

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

The First Few Pages

By: **Arun Rai**
Editor-in-Chief, *MIS Quarterly*
Regents' Professor of the University System of Georgia
Robinson Chair of IT-Enabled Supply Chains and Process Innovation
Harkins Chair of Information Systems
Robinson College of Business
Georgia State University
arunrai@gsu.edu

The first few pages of an article can make it or break it. They can make editors and reviewers lean into an article with intrigue and expectation of high payoff or lean out with boredom or confusion.

Yet, many authors pay insufficient attention to these parts of the article relative to other parts and overlook attributes of effective lead-ins.

In this editorial, I share a few thoughts on writing an effective introduction and also briefly comment on writing the abstract and title (see Table 1).

Writing the Introduction

Authors of award-winning articles note that writing the introduction was one of the most important, challenging, and time-intensive aspects of the writing process (e.g., Grant and Pollock 2011). Next, I discuss what authors need to achieve in the introduction and some steps they can take to do so.

Formulating the Research Question

It is in the introduction where authors need to make a convincing case for the importance of the research question and the value proposition of the work. While a puzzle, controversy, or issue in a problem domain establishes the foundation to derive research questions, they can stimulate several research questions. This requires authors to go beyond presenting evidence of the need for research in a problem domain (e.g., data breaches) by formulating the problem to focus on a *particular* research question and making the case for the importance of the question (Rai 2017). The introduction should make the case for “who should care” and “why should they care” about the aims of the study.

Taking stock of the advice in review processes and *MISQ* author development workshops, I see four key desirable attributes of research questions:

- *Compelling*: the question derives from credible arguments and evidence that the answer to the question is unknown, that the answer is not derivative to existing understanding, and that the answer to the question will matter to clearly identified stakeholders (Rai 2017).
- *Clear*: the question leaves no ambiguity as to what the research seeks to answer. The concepts that are investigated related to the phenomenon play a central role in formulating the question and are expressed in it.
- *Connected*: the question is linked to a puzzle, controversy, or issue in the problem domain.
- *Concise*: the question is a moderate-length interrogative sentence.

Of course, it is important to not focus on one but all four of the attributes, while recognizing that they can be in tension. Recasting a topic (e.g., security policies) as a research question (e.g., are security policies effective?) or reframing a viewpoint (e.g., bots are bad) as a research question (e.g., how are bots bad?) do not yield compelling, clear, or connected questions, even though they may yield concise ones.

Table 1. Writing the First Few Pages	
What to achieve in the introduction	
• Formulating the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make the case for “who should care” and “why should they care” about the aims of the study • An effective research question is <i>compelling, clear, connected, and concise</i>
• Stating the thesis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present a summary of the main argument with specificity and brevity
• Positioning in the literatures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Position work strategically in the relevant literatures to which the work seeks to contribute • Avoid diffuse or narrow positioning
• Rationalizing foreground versus background choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set the stage to focus on what is interesting by differentiating the foreground concepts and related literatures from those that should be kept in the background
• Avoiding the jingle and jangle fallacies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieve consistency in terminology by assessing for the <i>jingle fallacy</i> (if constructs with the same name refer to different phenomena) and the <i>jangle fallacy</i> (if constructs with different names refer to the same phenomenon)
• Explicating the role of context, if appropriate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bridge the novelty and importance of the context with the value proposition of the work
• Highlighting the distinctive aspects of “how” and “so what”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accentuate the distinctive aspects on how the research was done and why the study matters
Process of writing the introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iterate between thinking and writing, solicit feedback, and rewrite ruthlessly • Write the introduction in relation to other parts like an “hourglass” to manage the depth and breadth tension
Writing the title and abstract	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attract attention with the title by stating the core idea in an accessible and memorable manner • Entice browsing scholars with the abstract by communicating the aims of the study, the core idea, the highlights of the approach, and the key take-aways and why they matter

Stating the Thesis Succinctly

A thesis statement presents a general summary of the main argument of the article with specificity and brevity. If authors are unable to state their thesis in a sentence or two, they probably are unclear on the main argument. Including the thesis statement in the introduction provides the reader with a preview of the main point that the article will be making.

Positioning in the Literature

Authors need to effectively position their work in the relevant literature to formulate a gap in understanding, challenge an assumption of a body of work, surface contradictions, or surface an anomaly. This makes the positioning of the work in *relevant* scholarly conversations a strategic choice, which needs to be clearly and convincingly communicated in the introduction.

The decision on which literature to position the work is akin to a firm’s business strategy, which pertains to the firm’s product-market positioning or where the firm seeks to create value. In contrast, the quality of the research is akin to the firm’s competitive strategy, which pertains to how well the firm executes its business strategy relative to competition to create value.

As with a firm’s ineffective positioning in product-markets, the issues related to an article’s ineffective positioning in the literature to be avoided include:

- *Diffuse positioning*: unclear as to which scholarly conversations the work is seeking to connect with and contribute to. When an article overreaches and tries to connect with too many literature streams, it typically does not connect credibly with any of them.

- *Narrow positioning*: the article connects with a narrow sliver of the scholarly conversation but misses the broader, relevant discourse. Some articles that claim to be in “blue ocean” space are in blue ocean space from a narrow vantage point but not from the vantage point of the broader phenomenon where substantial knowledge may exist.

Rationalizing Foreground Versus Background Choices

Setting the stage for an interesting article involves differentiating early on the foreground concepts and related literature from the background ones. Too much detail, almost always, obfuscates what is interesting. When authors gush concepts into the introduction, the article starts off as a dense phone book, where much of the information is irrelevant to the reader or the main story of the article. In contrast, when authors are parsimonious in the concepts that are in the foreground and effectively differentiate them from concepts that are in the background, the article starts off with a carefully conceived stage for the unfolding of an interesting story.

