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Commonly observed shortcomings in manuscripts submitted to management journals

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Abstract We outline commonly noticed shortcomings and ways to overcome them in the manuscripts submitted by new management researchers, such as doctoral students and junior faculty. The usual pitfalls in manuscripts submitted to business and management journals include poor writing and presentation, lack of integration, lack of significance, poor research design, and scanty description of methods, untidy presentation of results, and inadequate and sloppy discussion and implication sections. Borrowing from our experiences and the writings of the editors of top tier management journals, we offer guidelines for crafting clear and persuasive manuscripts. We provide suggestions for developing each section of the manuscript: topic choice, abstract, introduction, theory and grounding of hypotheses, research design, methods and results, discussion and implications, and references.

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Indian management research, education, and practice seem to be heading into an exciting phase, a golden era (Khatri, Ojha, Budhwar, Srinivasan, & Varma, 2012; Khatri, Varma, & Budhwar, 2015). Valid and vigorous management research at this juncture can lay a strong foundation for excellence in management education and practice in India.

As research process can have enormous impact, either positive or negative, on researchers (Daft, 1995), the objective of this article is to mitigate disillusionment and reduce the time and trials in the review process by doctoral students and junior faculty in the field of management. With this goal in mind, we attempt to do three things. First, we delineate the common shortcomings that we observe frequently in manuscripts submitted to management journals. Second, we borrow from our own experiences and from the writings of the editors of top tier journals to develop suggestions on how to craft each section of the manuscript from introduction to conclusion. Third, we offer broader suggestions that may help in improving the quality of manuscripts submitted to management journals by Indian scholars.

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Table 1 Common shortcomings in manuscripts submitted to management journals.

Commonly observed pitfalls

1. Basic writing and presentation
2. Fragmentation and lack of integration
3. Lack of significance and originality
4. Poor research design, scanty description of methods, untidy presentation of results
5. Lack of proper structure and organisation
6. Inadequate and sloppy discussion and implication sections

Common shortcomings

A list of commonly discerned shortcomings in the manuscripts submitted to business and management journals is presented in [Table 1](#). The usual pitfalls range from the basic writing and presentation problems to the inadequate and sloppy discussion and conclusion sections. In the following sections of the article, we discuss the problems listed in [Table 1](#) at some length.

Basic writing and presentation

[Daft \(1995\)](#) suggests that three skills are needed to be a top professional in the organisational sciences—theory skills, writing skills, and design skills. Despite the importance of writing skills, they do not seem to receive sufficient attention from management researchers, and poor writing and presentation remains one of the most prevalent problems in manuscripts submitted to management journals ([Bettis & Penberra, 1989](#); [Billsberry, 2014](#); [Daft, 1995](#); [Fischer, 1992](#); [Thompson, 1981](#)). The manuscript may be addressing an interesting idea but the basic writing problem is too distracting to allow the reviewers to focus on the content of the manuscript. [Bettis and Penberra \(1989\)](#) observe that poor writing often is more a matter of haste and carelessness by the author than a lack of writing expertise, and a poor manuscript is often the result of premature submission. A list of writing and presentation problems in manuscripts is presented in [Table 2](#). We elaborate on these problems below.

A significant number of manuscripts submitted to journals do not look like finished products, but rather, like initial rough drafts with a plethora of problems ([Billsberry, 2014](#)). Submitting manuscripts that are not ready for submission serves no good purpose. Doing so increases the work of journal editors and reviewers and adds to their frustration. It may not serve the authors in that the comments they receive from editors and reviewers may not be all that pleasant and constructive, thus adding to the authors' disillusionment on top of the disappointment resulting from the rejection of the manuscript ([Daft, 1995](#)). Our suggestion then is not to rush the manuscript, but to develop it so well that the editors and reviewers find it hard to reject.

Many a times the manuscripts are overly long with a lot of redundancies and lack of focus ([Billsberry, 2014](#)). One of

Table 2 Commonly observed writing and presentation related shortcomings in manuscripts submitted to management journals.

