena Vista (Orlando), Fl. August 9-13, 2013***



# Objectives



- ◆ Help participants write theoretical articles that make a contribution to the literature.
  - *Writing clear theory*
    - Writing style, presentation and organization of theoretical manuscripts
  - *Making a theoretical contribution*
    - Content and paths to making a contribution
    - Issues and dilemmas in theory building
    - Effectively revising manuscripts



# Agenda

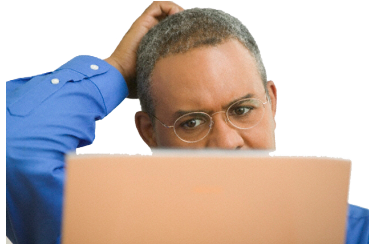
- ◆ *Part 1: Writing and Revising Clear Theoretical Articles*
  - 8:00– 8:25: Exercise and Discussion
  - 8:25-9:15: Presentations on Clear Writing (Belle Ragins), Structuring Manuscripts (Ingrid Fulmer), and Responding to Reviews (Neal Ashkanasy).
  - 9:15- 9:30: Break
- ◆ *Part 2: Discussion: What Makes a Theoretical Contribution?*
  - 9:30-10:10: Small Group Discussions Led by *AMR* Associate Editors (Facilitated by Cindy Devers)
  - 10:10 -10:30: Small Group Reports and Large Group Discussion



# What is Clear Writing?

(Gunning, 1952, 1968; Williams & Colomb, 2010; Zinsser, 2006)

- ◆ Technique that involves a commitment to expressing your ideas with **clarity, directness and precision.**
- ◆ Leads to nearly *effortless reading*
  - The reader should be able to follow your points without having to re-read any part of your manuscript
  - Allows reader to focus on content and meaning rather than presentation
- ◆ Focus is always on the **reader**
  - Goal is to engage readers and bring them with you on the inevitable journey that leads to your model.
- ◆ Rejects the assumption that scholarly writing should be esoteric; our ideas are complex, but our writing should be clear and accessible.
- ◆ **Readers can't use your ideas and reviewers can't evaluate them unless your writing is clear and accessible**

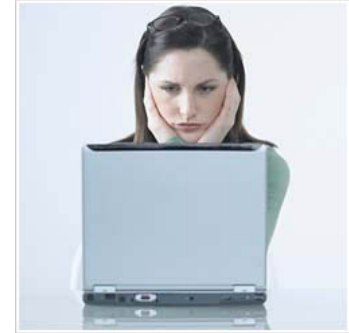


# Why we need clear writing

- ◆ Comments From *AMR* Reviewers:
  - "I'm puzzled as to what exactly you are trying to accomplish here."
  - "I had to read several pages into the manuscript to get a hint about what you are trying to achieve."
  - "What exactly is this paper about? After reading it twice, I'm still not sure."
- ◆ "I am simply tired of reading passages of manuscripts two and three times just to figure out what the authors might be trying to say."
- ◆ "The authors may have a brilliant idea, but if they can't articulate that idea logically and coherently, we can't evaluate it."



# 5-Minute Pet Peeve Exercise



- ◆ What is your *biggest pet peeve* when it comes to **writing style and/or organization** of a theoretical manuscript?



