© Academy of Management Review
2018, Vol. 43, No. 3, 345–348.
https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2018.0112

EDITOR'S COMMENTS: POSITIONING A THEORY PAPER FOR PUBLICATION

There is continuing interest in how to write and publish theory papers in top management journals (Clark, Wright, & Ketchen, 2016). Some authors have focused on how the content of theory papers affects their publication (Corley & Gioia, 2011)—are the papers creative (Weick, 1989) and interesting (Davis, 1971), with well-defined constructs (Suddaby, 2010), clear boundary conditions (Busse, Kach, & Wagner, 2017), and provocative implications (Whetten, 1989)? Others have focused on how theories are presented in a paper—is the paper written clearly (Ragins, 2012), is its macrostructure logical (Fulmer, 2012), and is its style consistent with a particular journal (Fulmer, 2012)? Finally, yet other authors (Smith & Hitt, 2005) have focused on the processes that theorists use to develop influential theories. Taken as a whole, this work—whether focused on content, presentation, or process—has generated important insights into writing and publishing theory papers in top management journals.

However, many of these insights remain somewhat abstract and difficult to implement. It is clear that a theory must be creative and interesting, but it is less clear how to develop such a theory. A theory must also be presented in a clear and understandable way, but so often what is clear and understandable to an author may turn out to be opaque and incomprehensible to at least some readers. And while some commonalities in the process of developing influential theories have been identified (Hitt & Smith, 2005), there are almost as many ways to develop influential theories as there are influential theories themselves—results that provide prospective theorists little guidance in identifying processes likely to work for them. Thus, while informative about theory writing in principle, much of this prior work remains difficult to apply when writing actual papers.

The purpose of this essay is to present one approach to writing one part of a theory paper—the introduction—that is somewhat less abstract and, thus, more applicable than prior work. This approach is not an algorithm for writing an introduction; its application still takes creativity, a commitment to clarity, and enormous work. Nevertheless, its application can help authors accomplish one of the most important tasks in writing a theory paper: positioning a paper in a way that makes its contribution to theory clear to readers (Huff, 1999).

A SIMPLE FRAMEWORK TO POSITION PAPERS FOR PUBLICATION

This approach to positioning a paper is presented as a simple framework that divides the introduction into several parts. I applied this framework in writing the introduction to this essay, so readers can use this example to see how to implement it.

First Sentence: Introducing the Paper to the Reader

Whether a paper is designed to significantly extend a received theory or to develop a new theory (Barney, 2018), the theory developed in it is part of an ongoing conversation in the literature (Huff, 1999). Before attempting to make a contribution to that conversation, an author must make it clear to the reader what conversation their paper proposes to join; thus, the first sentence of the paper must make this clear to the reader. In the case of this essay, the conversation focuses on "how to write and publish theory papers in top management journals."

Typically, theory papers start by specifying the theoretical conversation they are joining. This is true for many empirical papers as well. However, it can be appropriate to start an empirical paper with a brief description of the phenomenon that is being studied. This is particularly the case for inductive empirical papers. But theory papers are about contributing to theory. They generally

This editorial is based on a presentation given to many audiences, in many venues, around the world. Most recently, it was presented to the AMR Paper Development Workshop held on February 10, 2018, at the Haas School of Business, University of California at Berkley.

frame the discussion in the introduction around theory and theoretical issues. Even if a theory paper initially emphasizes a phenomenon, the language of the introduction quickly changes to focus on the theory or theories that try to explain this phenomenon, rather than on the phenomenon per se.

The Rest of the First Paragraph

After making it clear what conversation their paper proposes to join, the author must convince the reader—especially a reader with expertise in this conversation— that they have been paying attention to this conversation's main findings and conclusions. This does not require a literature review. Rather, it requires two or three sentences that summarize a conversation's main research traditions, along with the most important results associated with those traditions.

Armed with a computer and a reasonable bibliographic database, almost anyone can generate a long list of papers that address a particular research topic. This is different from knowing the literature well enough to distill its essential features into two or three sentences in the first paragraph of the introduction. This distillation will typically be enough to make it clear what at least one unresolved theoretical issue in the literature is, why this issue is important, and how this paper is going to resolve it—elements of the introduction discussed below.

In the case of this essay, prior work on "how to write and publish theory papers in top management journals" has focused on the impact of the content of the theory in these papers, the presentation of these ideas in a paper, or the process by which theories are developed. All these streams in work on publishing theory papers have generated important insights.

