ADDITIONAL QUOTES

AMR REVIEWERS AND EDITORS ADVICE ON CLEAR WRITING

Background: This document augments the *Academy of Management Review* essay: "Reflections on the Craft of Clear Writing" (Ragins, 2012).   For that essay, I surveyed current and past *AMR* board members, associate editors, editors and special issue reviewers to get their insights, pet peeves and recommendations for writing clear theoretical articles. I received responses from 67 reviewers, who offered over a hundred pages of advice and recommendations on the craft of writing.

I selected key quotes for the essay, which was published in *AMR* in 2012 (Ragins, 2012). Because of space limitations, I could not include many of the wonderful quotes and insights furnished by the reviewers – so I offer them to you here.

I hope they are helpful!

Belle Rose Ragins
Associate Editor, *Academy of Management Review*
December, 2012

> Ragins, B. R. (2012). Reflections on the craft of clear writing. *Academy of Management Review*, 37 (4), 493-501.

Questions Posed to AMR Reviewers, Editors and Associate Editors:
> • *As a reviewer, what is your biggest pet peeve when it comes to writing style and/or the organization of a theoretical manuscript?*

> • *From a writing perspective, what advice would you give to authors about writing for AMR?*

Responses listed below by theme.

SETTING THE HOOK

"Write out the first five paragraphs (FFP) 100 times if that is what it takes to hook the reader. Then, do any tables and figures. Then after totally grounding the FFP and the figures and tables, actually write the body of the paper in a conversational tone. Then only after you are happy with the flow and logic of the paper written is a conversational tone, go back and re-write it in formal prose."

"Knowing what problem you're trying to solve is absolutely essential to framing (and, frankly, marketing) a piece of research effectively."

"To strengthen an upfront theoretical hook, don't have four or five contributions in the introduction. Explain one really major contribution in the frame/intro on the paper and then explain all the others in the discussion section. With that one contribution, give a real-world example about how the way we currently think about relationships between variables is going to be different or explained/reconciled… I also do not like to see 'calls from others' as reasons to create theory rather than a real-world example that makes you sit back and think seriously about things."

STRUCTURING THE PAPER

"Once you have specified the stream of literature that you're contributing to in your first paragraph, and articulated what problem(s) you're trying to solve in that literature in your second paragraph, you should use the third paragraph to answer the question: How will you solve the problem(s) that you have identified? Give a brief overview of how your approach differs from earlier approaches, how it works, and why it is superior. Give the bare essentials of the answers to these questions, and nothing more.

Then, immediately end the introduction, and move directly to your contribution. Spend the remainder of the paper focused on developing every aspect, every facet, every caveat, and every implication of your contribution, rather than re-hashing the contributions that have been made by others."

"(2) Explicitly structure your message (using subheadings, for example) to help the reader get the point and keep the point in mind while reading the paper. (Think about subheading structure as an outline for the intended contribution -- a good tight logical outline of the argument.")

(3) Sell the unique, "value-added" contribution early, to keep the reader's attention and focus. I like the last line of the first paragraph to provide a brief preview of the intended contribution, with a more comprehensive statement of the intended contribution somewhere within the first 3 pages.

(4) I favor the following structure. The abstract should provide a synopsis of the contents of the paper. The introduction should expand the abstract into about 3 pages (1 abstract sentence = 1 paragraph in the introduction). And then each paragraph of the introduction expands to become a section in the body of the contribution. With a nice conclusion at the end that ties it all together."

"I always tell my junior colleagues that the right answer to any numerical question is "5 plus or minus 2." That's the number of unique items that the average person can hold in working memory. One place where that answer applies is in response to this question: how long (how many paragraphs) should the section BEFORE the first centered heading be? The answer: 5 plus or minus 2 paragraphs. If an author can write 3-7 solid paragraphs at the very beginning of the manuscript, they are giving both the reader and themselves a nice roadmap to what follows. It's harder to lose the plot once you have those 3-7 paragraphs. And those paragraphs can work as a standalone -- they work as a short précis that the author can share with lots of people for informal feedback (is it a compelling reason to write paper? Have I hooked your attention?) before they make a commitment to the full paper."

```
"Framing of the paper – Many authors don't do a very good
job of creating a compelling front end to a paper.  This is
clearly the most important part of the paper.   They have a
tendency to try to cite too much literature and as a result
go off on tangents.  Many also do not do a great job of
describing why the phenomenon is of interest."
```

"Probably the most serious, but very common problem, is authors not indicating the main purpose/contribution of the research in the first 1-3 pages. I reviewed a paper recently in which the purpose was not stated until page 15, and even then the statement of purpose was vague."