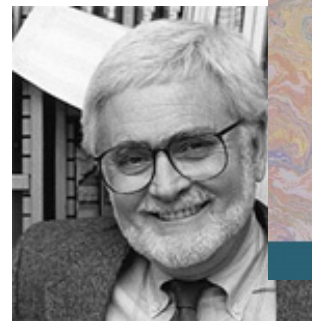
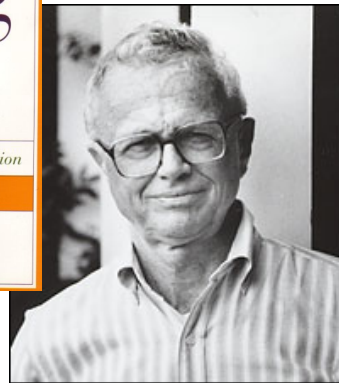
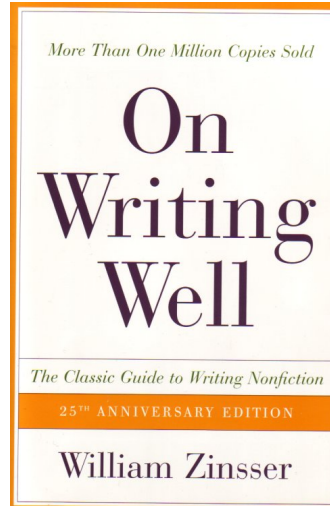
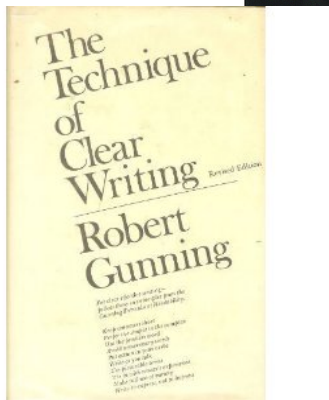
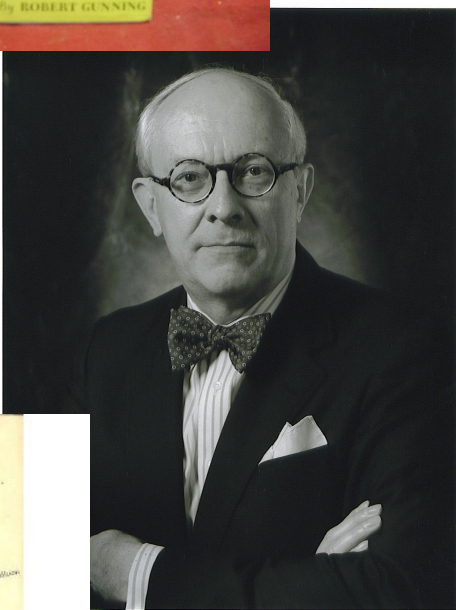
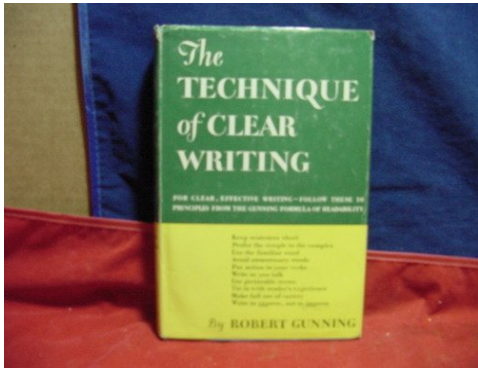
- ◆ *Why* do you think authors do this?



# The Informal Poll

The Academy  
of Management  
**Review**

- ◆ Asked current and past term *AMR* board members, special issue reviewers, associate editors and editors to share their:
  - 1) **pet peeves** about the writing style, organization and presentation of theoretical manuscripts,
  - 2) thoughts on **why** authors engaged in these practices,
  - 3) **advice and recommendations** for writing clear theoretical articles.
- ◆ Received responses from **67** reviewers\* who reported **483 years** of combined experience reviewing for *AMR*.
- ◆ Over 100 pages of responses





# The Three Pet Peeves

## Pet Peeve #1: Foggy Writing

### ◆ Problem:

- Use of needlessly complex language that obscures meaning.
- “My biggest pet peeve is when authors hide their thoughts behind opaque language -- arcane words and dense sentences. I'm a firm believer that the better one actually knows what one is trying to express, the more simply and clearly one can express it.”
- “needless complexity- e.g., by using more than one term for the same concept...by showing off with ‘big’ or ‘impressive’ words.”

# Foggy Writing: Reasons

## ◆ Assumptions and Insecurities

- “Writing to impress rather than express” (Gunning, 1968)
- “Perhaps some authors think that the use of more ‘esoteric’ words make their manuscript seem more ‘theoretical’ or ‘deep’. I prefer to read articles that use simple language regardless of how complex the ideas they are trying to convey.”
- “Good authors don’t try to demonstrate that they are more intelligent than their readers by losing themselves in overly complex formulation or using a jargon that might be comprehensible in their narrow scholarly community but incomprehensible for management scholars in other domains.”
- “Perhaps they think content is all that is important in writing -- they forget that if the paper is not clear and concise, content will not matter.”

# Foggy Writing: Reasons (cont'd)



## ◆ Lack of Clarity in author(s) own mind

- “Clear writing is based on clear thinking” (Gunning, 1968)

## ◆ Time and Effort

- ◆ “It's more difficult to write clearly. It takes time and a good deal of effort. Every time I read one of my papers I find ways to improve it. That means I read my papers over and over again until I'm nearly bored to tears.”