First Word, Second Paragraph

The purpose of the second paragraph in the introduction is to identify an unresolved theoretical issue in the received literature and then to demonstrate why this unresolved issue is important. This purpose is signaled by the first word in the second paragraph. Often, the word "However" is sufficient.

The Rest of the Second Paragraph

While not denying the importance of the work cited in the first paragraph, the second paragraph must establish a legitimate reason for writing a new theory paper. Usually, that reason is to resolve a theoretical issue that has not been resolved in the received literature. Thus, the rest of the second paragraph must first identify this issue and then explain why it is important.

There are a variety of reasons why addressing a previously unresolved theoretical issue may be important. For example, sometimes important empirical implications of a theory may have not yet been articulated. Other times the author may not have fully identified either the implications of a theory's boundary conditions or how relaxing some of its underlying assumptions may fundamentally change the implications of a theory. Also, the implications of one theory for another theory (or theories) may have not yet been discussed in the literature. All these, and many others, are reasons why a particular unresolved theoretical issue needs to be resolved (Davis, 1971).

One unacceptable reason why a theoretical issue is important is simply that it has not been addressed previously. There are literally thousands of issues associated with a particular theory that have not been addressed previously. This second paragraph must explain why, from among all these issues, a particular unresolved theoretical issue is especially important.

In this essay the theoretical issue identified in the second paragraph is that prior work on how to write and publish theory papers in top management journals has often been abstract and difficult to apply.

First Sentence, Third Paragraph

The first sentence of the third paragraph starts with "The purpose of this paper is . . ." This is where the author presents the central research question their paper seeks to answer. This is done without subtlety, using a simple, short, declarative sentence that tells the reader what question the paper is going to answer. Of course, the answer to this question—to be developed in the paper—must resolve the theoretical issue identified in the second paragraph.

Some authors may find it difficult to summarize their research question in a single, simple, declarative sentence. Usually, this is because these authors do not fully understand what their research question is. Other authors may find it difficult to identify just one research question in their paper.[1] This is usually because they are not clear about the specific theoretical issue they are trying to resolve. In general, papers that are about two or more research questions are usually about no research questions.[2] Finally, some authors believe that they cannot introduce a research question until after an exhaustive literature review.[3] This is usually because these authors are not sufficiently familiar with a body of literature to identify its central elements in two or three sentences in the first paragraph.

The Rest of the Third Paragraph

The rest of the third paragraph provides a preview of how the paper answers its research question and some of the critical implications of this answer. It is important that this preview not attempt to summarize, in detail, the paper's entire theoretical argument. If this argument can be summarized in a single paragraph, it probably is not much of an argument.

Rather, the preview in the third paragraph begins by simply stating the answer to the paper's research question—for example, "The purpose of this paper is to examine the implications of X for Y. It concludes that X has an important impact on Y." The rest of the third paragraph highlights a small number of important implications of the answer to this research question. These implications further help clarify the importance of a paper's theoretical argument.

In its third paragraph, this essay promises a less abstract and more applicable approach to writing one section of theory papers—the introduction—and warns that this approach is not an "algorithm" but that it can nevertheless be applied to help establish how a paper makes a contribution to the received literature. The ability to be clear about how a paper makes such a contribution is widely seen as the most important determinant of whether a paper is published in a top management journal (Rynes, 2002).

At this point in the introduction, many authors feel compelled to use several paragraphs to explain their paper's numerous contributions. In general, if the introduction is written correctly, the central contribution of the paper—that it resolves an important theoretical issue—will be obvious. Listing several other contributions—to other research questions, to practice, for teaching—simply draws attention away from a paper's central contribution.

Of course, a paper may have other implications. It is acceptable to mention—typically in a series of short sentences—these other implications in the third paragraph of the introduction. However, these implications will generally be explored in more detail not in a paper's introduction but in the paper's discussion section.

The Length of an Introduction

In well-written papers the full introduction is approximately 1.5 manuscript pages.[4] This length reflects both style and practical considerations.