Basic writing and presentation problems

1. The manuscript gives the feel of a first rough draft
2. The manuscript is unusually long
3. Font and formatting of the manuscript are improper and inconsistent
4. The manuscript is littered with grammatical and typographical errors
5. Sources in the manuscript are improperly cited; the format of the references is not consistent with the recommended style; sources and references are missing
6. Use of headings/subheadings in the manuscript is improper/inconsistent
7. The manuscript suffers from improper use of abbreviations/capitalisation
8. The titles and formats of the tables in the manuscript are inappropriate

the reasons this can happen is because the authors are trying to do too much in a single manuscript. Reviewers find such manuscripts quite annoying to go through. Rather than offering their comments on the content of the manuscript, their attention gets shifted to issues of writing and formatting. As authors, we always have a lot of interesting things to say in a paper, but we must resist the urge to incorporate all of them, many of which may only be tangentially relevant. It requires much discipline to stay focussed on the main argument and not digress into less important ones.

Close to half of the submissions to management journals so miss the mark that they cannot even be sent out for review ([Billsberry, 2014](#)). Manuscripts with many typographical and grammatical errors, convey to the editors and reviewers the impression that the authors did not take the writing of their manuscript earnestly. On occasions, manuscripts do not even include page numbers. We also find instances of improper and inconsistent use of fonts and format in the manuscript. In the process of cutting and pasting, we find manuscripts using more than one font in the same paragraph. Journals provide details on fonts and formats to be used in a manuscript. Most journals require that the manuscripts be double-spaced, but we often encounter manuscripts that are single-spaced.

In recent years, we have begun seeing a common problem of too many abbreviations being used. Abbreviating may be necessary if there is a long term that is used many times in the manuscript. Using the full term throughout makes it an awkward read. In such a case an abbreviated term is preferred. If a term is used only once, the use of an abbreviation serves no purpose. The use of abbreviations in the title or abstract of the paper sounds especially odd and should be avoided.

We often encounter issues related to capitalisation in manuscripts. This happens particularly in the case of headings and subheadings, and constructs and variables used in the study. The authors need to follow the style guide of the journal to which they are submitting their manuscript to figure

out whether they have to capitalise their headings and sub-headings or not. Similarly, we frequently observe that the constructs/variables are sometimes capitalised and at other times they are not. Two things are key in this respect. First, the guidelines of the journal to which the manuscript is submitted should dictate what to do. Second, if the journal guidelines are not clear whether to capitalise or not to capitalise headings/subheadings and constructs/variables, the authors need to make a decision on what they want to do and then do it uniformly.

References connect a scholar's work to the related literature. Improper citation of sources and missing sources can distract the reader from the substance of the manuscript. The references should be accurate, with the author's name spelled correctly and the listed year accurate. Journals usually have their own style of referencing. The use of a referencing style of a different journal may suggest that the manuscript has been rejected by that journal or that the author has poor attention to detail (Colquitt, 2013).

Many manuscripts are rejected because they do not follow the "house style", the specific style of a journal for presenting the content (George, 2012). The house style is reflected in the structure of the presentation—how certain sections such as theoretical background, hypotheses, methods, results, and discussion are explicated. The proper format and presentation of figures and tables in a manuscript is an important component of the house style of a journal. Manuscripts with carelessly done figures and tables are not uncommon. The titles of figures and tables should be precise and should follow the journal's style. It may be a good idea to look at recently published papers in a journal to get a clear sense of the format of figures and tables.

Inexperienced researchers from India and other emerging economies need to work on their manuscripts diligently and to revise their manuscripts several times. Even native speakers of English and veteran researchers have to revise their work numerous times. Clear writing requires a lot of discipline and is hard work. Authors must remember that they are writing the manuscript for others to read rather than for their own reference. While there is no formula for clear writing, we propose that "...clear writing involves a commitment to expressing ideas with clarity, directness, and precision. When using a clear writing approach, the author scrutinizes every word and sentence for meaning and purpose" (Ragins, 2012, 494). Clear writing involves writing simply rather than using overly complex language to describe straightforward concepts; it is a product of clear thinking (Gunning, 1968).