# Foggy Writing: Remedies

- ◆ **Think through your ideas *before* you start to write**
  - ◆ “To write well and simply you must train your mind to cut through the surface details and get at the bones of your thought.”  
(Gunning, 1968: 9)
- ◆ **Make sure your manuscript is peer reviewed**
  - ◆ “Never, ever, ever send a manuscript to a journal that hasn't been peer reviewed by people who will give you blatantly honest feedback about not just the theoretical contribution but the clarity of your writing.”
- ◆ **Take reviews to heart**; ignoring comments or trying to tweak papers that need a major overhaul dilutes the value of peer reviews
  - ◆ Barriers to overcome:
    - ◆ *Tender Egos*: We internalize the critique of the paper as a critique of our own ability
    - ◆ *Hopeless Romantics*: We fall in love with our words and we just can't cut them lose.





# Drilling Down



- ◆ Every sentence should serve a precise purpose and be part of a clear, concise and compelling story.
  
- ◆ Every word needs to be scrutinized for *meaning, clarity* and *purpose*.
  - “Eliminate words that don’t say what they mean, don’t say anything or are used merely for display” (Gunning, 1968: 4)
  
  - “Resist the mischief of making what you have to say even more complex in the telling.” (Gunning, 1968: 67)

## Pruning Example: Be Concise but not Terse

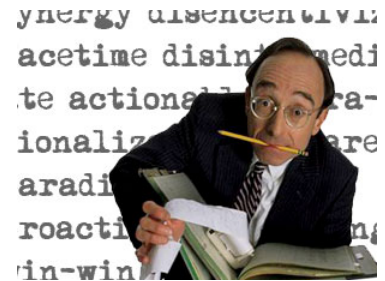
(Williams & Colomb, 2010 (p. 114) edit of Strunk & White, 2009)



- ◆ Original:  
Revising is part of writing. Few writers are so expert that they can produce what they are after on the first try.
- ◆ Erase Redundancy:  
Revising is part of writing. Few writers ~~are so expert that they can~~ produce what they are after on the first try.
- ◆ Rewording (italicized):  
Revising is part of writing, because few writers ~~are so expert that they can~~ *write perfect first drafts*.
- ◆ Cut to the bone (cut text in half)  
Most writers revise because few write a perfect first draft.

# Academese Example

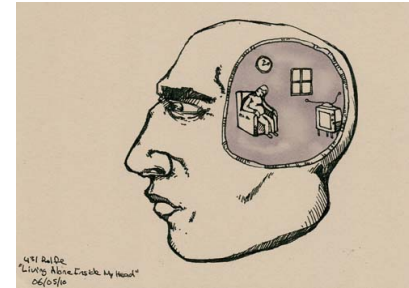
(Corley & Gioia, 2011:21)



- ◆ “Academese”  
“Our distal language often seems to elide the relevance of our second-order theoretical constructs from the proximal parties whose experience we are trying to explicate.”
- ◆ “Plain English”  
“Yet we should recognize that our specialized language tends to distance us from the issues that generated the theories about the phenomena we are trying to describe and explain in the first place.”
- ◆ Clear Writing:  
~~“Yet we should recognize that Our specialized language tends to distances us from the issues that generated the theories about the phenomena we are trying to describe and explain in the first place.”~~



## Pet Peeve #2: Read My Mind



- ◆ The reader is presented with concepts, jargon, and acronyms that are not defined or are used inconsistently in the manuscript.
  - The authors assume that the “reader is inside their mind.”
- ◆ Example: “*POS incorporates OCB and LMX within the context of JIP.*”

# Read My Mind: Reasons



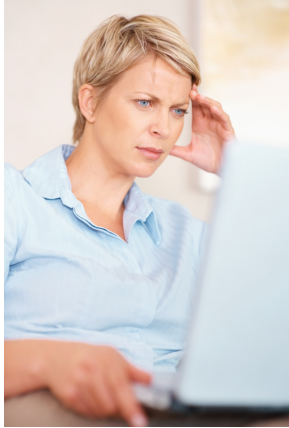
- ◆ Authors too close to material
- ◆ Lack of empathy and perspective; fail to put themselves in the shoes of the reader.
- ◆ "What we write always seems clearer to us than to our readers, because we read into it what we want them to get out of it. And so instead of revising our writing to meet their needs, we call it done the moment it meets ours."

(Williams & Colomb, 2010: 7).