"Important not to overpromise. The author needs to ensure to deliver what (s)he promises to the reader."

"- Clearly specify your contribution up-front in a concise manner. Don't feel obligated to provide a mini-summary of the whole paper up-front, though!
- Re-consider whether you really need a long definitions and/or literature review section. Can you instead incorporate some of this material within your own theoretical development sections to better effect?
- Recognize that it's important to provide theoretical details from prior work within your own paper; citations don't tell the story.
- Excessively long papers annoy reviewers, and they seem to indicate a lack of clarity of thought. (My cardinal rule is: "Don't annoy the reviewers!")"

PROBLEMATIZING THE LITERATURE

"In my experience, many authors fail to effectively problematize the literature and articulate a compelling theoretical contribution.

I believe this happens because authors are often too close to their own ideas to anticipate what about them will be original and important to others. I often advise

authors to overcome this tendency by taking two complementary steps:

(1) After finishing a draft, put the paper away for several weeks. When you come back to it, you'll have a fresh perspective that's better aligned with how readers will approach it.

(2) As a thought experiment, imagine that three experts in your topic were reading your paper. What would they find most surprising or interesting? What would they learn that they did not know before?"

"Never underestimate the value of focusing on a topic that is relevant to management practice. Relevance is important."

PROVIDING ROADMAPS

"My second peeve is when the author doesn't provide the reader the 'lay of the land' in the initial few pages and requires the reader to find that out for oneself. For example, often I come across skillfully executed literature review (as part of the manuscript) and then later find out that none of it is really used in the core body of the manuscript. Or, there are pages and pages of 'interesting' ideas but none of which are really connected to one another and it then becomes the responsibility of the reader to make sense of all these ideas. I have found that in such cases, as a reader, often I start losing interest (too much cognitive burden for me!) even if one or two of those ideas are promising. One exercise that I do as an author (after I have written the first draft) is to go back and justify the need for each and every one of the para that I have written. This forces me to make connections between the different ideas in the paper and develop a good map of the overall landscape – which then helps the reader and makes it easy for them to follow my (author's) thought process."

TAKING THE READER'S PERSPECTIVE

"Try to put yourself in the shoes of a reader coming totally fresh to your work - better still, ask a colleague to do this for you. Then fix all the large and small things identified!"

"Also, try and actively think through and anticipate how your readers might react to your manuscript; is the intended meaning crystal clear?; is the manuscript logically and coherently structured?; is there a good balance between my own direct argumentation and the embedding of the work in existing literature streams and third party references (and quotes)?"

 "An author (hopefully) in his or her domain is always 'high context'. Readers have less knowledge. They are 'low context'. A big mistake, when sending

papers to a general management journal is to write as if the readers would be high context as well. This kills a paper. Good authors carefully use technical terms (and only those necessary for the story of the paper) and they never lose sight of their key message."

TELLING THE STORY

"I think that authors often are SO into their own work that they fail to lay out a logical story for the reader. They have the deep knowledge and connections already in their mind when they begin to write and so they assume we're on board with them from the get-go. Not so! …Back to the story idea... think of your paper as a story, with a beginning, middle, and end. Don't assume the reader has heard the story before - it's fresh for us so write accordingly."

"Ask yourself as an author, which story you want to tell and perceive all your stuff (theories, data etc.) as material for telling the story."

"Write the entire storyline as bullets on one page, ensuring that the different key terms and relations cover the main aspects and are related in a logical, sequential way. Afterwards, refine the key terms and relations to come with a more fine-grained structure. The essence of the paper summarized in one parsimonious model and then writing the whole story around that model is a similar idea. Furthermore, ask constructively critical colleagues to read the manuscript before submission, helping to tease out things that are not clear. Finally, 'empathic writing', where the author constantly tries to think whether what (s)he writes is clear to the reader is important.

"Try to draw a simple diagram that represents the elements of your story and the relationships among them.   This may help identify central ideas and get rid of extraneous ones."

CLARITY AND PRECISION

"Be clear with your constructs. Provide clear definitions. If necessary, take some time to differentiate (and relate) the construct to other relevant constructs. Stick with a construct label throughout the manuscript. Don't conflate different constructs."

"Need to clearly define key terms. Especially ambiguous/multi-interpretable terms are sometimes left undefined, easily leading to misunderstandings."

"Be concise. Don't assume that the reviewers (as well as the readers of AMR) are intimately familiar with all of theories in your paper."