Avoiding the Jingle and Jangle Fallacies

The discordant naming of constructs, within an article or in relation to the broader tradition of work, can constrain the accessibility of the article for a reader. This construct-terminology problem, replete in the social and behavioral sciences, is exacerbated by two fallacies: (1) the *jingle fallacy*, where two constructs with the same name refer to different phenomena (Thorndike 1904) and (2) the *jangle fallacy*, where different construct names are used to refer to the same phenomenon (Kelley 1927). In developing an effective introduction, authors can avoid committing or propagating these fallacies by scrutinizing the nomenclatures for constructs against their definitions not only in their article but also in the related literature.

Explicating the Role of Context, If Appropriate

Authors sometimes lament that while their work is in a novel and important context, editors and reviewers did not appreciate this novelty and missed seeing its importance for the research. Explicitly addressing early on the role of context for specific aspects of the research process can be useful in bridging the novelty of the context with the value proposition of the work. Does context play a role in the formulation of the research puzzle and the research questions and in developing novel theories and models? Does it play a role in the evaluation and refinement of theories, models and solutions?

Highlighting the Distinctive Aspects of “How” and “So What”

Readers' attention is likely to be captured by the distinctive aspects of how authors go about answering the research question and why the work matters. The distinguishing elements may pertain to theorization, research design, analysis, or utility of the theories, models, or solutions. Accentuating in the introduction the distinctive aspects of the research can be a strong complement to making the case for the importance of the research question in motivating the reader to read on.

The Process of Writing the Introduction

Making sense of how to stage and frame the key aspects of a study requires iterating between writing and thinking—as Weick (1979) aptly notes, “How can I know what I think until I see what I say?” (p. 5).

Developing an effective introduction also requires ruthless rewriting. This process can be aided by feedback from scholars at some distance from the work, cycling back to hone the introduction as the manuscript evolves, and engaging coauthors in back-and-forth incisive reworking.

The “hourglass” shape is a useful metaphor to understand the role of the introduction in relation to the other parts in managing the tension between breadth and depth of coverage in an article (Bem 1987). In the introduction, authors can start off by positioning the work and connecting it in the relevant scholarly conversations, formulating the puzzle and the research questions, and showcasing the distinctive aspects. In subsequent sections, authors can present an in-depth treatment of the substantive aspects (e.g., theory, research design, analysis, etc.) that are likely to resonate with a more specialized community. In closing, they can abstract the implications of the findings for scholarly conversations, for practice, and for future research.

Writing the Title and Abstract

The title and abstract are not only the first parts of an article—they are also the only parts that most people read (Fulmer 2012). They play an important role in catching the attention of a reader in a world with increasing competition from a variety of sources of information for the scarce attention of readers. Titles and abstracts are now routinely distributed as part of table of content notifications, retrieved in a list of search engine results, or shared by editors with reviewers who are invited to review an article. The title and abstract are likely to play an important first step in influencing whether or not a reviewer invited to review an article will accept the invitation or whether or not scholars will be motivated to look at the introduction or other parts of the article.

Although there isn't a script for a good title, effective titles strive to attract the attention of appropriate readers by stating the core idea or construct of the article in an accessible and memorable manner (Fulmer 2012; Huff 1999). They do not stray off path into tangential ideas and they stay away from the use of jargon. They can attract the reader's attention through brevity, where the core construct or idea is stated in a few, say three to five, words. Alternatively, they can attract the reader's attention through a punchy, memorable idiom (e.g., "Time flies when you are having fun") followed by a colon to contextualize the connection of idiom to the core construct or idea of the article (e.g., "Cognitive Absorption," which describes a state of flow).

As with the title, there isn't a script for an effective abstract other than brevity, which outlets impose with a maximum word count. Effective abstracts communicate in a few sentences the purpose of the study, the core idea, the highlights of the approach, and the key take-aways and why they matter.

Concluding Remarks

An effectively crafted title and abstract will entice browsing scholars to read the article. However, readers are likely to quickly tune out if their first impressions from the introduction are that the story lacks sufficient plot or is unclear or complicated. The introduction is where the authors can set the hook for the audience. Mark Twain lamented, "I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead." Investing the time to develop an effective introduction is likely to yield high payoff by succinctly and convincingly making the case for the research question and the value proposition of the work.

References

- Bem, D. J. 1987. "Writing the Empirical Journal Article," in *The Compleat Academic: A Practical Guide for the Beginning Social Scientist*, M. P. Zanna and J. M. Darley (eds.), New York: Random House, pp. 171-201.
- Fulmer, I. S. 2012. "Editor's Comments: The Craft of Writing Theory Articles—Variety and Similarity in AMR," *Academy of Management Review* (37:3), pp. 327-331.
- Grant, A. M., and Pollock, T. G. 2011. "From the Editors: Publishing in AMJ—Part 3: Setting the Hook," *The Academy of Management Journal* (54:5), pp. 873-879.
- Huff, A. S. 1999. *Writing for Scholarly Publications*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Kelley, T. L. 1927. *Interpretation of Educational Measurements*, Oxford, UK: World Book Company.
- Rai, A. 2017. "Editor's Comment: Avoiding Type III Errors: Formulating IS Research Problems that Matter," *MIS Quarterly* (41:2), pp. iii-vii.
- Thorndike, E. 1904. *An Introduction to the Theory of Mental and Social Measurements*, New York: Science Press.
- Weick, K. E. 1979. *The Social Psychology of Organizing* (2nd ed.), New York: Random House.