# Read My Mind: Remedies

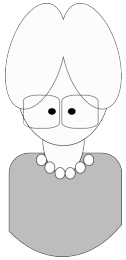


- ◆ “Jargon should be introduced for only 2-5 variables, the rest should be colloquial words. Do not wholesale incorporate the jargon of other literatures ... just incorporate their relevant meaning.”
- ◆ “If spell check thinks it isn’t a word, it probably isn’t needed.”
- ◆ “Leave a written paper for a few days and re-read it. If you don't understand any sentence or other part of it, be assured that the reader won't either.”
- ◆ “One technique for improving succinctness and readability is for two coauthors to read the paper together aloud. Reading aloud also catches typos.”



## Never Lose Sight of Your Reader

- ◆ “In good papers, the sentences and paragraphs flow naturally from one to the next without the reader having to pause to consider how points are connected.”
- ◆ “My advice to authors is to use their imaginations to take the perspective of an intelligent but naïve reader who has limited time and resources in reading their own manuscripts. Make their papers worth the reader's effort and don't make the reader work harder than necessary to get the point.”



## Use Non-Specialist Reviewers

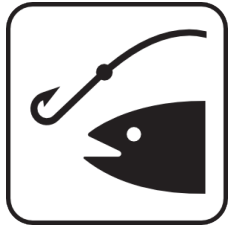


- ◆ “Let your partner/spouse read it. If they have no clue what you are talking about, your writing is too complex.”
- ◆ The “Mom Test”
- ◆ “I often find that the best way to avoid some of these pitfalls is to take off the academic hat, have a good conversation with a friend or loved one and figure out what it is you are really trying to say without the guise and pretense of all the academic accoutrements. I also find speaking with real managers helps to clarify how best to present theoretical ideas and to pass the face validity hurdle.”



## **Pet Peeve #3: Story, Story, What's the Story?**

- ◆ **What we want: Papers that offer a clear, direct and compelling story that hooks the readers, and then carries them on a straightforward journey from the beginning to the very end of the manuscript.**
- ◆ **What we get:**
- ◆ **"Many of the AMR submissions I read are mystery novels, where even the author isn't sure where the paper is going to end up."**
- ◆ **"Many papers are fragmented, have no thread, and tell no story. Authors have to understand that it is not my responsibility as a reviewer to search for the thread but their responsibility to make it as easy as possible for me to follow their story."**



## Poor Hooks and Winding Roads

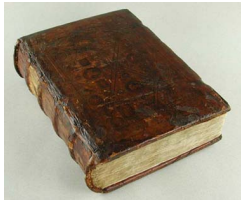


- ◆ “Many papers have horrible introductions....[A] good introduction tells the story in a nutshell, embeds the paper in its research context, explains the contribution (answer to the “so what question”) and draws the reader into the story.”
- ◆ “... it drives me crazy when the motivation for a manuscript is because ‘no one has looked at X before’. Chances are that no one has ever studied the causal link between managers’ favorite cheeses and their leadership style, but that doesn’t mean someone should.”
- ◆ No road map
- ◆ Long and winding introductions

# Wait for it stories and stories that begin at the end

- ◆ **Reader forced to wade through pages of introduction and meandering literature reviews before reaching core contribution**
- ◆ “If I haven't reached the author's own contribution by pages 10-12, I start getting annoyed...”
- ◆ “My BIGGEST pet peeve is that authors sometimes don't get to the point of their paper until many many pages into the text. It's like they are waiting for the paper to inspire THEM (rather than the reader) in terms of its overall contribution.”
- ◆ Wait for it stories may “begin in the middle” or “begin in the end”
- ◆ Leads to under-developed manuscripts.





## Muddled and Fragmented Stories: Reasons

- ◆ Process of writing takes manuscript in different direction.
  - Paper needs to be rewritten.
  - Authors tweak when they need to overhaul.
- ◆ Too many cooks in the kitchen
  - Parceling out sections to different authors creates multi-headed monster – no unifying voice
  - Co-authors unwilling to cut and critique each others work
- ◆ Going for the **GRAND EPIC THEORY**: Author tries to explain every conceivable aspect of phenomenon.
- ◆ *Story becomes an epic novel rather than tightly focused short story*



## Trying to do too much.... (or too little)

- ◆ “Great papers are often amazingly simple papers. They have one message, not five.”
- ◆ “You don't have to create a model of everything in a single manuscript.”
- ◆ “...it's impossible (to) develop a wide-sweeping, perfectly generalizable, grand theory in 30 pages, so temper your aspirations and focus on observationally based explanations of a particular phenomenon of interest to management scholars and practitioners.”
- ◆ *AMR LITE*: “An AMR paper is not the front end of an AMJ paper.”