Fragmentation and lack of integration

A good manuscript has a laser-like focus on the main argument, from the abstract to the conclusion section of the paper. The reader should be able to understand the key points and follow the logic of the manuscript without having to reread it (Ragins, 2012). It is not the responsibility of the reviewers to search for the common thread of the paper but the authors' to make it as easy as possible for reviewers to follow the story. Unfortunately a typical manuscript may not show such focus. Various sections of the paper may lack proper connection and the manuscript may be replete with loose

statements. The arguments may lack sharpness and precision. The reader is presented with concepts, jargon, and acronyms that are not defined or are used inconsistently in the manuscript. One of the reasons this may happen is because the authors are too close to the material and fail to put themselves in the shoes of the reader (Ragins, 2012); the authors get too wrapped up in their ideas and lose their perspective of what is primarily important and what is less important for the purpose of the manuscript.

Lack of significance and originality

Fischer (1992) notes that lack of significance is a major shortcoming in manuscripts submitted to business and management journals. Lack of significance occurs in three ways: (a) failure to go beyond existing literature; (b) unimportant topic; and (c) trivial findings. We find three typical but related problems in the manuscripts of management researchers from emerging economies regarding significance and originality. First, many of the manuscripts address theories and models from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. The citations and references of the manuscript are old and outdated. While the classic research studies from the earlier decades need to be included in the manuscript, the less important studies need not because including all the studies makes the reference list too long and it also shows that the authors probably do not know which studies are seminal and which are not (Colquitt, 2013).

The second problem, which may overlap with the first one, is picking overly researched topics such as the leader-member exchange theory and organisational citizenship behaviours. The case for such mature and over-studied topics is much harder to make than topics that are new, fresh, and poorly understood. The overly researched topics fail to generate any interest and enthusiasm in the reviewers and editors.

The third common problem is that the manuscripts of management researchers from emerging economies justify the contribution of the study by simply arguing that there are not many studies on the topic in their country. The reviewers may not find such an argument compelling. The authors need to explain why the relationships observed in previous studies elsewhere may or may not hold in their country context. The authors need to provide a theory of the contextual factors prevailing in their countries/societies. Unless such an explanation is rendered, the manuscript fails to make a favourable impression on editors and reviewers (see Khatri, 2011; Khatri et al., 2012).

Poor research design and incomplete description of methods

In some manuscripts, the research design does not adequately allow testing the arguments put forward. One problem is using cross-sectional data to test causality, which often arises because hypotheses are stated rather casually; rather than stating hypotheses as an association, they are stated in the form of cause and effect. Other prevalent problems of design include inappropriate sampling procedures or inadequate samples.

The problem of incomplete description of methods is a common feature of manuscripts submitted by new and

inexperienced management researchers. This occurs because the section on methods may not be considered with the same urgency as the theory and results sections. Also, describing the methods and procedures is a more routine task. Whatever the reason, lack of clear and full description of methods leaves reviewers confused. They would want to know if the measures used in the study capture the proposed constructs. The authors need to include their measures, whether newly developed or existing ones, in tables or exhibits so that the reviewers can readily look at them and see if they make sense. The authors are obligated to provide clear and sufficient descriptions of validities and reliabilities of the measures used in the study.

Lack of proper structure and organisation

Daft (1995) suggests that a good journal manuscript pays close attention to both macrostructure and microstructure. The macrostructure considers whether various parts of the paper fit together into a coherent whole. Microstructure pertains to individual sentences and paragraphs. Overall, the structure and organisation of the paper is the skeleton of the paper. If the skeleton is deformed, the body will be deformed too. Clear writing depends upon clear structure. A carefully considered outline of the manuscript may be a good starting point before plunging headlong into the writing of the manuscript. The outline may include ordering of key arguments in each section of the paper and how they connect with each other. The judicious use of headings and subheadings can enhance the readability of the manuscript significantly. Similarly, the proper use of figures and tables to summarise the main arguments can say a lot while using much less space.