"Avoid redefining the wheel when finished writing, look over the hypotheses (or have someone else do so)...if they seem incredibly self-evident, please try again remember that theory means explaining the 'why' of relationships between variables... if you are not doing that then you are wasting paper."

USING TEMPLATES

"Take a well-received paper that they really understand/like/cite in AMR and do a paragraph by paragraph analysis to create an "anatomy" of that paper. The anatomy should dissect each paragraph and result in an outline of what the authors of that paper are trying to achieve in each paragraph. This would help the author see the "rhythm" of that paper and write his/her own paper using a similar rhythm."

"Comb through old AMRs to find articles that have the same sort of objective you do - e.g. develop a new concept, critique a dominant assumption, fill in a gap, import insights from another field, etc - and then see how they structure their articles."

"- Read a lot of published AMR papers first and study the language, flow, clarity of ideas, etc.

""Practice, practice, practice -- coupled with soliciting friendly feedback from various people. I know of no short cut to becoming a better writer. Looking at my dissertation 25+ years later, I'm embarrassed but how turgid the writing was. My poor committee! I also found it helpful to study the work of writers I admired -- especially those whose writing seemed to exemplify clarity and elegance."

"The guide authors should use for writing should be Fitzgerald or Hemingway, not other scholars!"

"(Take) a course in Creative Writing."

THE "MOM" TEST

"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. Counsel young writers to first explain their ideas to their mothers -- with a recorder running. Then write pretty close to how they explained it orally. The 'Mom test' is a pretty good test for explaining things to readers."

GETTING FEEDBACK FROM OTHERS

"Have as many people as possible read it, especially those outside of the paper's domain. These individuals may not be able to judge the novelty of the paper but they should be able to help locate areas where logic is unclear, the story is inconsistent, or transitions are awkward."

"Reviews from non-specialists will help sharpen the clarity and exposition."

"Once your article is rewritten, and rewritten, then show it to someone who is not in the field and not an academic. See if they get bored or can even understand it.

"There is no substitute for getting lots of feedback from critical but friendly reviewers. Presenting the paper also helps."

"Three rules: (1) Workshop. (2) Workshop. (3) Workshop. If necessary, find an appropriate co-author."

"I still find very useful the old advice of re-writing by editing one's paper as though it was originally written by 'one's worst enemy'. Some of my worst writing ignores this wisdom."

"Similar to the kind you get in a creative writing class; distribute the work among colleagues and work with their feedback to revise the writing."

"Peer review before submission -reviews from specialists on the topic of the manuscript will help to attune the intended and delivered contributions."

"I've heard it from others and I'll reiterate how important and valuable it is for all of us to rely on our amazing colleagues for informal peer reviews, presentations, and major self-revisions before submission."

"One way of dealing with these points is to get the paper proofread by somebody willing to provide detailed feedback. We usually give other folks our work to read to try to ensure that the content and logic of our arguments is appropriate, but these tend to be experienced academics who are unlikely to spend time providing detailed feedback on the writing. A good doctoral student, for example, would be ideal for this role, or a close colleague who will not mind spending more time than usual in ensuring that points flow logically, unpicking arguments, and checking grammatical structure (a reciprocal arrangement is usually a good idea!)"

"Have someone friendly review the paper for conciseness and clarity (not just content). Double check your final paper against the publication's guidelines to make sure you have met all of the style criteria."

KEEPING THE FOCUS

 "Each manuscript should contain one key point, which the author should be able to state in one sentence. Digressions from one key point are common when authors cite more literature than is necessary to frame and justify an argument." What exactly is this paper's "reason for being"? What is its "one key point"?"

 "My main concern with submitted papers is that they try to do too much. As result, the papers often are unclear in their contribution and utility. From an academic standpoint, trying to do too much subjects the paper to multiple interpretations, which likely leads to multiple critiques that are likely difficult to address. From a practical standpoint, trying to do too much is typically negatively correlated with exposition clarity.

Instead, I recommend to authors to focus on explaining something well. That is, explain a phenomenon that is relevant to management scholars and tell us how and why its interesting. Be concise and parsimonious in the number of constructs and relationships in your theory, and be sure to provide logical boundaries to your argument.

In short, it's impossible develop 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. If you remain focused on clarity, conciseness, and 'not trying to do too much,' then you can derive logical conclusions or propositions that serve as summary 'take aways' for your theory. In turn, the reader can see value in these take-aways and how they can be empirically tested and practically applied. I think providing concrete deliverables is an important aspect of AMR. Not every proposition can be tested verbatim, but the conclusions derived from the paper should be subject to testing and practical application."