# Story Problems: Remedies



- ◆ Strong introduction, compelling hooks, clear justifications
  - Need to answer problematization question: “ ‘without this work, what can’t we understand?’ or even more seriously: ‘what do we get wrong?’ ” (cf., Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; see also Grant & Pollock, 2011)
- ◆ Clear road maps and deliver on promise
- ◆ Use reviewers to assess clarity of story:
  - “Give your paper to someone else and ask them to tell you what the story of the paper is. If they can't tell you the story that you think you wrote, you haven't written it. Ask them questions, find out where they got off-track and edit so that the next person who reads it doesn't get stuck in the same place.”

# Concluding Thoughts on the Craft of Clear Writing



- ◆ **Clear writing *takes a substantial amount of time and effort.***
  - There are no short cuts. Every word and sentence needs to be scrutinized
  - Clear writing is about writing simply, but it is not simplistic
  - More complex the idea, the more important and difficult it is to write clearly
- ◆ **Clear writing *refines our ideas***
  - The process of clear writing helps us develop, distill and crystallize our ideas
    - “How can I tell what I think until I see what I say?”  
(E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 1927: 101)
  - Resist the urge to use editors in early drafts or depend on them to clarify your writing – you’ll miss the heuristic benefits of clear writing

◆ **Clear writing is all about rewriting**

- The process of clear writing helps us sharpen our ideas. It can also illuminate flaws in our logic or approach.
- When we drill down to the core of our ideas, we may discover a diamond in the rough or a lump of coal. If it is coal – don't try to pass it off as a diamond. Start fresh. Part with your words; it is part of the process.



◆ **Have fun and find your voice**

- Be creative, but keep the reader in mind
- Look to other writers and emulate their work, but only if it fits your voice.
- “be yourself when you write.... Never say anything in writing that you wouldn't comfortably say in conversation.” (Zinsser, 2006: 25-26)





- ◆ The goal is not just to publish your paper in *AMR*, but also to write a paper that will **be read, used and cited**.
- ◆ To do this, we need to see ourselves not only as scholars but also as **writers**.
- ◆ What does it take to become a successful writer? As expected, Gunning gives a crystal clear answer to this question:
  - *"In general, you can define successful writers as those who have something to say and who have learned how to say it simply. No writer ever gained a large audience by making his style more complicated than his thought required. The writers who gain an audience – the writers you read and can name – write surprisingly simply. They observe a strict discipline, but they introduce within that discipline much variety. They write simply but they don't get caught at it. To a great degree, that is the key to writing craftsmanship (Gunning, 1968: 12)."*

# Structuring Your Manuscript for Maximum Effectiveness



- ◆ As you are writing and rewriting for clarity → don't forget to think about structure!
- ◆ **In addition to content and clear writing → use the organization and structure of your paper for maximum impact**
- ◆ First step: Do your homework!! Study published papers.
  - Good places to start: AMR Best Papers + highly cited papers + papers doing similar things as you are (e.g., process model or new construct development, etc.)

# First Impressions – Title & Abstract

- ◆ Title → Reference the core construct or idea
- ◆ Both title and abstract: Simple language instead of “ten dollar words”
  - “Systems of Exchange”
  - “Management Innovation”
  - “Social capital: Prospects for a new concept”
  - “Stealing fire: Creative deviance in the evolution of new ideas”
- ◆ Abstract can give brief outline OR preview what authors will create/argue



# Major Headings & Propositions

- ◆ **Headings form an outline of your paper** - make sure they are clear!
- ◆ Other than the one for “Discussion,” generic headings (“Background,” “Literature Review” . . .) not as valuable as headings that move paper along. Better:
  - “Defining X”
  - “Sources of Y”
  - “Contingencies Affecting Z”
- ◆ **Propositions provide the roadmap for your model**
  - Use clear wording, consistent language with text
  - Check yourself → *If you only read the propositions, one after the other, do they tell a story that fits the theoretical model?*



## Tips on Getting the Most from Figures and Tables

- ◆ If you have propositions that describe a model in a figure → it helps the reader if you label your propositions in the figure (e.g., P1, P2).