Inadequate discussion and implication sections

A common problem related to the discussion section of the paper is that the authors confound results and discussion sections with each other. The results section is simply a reporting of the results of the data analyses. It also provides specific information on hypotheses that received support and the ones that did not. The scope of the results section does not include a detailed explanation of why certain hypotheses were supported and others were not. It is the discussion section that needs to explain the findings of the study in relation to the underlying theory and previous research. The repetition of results in the discussion section needs to be avoided. The discussion section should talk about the main thesis and what the study contributes to existing knowledge. This section needs to then describe what it means to future research and management practice.

How to craft each section of the manuscript

We borrow from our own experiences and from the writing of the editors of top tier journals to develop suggestions on how to craft each section of the manuscript from introduction to conclusion. In recent years, editors from many top tier management journals have made many invaluable observations on how to craft a clear and persuasive manuscript. The

editors of *Academy of Management Journal* offered helpful suggestions for authors in their "Publishing in AMJ" series in various issues of the journal from 2011 to 2013 (Bansal & Corley, 2012; Bono & McNamara, 2011; Colquitt, 2013; Colquitt & George, 2011; Geletkanycz & Tepper, 2012; George, 2012; Grant & Pollock, 2011; Mayer & Sparrowe, 2013; Shaw, 2012; Sparrowe & Mayer, 2011; Zhang & Shaw, 2012). The editors of *Academy of Management Review* provided their recommendations in various issues of the journal in 2012 (Fulmer, 2012; Ragins, 2012). *Journal of Management Studies* covered this issue in its December 2013 issue (Clark, Floyd, & Wright, 2013), and *Asia Pacific Journal of Management* in the June 2011 issue (Lahiri, 2011). We discuss the key issues related to each section of the manuscript next.

Topic choice

The choice of topic for research is a critical one given that it is one of the least revisable aspects of any manuscript, along with research design. Colquitt and George (2011) suggest that the chosen topic should tackle a significant issue, pursue a novel direction that arouses and maintains curiosity, builds a study with ambitious scope, and uncovers actionable insights. Naturally, the question arises as to how to select a good topic? Doctoral students and junior faculty struggle with this issue more than the experienced scholars. We would like to make some suggestions based on our experiences. First, you may want to talk to trusted colleagues and experienced scholars about the research idea that you are toying with. Their feedback will offer clues on whether the topic is worth pursuing. Second, if the topic clears this first test, the next step is doing preliminary research on the topic and giving a research seminar to departmental colleagues. You can gauge the merit of the topic from the comments of the seminar participants. The topic is worth pursuing further if it arouses much interest in the participants and awakens their curiosity as researchers. The third suggestion is to submit a conceptual paper to a research conference. The comments of the conference reviewers are likely to be a good barometer of the worth of the topic.

Abstract

While authors in general know what an abstract means, poorly done abstracts are not uncommon. In some cases, a part of the introduction is cut and pasted in the abstract. In other cases, the abstract is the same as the conclusion section. However, the abstract is neither the introduction to the paper nor the conclusion of the paper. The abstract of the paper has to provide information on key aspects of the paper precisely. It needs to touch on the rationale of the study, the underlying theory, the main hypothesis, the research design/methods, and the notable findings and implications.

Introduction

A good introduction captures the attention of the reviewers and makes a favourable first impression. If the reviewers are intrigued by the research question, appreciate its importance,

and understand how the study advances understanding of the topic, they are more likely to look for reasons to recommend revision. According to [Grant and Pollock \(2011\)](#), an effective introduction answers three sets of questions:

- (1) What is the topic or research question, and why is it interesting and important in theory and practice?
- (2) What key theoretical perspectives and empirical findings have already informed the topic or question? What major, unaddressed issues does this study address and why do they need to be addressed?
- (3) How does the study fundamentally change, challenge, or advance current research and understanding?

[Grant and Pollock \(2011\)](#) noted three common mistakes made in introductions. The most common of them is providing insufficient justification for the importance of the topic and how the paper contributes to existing knowledge. The second problem is the lack of focus. The introduction section may be too long and contain extraneous arguments that do not relate to the core research question. The third problem is "overpromising". The authors set very high expectations about the study in the introduction section but then fail to meet them in the rest of the paper.

The introduction section requires a lot of attention from authors. To make it focussed and impactful, it may need several revisions.

