

## EDITOR'S COMMENTS: THE CRAFT OF WRITING THEORY ARTICLES— VARIETY AND SIMILARITY IN AMR

Over the years, a host of articles and editorial commentaries in this journal and elsewhere have been written with the aim of helping management scholars understand (1) what theory is and (2) how to develop better (i.e., more novel, useful, and interesting) theory (e.g., Bacharach, 1989; Kilduff, 2006; LePine & King, 2010; Suddaby, 2010; Sutton & Staw, 1995; Thompson, 2011; Weick, 1989; Whetten, 1989). However, it is also worth remembering that journals don't publish big ideas; they publish manuscripts where authors have *successfully communicated* their big ideas in such a way that they can be readily understood and evaluated by others (Daft, 1995; Kilduff, 2006; King & Lepak, 2011). As the mission statement for this journal notes, "AMR publishes novel, insightful, and *carefully crafted* conceptual work" (emphasis mine). Of course, a necessary part of the crafting is in the conceptualization of good theory, but equally important is structuring the paper well.

To use an analogy, the organization of a manuscript (i.e., "macrostructure"; Daft, 1995) and the quality of the writing therein are like a window. A manuscript's window is "dirty" when its organization is awkward, unclear, or a poor fit with the concepts being explained, or when the writing is sloppy. The effect is to distract the reader by causing him or her to focus on the window (the poor structure), rather than to look through it to the underlying message. In early rounds of the journal review process, editors and reviewers all too often have to advise authors to clean up their paper (e.g., streamline the writing, coordinate the text with the figures, add or reword propositions) before they can begin to actually evaluate the merits of any theoretical contribution. And that is if the authors are lucky; confusing structure or poor writing may so dominate a manuscript that it diminishes any perceived potential theoretical contribution the paper might have, leading to a first-round rejection.

Although in reality the two are often inextricably connected (Van Maanen, 1995), in this essay I focus on the window—that is, on the craft of constructing a theory paper—rather than on the process of generating theory *per se*. And while there is much to be said about grammar, sentence structure, language usage, and specifics of writing technique (what Daft calls "microstructure"), I mostly focus on issues of manuscript organization and presentation, including the title and abstract, headings and sections, the use (or nonuse) of formal propositions, and the use of tables and figures.

In a recent editorial essay King and Lepak recommended that aspiring authors "outline or map out the structure of exemplar articles and then customize the learning gained in this process to come up with new and more effective approaches for communicating fundamentally good ideas" (2011: 209). Modeling this approach, I use AMR Best Articles from the last ten years (published 2001 through 2010) to illustrate both the structural variety and the similarities in articles published in AMR.<sup>1</sup>

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS: THE TITLE AND ABSTRACT

It is a sobering thought, but the only parts of a published paper that most people will ever read are the title and abstract. Whether retrieved in long lists of search engine results or appearing in table of contents notifications, these either grab the reader's attention immediately or never. The title and abstract are also

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<sup>1</sup>For readers who wish to play along at home, these are noted with an asterisk in the reference list. AMR Best Article Award winners are selected in the spring of each year. A committee composed of both macro- and micro-oriented scholars reads through all the articles published in AMR during the prior year and then engages in several rounds of a structured process of ranking and voting to arrive at a consensus. The winner and finalists are announced at the following Academy of Management annual meeting.

often the only information that potential reviewers see in the journal's request to review a paper and, of course, are the first things that reviewers, and ultimately readers, will see if and when they do encounter the full manuscript. Although these elements of a paper are the smallest, they do a lot of work. We as authors need to think of them as appetizers.

Good authors know how to make the title and abstract "hook" a reader, but they don't all do it in the same way. Among the ten Best Articles, for example, seven exhibit what one of my colleagues refers to, tongue in cheek, as the "colonic" title—that is, a longish title consisting of two phrases separated by a colon. Of the remaining three, two articles go to the other extreme, with simple two- or three-word titles ("Systems of Exchange" and "Management Innovation"). One advantage of the latter is that brevity, especially in academic writing, is novel and therefore attention grabbing. An advantage of the longer style is that the author can use the "precolonic" part of the title either to succinctly state the topic (e.g., "Social Capital: . . .") or to artfully begin to tell the story using some sort of image or metaphor ("Stealing Fire: . . ."), while still being able to give additional clarifying information after the colon to help position the idea in the reader's mind.