- ◆ Be sure model in figure actually matches the text!! 😊
- ◆ Use same labels/terms in figures and tables as in text
- ◆ Tables (if used) should ADD something new somehow, not just repeat text

# Final thoughts...



- ◆ Attention to detail really matters.
- ◆ Sloppy writing signals (to reader) sloppy thinking:
  - Misspellings, poor grammar, punctuation/capitalization errors
  - Rambling/incomplete sentences, going off on irrelevant tangents
  - One sentence paragraphs
  - Promising but not delivering: “There are three reasons for x. . .” (but then you only provide two????)
- ◆ Writing and structure should showcase your ideas, not detract from them.
  - If the window is dirty (your writing and/or structure are poor), people get hung up on that and not your theory, so
  - **Clean that window!!**

# Tips for Handling R&Rs

Neal M. Ashkanasy

- ◆ Ireland, R. D. 2008. Revisiting AMJ's revise-and-resubmit process. *Academy of Management Journal*, 51, 1049-1050.
  - ‘Failed’ AMR policy (Rynes, 2006): “to carefully respond to the major issues in their action editors’ letters in lieu of responding to each individual point” (p. 1049).
  - Instead, Ireland recommends authors to keep in mind the ‘big picture’ but to “deal with all issues raised by (all) the reviewers and the action editor while revising your manuscript and that you *provide point-by-point responses to explain how you have done so*” (p. 1050, emphasis added).
  - But please don’t “rabbit on” (☺ - an Aussie expression)
    - Be concise.
  - Ireland: “Extended discussions of tangential issues should be avoided as should reproductions of large blocks of text from the paper” (p. 1050)
- ◆ Rules of clear writing apply to your letters, too!



# R&R Rights and Responsibilities

## ◆ Your rights

- Harrison, D. 2002. Obligations and obfuscations in the review process. *Academy of Management Journal*, 45: 1079-1084.

1. Courteous treatment
2. Reviewer has read the manuscript
3. Criticisms maintain standards of logic
4. Prioritized
5. Timely



## Your responsibilities:



1. Courteous responses
2. Read the reviews (ask the Editor if unsure)
3. Maintain standards of logic
4. Prioritize responses
5. Timely

# R&R Attitude



- Altman, Y., & Baruch, Y. 2008. Strategies for revising and resubmitting papers to refereed journals. *British Journal of Management*, 19: 89-101.
- Two strategies
  - Rationale (instrumental reasoning versus ethical reasoning)
  - Agency (individually centred reasoning versus community-centred reasoning)

<b>Agency</b> <b>Rationale</b>	<b>Self-Centered</b>	<b>Community-Centered</b>
<b>Instrumental</b>	Q1 <i>'This is the most cost-effective way to publish. I aim to maximize my research output' ...('though it may not be worth the effort')</i>	Q2 <i>'This is how the system works, and I have to comply. These are the "rules of the game" ... (however, 'I may try to "beat them"')</i>
<b>Ethical</b>	Q4 <i>'Peer reviewing makes me a better researcher, improves the paper, and enhances scholarship' ...('but 'I don't trust the process')</i>	Q3 <i>'This is "fair-play", the decent thing to do' ...('alas, 'it is a political game')</i>

# Final Comments on R&Rs

- ◆ Don't write an entirely new manuscript
- ◆ E-mail the Action Editor if in doubt
  - We are authors, just like you!
- ◆ Regulate your emotions
  - Leave it for a while after you receive the decision-letter
- ◆ Form a positive attitude
  - Just do it!
- ◆ Practice makes perfect!



## **Part 2: Making a Theoretical Contribution**

- ◆ **AMR Mission Statement: The Four Paths**
  - **Developing new management and organization theory**
  - **Significantly challenging or clarifying existing theory**
  - **Synthesizing recent advances and ideas into fresh, if not entirely new theory**
  - **Initiating a search for new theory by identifying and delineating a novel theoretical problem.**



# Small Group Discussion: Possible Topics



- ◆ What does “making a theoretical contribution” mean?
- ◆ What questions come to mind when viewing these paths?  
Are they clear? Sufficient?
- ◆ As authors, what are some of the dilemmas we face when writing theory?
- ◆ As readers, what makes a theoretical manuscript “a keeper”?
- ◆ What are some dilemmas we face when revising our manuscripts?

# Wrapping it Up

## Final Questions and Comments?