Theory and grounding of hypotheses

A lack of proper theoretical grounding is a common problem in manuscripts submitted to management journals. [Daft \(1995\)](#) reported that about half of the manuscripts had little or no theory. Without a theory, there is nothing to pull the study together. Simply reviewing the literature and showing that each variable appeared previously is not enough. The theory provides an overarching, coherent framework for the study, and thus the theory section is a critical part of the paper.

[Sparrowe and Mayer \(2011\)](#) have offered many excellent suggestions on how to develop this section. They observe that the primary purpose of the theory section is to ground hypotheses. This can be achieved by positioning the study hypotheses in relation to the related research literature and developing clear, logical arguments explaining why the key variables are related in the proposed manner.

One commonly observed problem in the theory and grounding hypotheses section is that the authors do a basic literature review, which is consistent with the format of the traditional doctoral theses. In a research paper, there is a delicate balance between engaging previous research and carefully developing one's own novel insights that ultimately lead to the formulation of a theoretical model and hypotheses. It is important to cite relevant prior research, but the theory section should not be built around these prior works such that the logical reasoning is pushed to the background ([Sparrowe & Mayer, 2011](#)). At the same time, it is important to avoid the other extreme, focussing exclusively on the argument and ignoring prior related research. Failing to cite highly relevant studies leads readers to question the value of the contribution.

Research design

Research design, like topic choice, is a section that is not amenable to revision. Thus, it needs careful planning so as to avoid problems and surprises later. A basic problem with the research design would cast a doubt on the study findings. [Bono and McNamara \(2011\)](#) identify three broad research design problems in manuscripts: (1) mismatch between research question and design; (2) mismatch between construct definition and operationalisation; and (3) inappropriate or incomplete model specification. For example, researchers cannot develop causal attributions with cross-sectional data, nor can they establish change, regardless of which analytical tools they use. Similarly, asking students with limited work experience to participate in experimental research in which they make executive decisions may not be appropriate. Prior to making operational decisions, the authors developing a new construct must clearly articulate the definition and boundaries of the new construct, map its association with existing constructs, and avoid assumptions that the scales with the same name reflect the same construct and that scales with different names reflect different constructs ([Daft, 1995](#)).

Methods and results

The methods and results sections often play a major role in how reviewers evaluate a manuscript. Instead of providing a clear and complete description of data collection procedures and findings, these sections often leave reviewers confused. Many authors seem to hide the details of their research procedures, as if they fear that reviewers will criticise and reject the paper for those weaknesses ([Daft, 1995](#)). There is no better way to defuse criticism than to admit the weaknesses.

The sections on methods and results answer two broad questions: (1) how and why the data were obtained, and (2) how the data were analysed and what was found. [Zhang and Shaw \(2012\)](#) found lack of completeness, clarity, and credibility as the three main problems in the methods and results sections that led to the rejection of manuscripts.

Completeness: The authors fail to provide a full description of the ways they obtain the data, the operationalisations of the constructs that they use, and the types of analyses they conduct. The methods should be described so fully that someone could replicate the study and get the same results. Including an appendix with a full list of measures can be helpful to reviewers. In reporting results, it is important to specify the unit of analysis, sample size, control variables, and dependent variables.

Clarity: Authors far too often fail to clearly explain what they have done. [Zhang and Shaw \(2012\)](#) found not reporting how measures were adapted as one common problem. Authors can avoid such a problem by using the full validated measures of constructs when they are available. If that is not possible, it is necessary to provide a justification for the modifications and provide additional empirical validation for the adapted measures.

In the results section, the authors often fail to relate their findings to the study's hypotheses or do so in the discussion section. Conversely, they begin to discuss the implications of the findings in the results section prematurely,

rather than doing it in the discussion section. To avoid confusion, variables ideally are presented in the same order across sections.

Credibility: The authors can enhance the credibility of their study by explaining why a particular setting and sample were chosen. It is crucial to offer sufficient evidence of reliabilities and validities of the measures used. The authors need to define the key constructs clearly and demonstrate that the measures they have used do capture those constructs. The authors may also need to justify why a particular analytical method is used.