From the perspective of style, shorter is almost always better than longer. Constraining oneself to 1.5 manuscript pages will almost always generate clearer and more precise writing than writing introductions that go on for two or three manuscript pages. Indeed, in writing papers, authors should generally write a first draft, cut it by 20 percent, and then cut it by 20 percent again. The results of this draconian editing are almost always positive.[5]

Practically speaking, authors only have a page or a page and a half to convince readers that their paper is worth the time and effort to read in detail. Readers have little patience with papers that force them to wade through page after page of prose, only to find the paper's research question on page seven—if at all. In these settings it would not be surprising for readers to ask themselves,

[1] That a paper should have only one main research question does not mean that a paper can have only one research proposition. It does mean that the multiple propositions in a paper must all speak to multiple dimensions of a single research question. These observations do not imply that a paper must have formal propositions to be published in *AMR*. Also, a single research question may have multiple parts that must be addressed if the implications of answering that question are to be fully resolved.

[2] Sometimes it is possible to introduce a second or even third research question in the discussion section of the paper. However, typically, the main purpose of including these research questions in the discussion is to call for additional research.

[3] "Exhaustive" can also be read as "exhausting."

[4] There should be no cheating—no microfonts and no quarter-inch margins.

[5] I have applied this standard to my own writing, including to this essay.

"Why am I doing all the work to try to understand what this paper is about? Wasn't it the author's responsibility to explain this paper to me?"

DISCUSSION

This essay presents a simple framework for writing introductions to theory papers that helps establish how these papers contribute to the received literature. Obviously, this is not the only way to write an introduction. However, the discipline that underlies this particular framework is probably common across other ways of writing introductions to theory papers.

Also, writing a good introduction—using this or some other approach—does not guarantee that a paper will make an important theoretical contribution. The rest of the paper has to deliver on the promise of the introduction by developing a creative and interesting theory with well-defined constructs, boundary conditions, and provocative implications. Moreover, the paper must be written clearly, with a logical macrostructure and consistent with a journal's style. However, while writing a good introduction does not guarantee that a theory paper will get published, writing a bad introduction—one that does not make a paper's contribution to theory clear—virtually guarantees that it will not get published.

One final observation: the application, or not, of the framework described in this essay in a particular paper does not constitute, by itself, a reason to either accept or reject a paper at *AMR*. *AMR*'s policy is to publish papers that either significantly contribute to ongoing theory conversations or create new theory conversations (Barney, 2018). The framework presented in this essay is only one of several ways that authors can make such contributions clear and obvious to reviewers and readers. Authors are free to adapt this framework or to choose an entirely different way to make a paper's contribution to theory clear to readers and reviewers. The point is not to blindly implement the framework—it is, after all not an algorithm for writing introductions—but, rather, to find a way to make a paper's contribution to theory clear.

REFERENCES

Barney, J. B. 2018. Editor's comments: Theory contributions and the *AMR* review process. ***Academy of Management Review,*** 43: 1–4.

Busse, C., Kach, A., & Wagner, S. 2017. Boundary conditions: What are they, how to explore them, why we need them, and when to consider them. ***Organizational Research Methods,*** 20: 574–609.

Clark, T., Wright, M., & Ketchen, D. (Eds.). 2016. ***How to get published in the best management journals.*** Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.

Corley, K., & Gioia, D. 2011. Building a theory about theory building: What constitutes a theoretical contribution? ***Academy of Management Review,*** 36: 12–32.

Davis, M. 1971. That's interesting! Towards a phenomenology of sociology and a sociology of phenomenology. ***Philosophy and Social Science,*** 1: 309–344.

Fulmer, I. S. 2012. Editor's comments: The craft of writing theory articles—Variety and similarity in *AMR*. ***Academy of Management Review,*** 37: 327–331.

Hitt, M., & Smith, K. 2005. Introduction: The process of developing management theory. In K. Smith & M. Hitt (Eds.), ***Great minds in management:*** 1–8. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Huff, A. 1999. ***Writing for scholarly publication.*** Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Ragins, R. 2012. Editor's comments: Reflections on the craft of clear writing. ***Academy of Management Review,*** 37: 493–501.

Rynes, S. 2002. From the editors: Some reflections on contribution. ***Academy of Management Journal***, 45: 311–313.

Smith, K., & Hitt, M. (Eds.). 2005. ***Great minds in management.*** Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Suddaby, R. 2010. Editor's comments: Construct clarity in theories of management and organization. ***Academy of Management Review,*** 35: 346–358.

Weick, K. 1989. Theory construction as disciplined imagination. ***Academy of Management Review,*** 14: 516–531.

Whetten, D. 1989. What constitutes a theoretical contribution? ***Academy of Management Review,*** 14: 490–495.

Jay Barney
Editor