What most of these articles' titles have in common is that they reference the core construct or idea of the paper in simple language. Rather than trying to impress with an ostentatious title, they aim to draw the reader in. More pragmatically, they aim to draw the *right* reader in—that is, the audience most likely to understand and appreciate the paper.

As with the titles, the abstracts of these articles vary considerably. Some present a brief outline of the article in three to four sentences (e.g., Dane & Pratt, 2007; Makadok & Coff, 2009; Mitchell & James, 2001), whereas others simply state succinctly what the authors create or argue in the article (e.g., Adler & Kwon, 2002; George, Chattopadhyay, Sitkin, & Barden, 2006). One even starts with a hypothetical question and then uses the answer to lead into a description of what the article does (Mainemelis, 2010).

Again, what these abstracts have in common is that they clearly name and describe the core constructs and aims of the article. For the most

part, they also steer clear of jargon and are relatively conversational in tone.

### MACROSTRUCTURE: ORGANIZATION OF MAJOR SECTIONS

Among the ten Best Articles, authors differ in how they use the formal structure of the article as a device for advancing the narrative. With the exception of the conclusion or discussion section, which is usually labeled as such, not one of the ten award-winning articles uses solely generic section headings, such as Background, Literature Review, Model and Propositions, and so on. Instead, each employs descriptive headings that introduce concepts or mirror the structure and flow of the theoretical model. As an example, "Social Capital: Prospects for a New Concept," by Adler and Kwon (2002), has five main headings—"Defining Social Capital," "Sources of Social Capital," "Benefits and Risks of Social Capital," "The Contingencies and Value of Social Capital," and "Conclusion"—that roughly map onto the conceptual model depicted in the first figure of their article.

In terms of similarities, the authors identify and define key constructs very early in most of these articles, typically either in the introduction or in the first formal section. This is most noticeable in several of the headings of the first sections: "Defining Social Capital" (Adler & Kwon, 2002), "What is Management Innovation?" (Birkinshaw, Hamel, & Mol, 2008), "Defining Creative Deviance" (Mainemelis, 2010), and "What Intuition Is: Bringing Together Intuitive Processes and Outcomes" (Dane & Pratt, 2007).

As noted above, all the articles have a discussion and/or conclusion section. In addition to bringing the manuscript to a close and offering implications for future research, in many cases the authors also offer suggestions for managerial practice (e.g., Adler & Kwon, 2002; Dane & Pratt, 2007; Makadok & Coff, 2009), recalling Lewin's (1945) oft-cited statement about the practicality of good theory.

### ILLUMINATING THE PATH: PROPOSITIONS AND OTHER TOOLS

In his editorial advice about writing theory, Kilduff (2006) argued that while some approaches to theory development lend them-

selves to propositions, others do not; indeed, in many cases, propositions may be more distracting than helpful. It is an interesting exercise to study how the authors use propositions, as well as other techniques, to advance their ideas in the award-winning articles. Among the ten Best Articles, in five the authors communicate their theoretical contribution quite effectively without any formal propositions, using other means to accomplish the objectives of the paper. Among the five, one article focuses on conceptual synthesis across disciplines and theoretical perspectives (Adler & Kwon, 2002), one presents an analytic classification scheme (Biggart & Delbridge, 2004), one is an essay on the self-fulfilling nature of theory (Ferraro, Pfeffer, & Sutton, 2005), one focuses on defining and illustrating a process (Birkinshaw et al., 2008), and one utilizes a summary of configurations and theoretical examples, as well as figures (Mitchell & James, 2001). Of those articles that contain propositions, four develop comprehensive sets of propositions; three of these relate to theoretical models aimed at predicting organizational outcomes (innovation and adaptation, organizational actions, creative products; Benner & Tushman, 2003; George et al., 2006; Mainemelis, 2010) and one predicts individual decision-making effectiveness (Dane & Pratt, 2007). The remaining article (Makadok & Coff, 2009) primarily uses a formal model with a theorem and formal proof to communicate its main insights but also offers an example proposition that illustrates one of the cases derived from the model.