Discussion and implications

A good discussion section provides a clear and compelling answer to the original research question, cast in a theoretical light; it explains clearly how a study changes, challenges, and advances existing theoretical understanding (Geletkanycz & Tepper, 2012). Geletkanycz and Tepper (2012) identify three common mistakes authors make in articulating the discussion section of their manuscript. The first mistake that authors make is to rehash the results. Authors devote too much discussion to summarising and re-summarising the results of their hypothesis tests while devoting too little attention to explaining what the results mean. Instead, what is needed in the discussion section is a thoughtful interpretation of why the findings are important and how they change the conversation that the research joins.

The second mistake authors make in their discussion section is to meander; that is, the section seems to lack focus around key issues. A paper's discussion of theoretical implications should cohere around a small number of important issues that are covered in great depth. The discussion section may go into too much detail in its contributions and implications.

A third mistake in the discussion section involves overreaching—deriving conclusions that outstrip the data.

References

Colquitt (2013) offers an excellent treatment of how to craft references in research papers. The author divides his discussion in two parts: avoiding shoddy craftsmanship and achieving refined craftsmanship. The shoddy craftsmanship in references can be avoided in two ways. First, the references need to be formatted according to the guidelines of the journal to which the manuscript is being submitted. Second, it is important to be accurate bibliographically and that includes correct spelling of the author's name, proper volume and page numbers of the source, and the correct year of the publication.

Colquitt (2013) recommends four ways to achieve refined craftsmanship in referencing. The first suggestion is that the authors be accurate substantively in the citing of their sources. The second recommendation is to acknowledge seminality and to give credit where credit is truly due. The third suggestion is to account for the rigour of the studies. More robust and rigorous studies should be given more weight than other studies, thus ensuring that the most persuasive knowledge is what gets transmitted through the literature. The last suggestion offered by Colquitt is to optimise the scope of

references. On the one hand, omitting important references fails to give credit where credit is due. On the other hand, too many references can distract readers while adding unnecessary length to a manuscript. Thus, the authors need to strike a balance.

Other broad suggestions

When we were new to research, we were advised not to submit a manuscript unless it was fully ready. We were also advised to revise our work many times and seek feedback from colleagues and senior scholars. On many occasions, we ignored this advice only to experience unfavourable and unpleasant outcomes later. In the beginning of our career, we were defensive and did not take criticism of our manuscripts from colleagues and reviewers too well, but doing so was not helpful. The sooner we learn to be open to feedback and become a bit thick-skinned, the sooner we become more persuasive as scholars and writers.

The business and management schools in emerging economies like India have to step up the training and grinding in clear writing in their doctoral programs. Further, they need to inculcate a culture in which their experienced faculty mentor doctoral students and new faculty in research projects.

Another practical suggestion for authors is to enlist the services of a professional copy editor before submitting their manuscript for review and publication considerations.

Publishing in top tier journals has become an increasingly hard and complex task. Doing so requires mastery in theory, methods, writing, and a bit of luck. It seems quite a difficult proposition for an individual scholar to achieve mastery in all the required areas. Thus, forming a research team with complementary skills may be the answer to the challenge of publishing in top tier journals. For example, some scholars are good in theory and others in methods. A research team with a suitable combination of expertise in theory and methods may improve the chances of developing a manuscript that does well in the review process. Moreover, as researchers, we learn and grow more quickly when working with other accomplished researchers.

Finally, we agree with Daft's (1995) observation that writing skills, like theory building skills, are hard to learn and they take time, commitment, and hard work. "These skills may not be analyzable and teachable, as experience and practice are crucial, just as golfers must play every day to learn driving, approach, and putting skills" (Daft, 1995, 177).

Conclusion

Conducting valid research and developing a compelling manuscript lie at the heart of the research process. By crafting high quality manuscripts, management scholars in India and other emerging economies can reduce the time needed to publish their work and thus avoid frequent disillusionment and disappointment resulting from the rejection of manuscripts. It takes time to build the three needed skills for a successful research career: theory building, research writing, and research designing. In this article, we have delineated the common problems that we have observed in manuscripts submitted by management scholars and provided simple and

effective prescriptions to craft great manuscripts that make it hard for reviewers and journals editors to reject.

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