"As Goethe wrote: "In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister" ("it is in working within limits that the master reveals himself", or just "less is more"). Don't try to incorporate every idea that might also be relevant, but focus on developing a clear line of argument."

 "Authors may save themselves some headaches by simplifying the picture and clearly stating early in the manuscript the boundary conditions of their model. You don't have to create a model of everything in a single manuscript. Especially early in the development of a given area, starting smaller can make a problem more manageable and enable progress that can be built upon over time. In the discussion

section, you can talk about loosening your boundary conditions and what that might mean for future research."

 "Authors who use a patchwork quilt approach in picking constructs and arguments from a broad array of theoretical frameworks. This often comes across as a theoretical jumble that is not coherent. A better approach is to have a single coherent theoretical framework from which the author draws to extend a single theory. This is not the only approach, but it certainly better than an incoherent patchwork approach."

"* Write by hand what you read – this will allow you to reflect on what you are thinking when you are reading; and read more carefully what we are writing to see if things make sense. Then bounce your thoughts with others."

"Write linearly -writing in a linear fashion (tightly connecting every argument to the argument before and after) exposes the gaps in the logical flow of the ms., if there are any."

"Strive for parsimony in making arguments; be direct and to the point, and make sure that the main contribution(s) to the literature is made crystal clear."

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

 "Check out the editorial board. If they/we are publishing stylistically uniform and scientific papers, chances are that authors are well advised to do the same." "Remember that many of tradeoffs in terms of more detail/less detail, more theories/less theories and required or not required justifications are journal and discipline norms. If you go back 50 years and look at the journals, notions about what is an adequate story were quite different. This is not just because we have more sophisticated statistics.   Find someone who knows the journal to which you are submitting. Ask them what the reviewers are likely to expect in order to accept your results as 'the truth.' Many of these rules change over time."

"- Read a lot of published AMR papers first and study the language, flow, clarity of ideas, etc.

"Read AMR's editorials and author guidelines plus AMR articles!"

"An AMR paper is not the front end of an AMJ paper."

THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS: TYPOS, REFERENCES AND FORMAT

"I didn't mention grammatical, spelling, and AMR format issues above, but those are the ultimate way to annoy reviewers. Even if you need to pay a copy-editor to

review your paper or buy drinks for a colleague at the next conference to get his/her help, it's worth the time and expense necessary to ensure your paper is grammatically correct and formatted correctly before submission."

"lack of proof reading!! Nothing annoys me more than a manuscript full of typos and spelling/grammar errors."

"It is hard for reviewers to believe that you put a substantial amount of work into the paper if you didn't even take the time to proof it."

"I hate it when a cited paper is not included in the references, or when there is an error in the reference provided."

"Another is sloppy grammar. I find it really distracting and it provokes a thought that I have to fight hard against: 'If the author seems to care so little, why should I?'"

"This is not rocket science: Turn on and use the spellchecking and grammar tools in Word.   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. Try to put yourself in the shoes of a reader coming totally fresh to your work - better still, ask a colleague to do this for you. Then fix all the large and small things identified!
        Remember that a carelessly presented paper makes it very easy to find reasons to reject that paper. Finally, signal that you really want AMR to accept your paper despite its high rejection rates. Don't only pay attention to perfecting the spelling and grammar, but go to the bother of putting the references into AMR format - leaving them in another format signals that this is just a try-on and not a serious attempt to get your paper accepted."

 "I'm a big fan of clear, crisp active writing."

"Use I and we. Take ownership of your own ideas, for God's sake."

"Everyone should read Strunk and White, and adhere to their dictum, "Omit needless words.""

"One thing that frustrates me enormously is missing nouns or improper subjects that obscure the source of action. For example, a theory can't be an actor. Many authors seem to forget that every sentence should have meaning and answer the question: who is doing what to whom?"

"Reification of constructs. I see this ALL the time. "The Resource Based View notes that companies enjoy competitive advantage when their resources are heterogeneous".
 The Resource Based View does no such thing. Scholars who are persuaded by the Resource Based View note things."

"MY BIGGEST PET PEEVE IS THE USE OF THE WORD "WE". WE SOMETIMES MEANS THE AUTHORS THEMSELVES, IT SOMETIMES MEANS LARGER GROUPS SUCH AS THE WHOLE FIELD. THE WORD IS SOMETIMES USED DIFFERENTLY IN THE SAME PARAGRAPH. I USED TO TRY TO GET PEOPLE TO CHANGE, BUT I HAVE GIVEN UP."