Among the articles in which the authors do use propositions, there are important similarities. First, the propositions themselves are clearly worded, using the same terminology as is used in the rest of the paper, and they describe the expected direction (positive or negative) of relevant relationships. Many of the propositions in these articles are fairly complex and lengthy; therefore, clarity is especially critical. Further, moderating relationships are identified as such, and the effects of moderators on underlying relationships are clearly explained in the propositions. One final observation is that the propositions are an organic part of the article and have a logical and coherent flow. By "organic" I mean that the logical arguments in the article build to each proposition and that the

series of arguments and propositions appears in the text this way, rather than as a lengthy discourse followed by a list of propositions all "orphaned" together on the last page of the manuscript. A quick way to check for logical and coherent flow is to simply read through the paper from one proposition to the next. Are they consistently worded? Taken together do they tell a story that fits with the manuscript's theoretical model as described in the paper and/or figure(s)?

### ACCESSORIZING: THE USE OF TABLES AND FIGURES

With the exception of the essay by Ferraro et al. (2005), the ten award-winning articles all include at least one figure or table. Many of the articles illustrate conceptual constructs and relationships using boxes and arrows models, although not all of them use formal propositions to describe those relationships (e.g., Adler & Kwon, 2002). Makadok and Coff (2009) include a figure illustrating a three-dimensional taxonomy of governance forms, to which they refer frequently. Birkinshaw et al. (2008) also use a figure to illustrate a process framework. And in their paper on the role of time in the conceptualization of causal relationships, Mitchell and James (2001) use a variety of graphs and figures to convey their arguments. In several of the articles the authors use tables to summarize the defining elements of a typology or to organize and present lengthy literature reviews concisely (e.g., Adler & Kwon, 2002; Biggart & Delbridge, 2004; Birkinshaw et al., 2008; Dane & Pratt, 2007). In addition to creating useful visual aids to help the reader quickly understand a framework or grasp a large body of information, tables can also sometimes help streamline and reduce the length of a manuscript.

One common feature of the articles with multiple formal propositions is that in all of them the propositions are labeled as such (P1, P2, etc.) in the relevant figure. This is immensely helpful for guiding the reader through the propositions and for linking the text to the figure. Even in articles without propositions, figures and tables are well integrated with the text. As one is constructing a paper, it is important to visualize the final published piece, with the tables and figures embedded adjacent to the ideas being ex-

plained. This requires conscious effort, since when we prepare manuscripts for submission, we append the figures and tables to the end of the document, which may make it more likely that they are treated as afterthoughts (i.e., out of sight, out of mind). Effective authors not only use figures and tables that correspond to the text (e.g., same construct labels) but also actively integrate them (e.g., by giving an overview or by referring to them periodically in the text). While it is true, as Sutton and Staw noted, that “diagrams are not theory” (1995: 376), these accessories can be powerful tools for clarifying and enhancing the theoretical ideas in a paper.

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this exercise is not to provide an exhaustive review on the subject, nor is it to recommend a particular template for theoretical articles for *AMR*. Indeed, as the ten Best Articles illustrate, there is no single, most-preferred way to write a paper for *AMR*. Just as good theoretical contributions can emerge from a range of disciplinary and epistemological camps, good manuscript craftsmanship emerges from conscious attention to a variety of structural elements. The point is to illustrate that with relatively little effort invested (e.g., downloading and studying a handful of papers), one can learn a lot about how successful authors leverage the structure of a manuscript to aid in effectively communicating their theoretical contribution. Aspiring authors may also want to examine the structure of other *AMR* articles that they especially like or often cite, which “means looking at—rather than through—our more persuasive writings” (Van Maanen, 1995: 135).

In a theoretical paper the author is faced with a mixed blessing: greater freedom and page length within which to develop theory but also more editorial rope with which to hang him/herself. Consequently, structure and writing are arguably even more critical for the success of this type of work than for an empirical paper. As we have seen from this selective review of award-winning articles published in *AMR*, there is no “one best way” to structure a theory paper. What these pieces do share in common is the thoughtful and careful matching of manuscript form and structure to the theoretical purpose of the paper, which enables the reader to see

clearly through the window to the big ideas beyond.

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