"For young scholars, though, I do make several suggestions to improve their writing.

First, seek help. There is nothing inappropriate or inauthentic about having a professional (a copy editor) review a manuscript before it is submitted. Professionals are able to catch issues such as parallelism, verb tense, preposition usage, spit infinitives, etc., and correcting such problems can dramatically improve the readability of a manuscript. Great writing is a set of skills, and my experience has been that paying for professional services once or twice (great copy editors are available through brokering websites such as editavenue.com) and then learning from the feedback is one of the fastest ways of developing the skills of a great writer.

Second, use the active voice. Our discipline has developed the convention of writing in the passive voice (e.g., "The stakeholder literature has been reviewed by many scholars"), but the greatest of management authors tend to write in the active voice (e.g., "Many scholars have reviewed the stakeholder literature"). There is a pretentiousness about the passive voice that some interpret to be a sophistication expected of social science, but the passive voice is generally less direct and thus less clear. The active voice is much more consistent with how we communicate only a daily basis (spoken, e-mail, etc.) and so it tends to resonate more completely with the reader. My experience has been that when we write in the active voice, readers appreciate the writing (but because the differences are somewhat subtle they rarely can pinpoint why)."

```
"Have a great writer, outsider, help with your writing if
you are not a wordsmith by nature. Do not make a reviewer
have to work harder to learn your point because they are
stumbling through awkward passages."
```

"CITE-ITIS"

"Argument by citation - particularly annoying when the statement is obvious. e.g., "Goal setting is an important theory of human motivation" (Author, year; Author, year; Author, year; Author, year; Author, year; Author, year; Author year; Author, year; Author, year; Author, year; Author, year; etc etc etc......)"

"Cite-it is. It is correct and proper to acknowledge the contributions of those who came before you. But you do not need to incorporate citations after every word of your manuscript!

Cite-agion. Related to Cite-it is, this is the habit that some people have of citing well known reference works that make a broad point without linking it to some clear idea. Example: Learning (March and Levitt, 1984) is a critical process in organizations"

"My final pet peeve is when authors provide citations as ammunition or a cursory hand-wave to logic and reason without doing the hard of sorting through murky theories and logic. By doing this, they are abdicating their role as a writer and putting the onus on the reader to connect the dots, and hopefully in the right order."

"Over-referencing. It has become ridiculous: it is quite clear that the authors haven't read even one third of the texts they refer two. In the best case, they skimmed the abstracts; mostly, they went for keywords."

LENGTH OF MANUSCRIPT

"The paper is much too long. I think some authors think that the longer the manuscript (and the bigger the model), the better their chances of a positive review. Yet, it is much more challenging to maintain a reader's interest in the paper when it is overly long. There's not a positive relationship between length and quality of a manuscript."

"MANUSCRIPTS ARE TOO LONG!!! As Thomas Jefferson once said, "The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do." What I think most authors don't realize is that shorter manuscripts allow the intended contribution to be featured more prominently. With very long manuscripts (>50 or even 60 pages), it's hard for a reader or reviewer to maintain focus and often the intended contribution gets lost in the flood of verbiage."

OTHER PET PEEVES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

"Putting too many concepts / ideas / arguments into single paragraphs, sections, or the whole paper. Individual ideas may make sense, but having too many ideas implies that none of them is developed in sufficient depth, and as a whole they don't constitute a clear argument; it doesn't lead up to or substantiates a clear conclusion."

"Not making it clear up front what the article is about and then springing a surprise halfway through (the "WTF" factor!)."

"My wish is that authors would distinguish between theorizing and the operationalization of the theory. The operationalization level must be clear about the basic facts of action in order for the reader to determine the relevance of theory."

"I would suggest authors be certain that they are making claims that are well-supported. Often, I read work that makes novel and interesting claims, but they author(s) provided little justification for those claims. Also, I encourage authors to have a few propositions rather than lots of unsupported propositions."

"my major pet peeve was the lack of novelty. When novelty was present--no matter how unrefined--I found myself giving to authors several tips for resolving problems related to clarity, focus, and structure. But when novelty was not present, I found myself feeling frustrated about reviewing a paper that scores low on both novelty and quality (clarity, purpose, focus, structure)."

"Focus on content, on what is NEW (i.e., explains stuff that existing theory does not, or better, on what predictions are counter to existing thought), and lose everything else. Cite only the most relevant works."

"As an avid reader, I admire good writers. To the extent the publication process is about communicating ideas with peers, writing style greatly contributes to the field and facilitates scholarly discussion: writing style is an important multiplier. But it does not compensate for the lack of content."