Chapter 1. What makes great academic writing?

By Akanksha Lohmore, Edi Oliviera, Duke Debrah Afrane and Thi Ngoc Dao

This chapter takes a more general look at the researcher and their approach to academic writing. It recognises that every researcher has a voice and the potential that needs to be unlocked to write interesting work. The chapter identifies the ingredients needed for excellent writing and provides practical steps that new researchers can follow.

1.1 Unlocking your researcher potential (Akanksha Lohmore)

This article is going to focus on academic writing in the business domain. Firstly, I will focus on what I understand by academic writing. In the positivist paradigm, research is considered as object that is ‘out there’, as a basket full of knowledge to be carefully fished out of ‘non-knowledge’ content. This process involves designing a theoretical framework, research questions, related hypothesis, methodology to address these hypotheses, followed by academic writing to disseminate the knowledge and sharing it to the community for review. Interestingly, academic writing in general causes a kind of uneasiness for authors, readers and researchers alike. The academic community finds it to be taxing and perhaps the part they feel disconnected with the most. Suchan (2004) suggests that the following reasons could be pushing authors away from academic writing. Dysfunctional personal stories or narratives about being a “researcher” or “social scientist” that generate limiting, unhealthy metaphors about writing; difficulty connecting writing, learning, and teaching that is, writing is seen as an end in itself rather than integral to teaching and learning; and the lack of outlets to publish different, non-traditional types of writing. They suggest a few tips that ‘unlock’ a researcher’s potential to write and to write effectively. To think of academic writing as tool of communication to develop the academic discourse in one’s discipline is one of their suggestions. One can also weave this academic narratives in one’s teaching practice, not only enriching the teaching and its content but also providing a purpose more organic than a publication. An academic writer’s job is to create informed stories based in scientific process of research and responsibly disseminate it in the community.

That brings me to my last next section of the paper, the social construction of the academic voice and finding relevance for the management practice. Bedeian (2004) draws attention of the reader towards the power dynamics among the triad of peer review process. The interests of authors of the knowledge and that of editors and reviewers is at a cross. The negotiations that ensue inevitably involve tension as authors try to show that they "deserve credit for something new," while editors and referees try to access the acceptability of the authors' claims (Myers, 1990, 67-68). The author present recommendations that can address this power dynamic and enhance the scientific integrity that might be under threat due to this power imbalance.

To conclude, I find it appropriate to bring in the work of Cheung and colleagues (2018). Their work discusses the importance of developing the authorial identity in students. The model of authorial identity involves ‘authorial confidence’, ‘valuing writing’, and ‘identification with author’ as important elements to develop when grooming students to be academic authors (Cheung, Stupple, and Elander 2015). ‘Ownership and attachment’, ‘authorial thinking’, and ‘authorial goals’ are suggested as useful targets for pedagogic interventions. Future interventions to improve students’ authorial identity might therefore aim to improve their sense of ownership of written work, guide them toward authorial ways of thinking, and help them adopt more authorial writing goals.

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1.2 Writing interesting academic articles in the business domain (Edi Oliviera)

I am sure all of us in the academic community had the experience to read a paper that gave us so much food for thought leaving us with the feeling of wanting more. What does make some papers different from others that so strongly sparks our immediate interest? Davis (1971) defines research as interesting when it challenges some parts of well-established truths, striking a delicate balance: if challenging all of it, it might be considered absurd; if it challenges none, it might be irrelevant. How is, then, the concept of interestingness defined within the academic business domain?

A research conducted by Bartunek et al. (2006) asked editorial board members of the Academy of Management Journal "what makes research interesting" (p.9). Findings suggested that, additionally to challenging current assumptions (Davis, 1971), other aspects of interestingness are: quality, good writing, newness, practical implications, and impact. Frank and Landström (2016) defined interesting research according to its practical application within society. It is about getting the balance between rigour and relevance right while bringing a novel contribution to science. Following the same logic, Wiklund et al. (2019) argued that business research is quite unintelligible for practitioners, policymakers, and lay audiences. Researchers are more focused on what they are interested about, rather than what other stakeholders outside the academic community care about. Therefore, research has very little relevance and impact in the real world. Finally, Barney (2020) proposed a conceptualization of interestingness based on the work of Kuhn (1962), who differentiated between normal and revolutionary science. The former applies existing theories to new phenomena, in novel ways, or to develop new research questions. The latter challenges existing theories offering an alternative based on different assumptions. While both are important to knowledge building and development, revolutionary science is relatively rare. That also means that within normal science, most knowledge is incrementally built with the objective to fill gaps within existing theory. However, the author warns that not all gaps deserve to be filled. Hence, interesting research is about "filling an important gap" (p.50), that inspire insightful debate and dialogue.

The next question I was interested about was whether a guideline on how to write interesting research is possible. Based on the above definitions, and in a creative dialogue (Montuori, 2005) with other authors, I compiled the following list. While not exhaustive, I hope it can help readers to find interestingness in their own research.

Quality: articles, either quantitative, qualitative or mixed methodology, that follows the rigour of academic research (Bartunek et al., 2006).

Clear writing: research which express ideas with "clarity, directness, and precision" (Ragins, 2012, p.494).

Novelty: research that challenges current assumptions in a positive dialogue with the scholarly community (Davis, 1971; Gartner, 2013), filling up an important research gap (Barney, 2020).

Criticality: research that challenges taken-for-granted assumptions (Fayolle et al., 2016); and embraces disciplinary concepts from different fields, opening up possibilities for new explorations and discoveries through the lens of "the other" (Gartner, 2013).

Relevance: action and community-oriented research, learning from practitioners' tacit knowledge (Frank & Landström, 2016; Wiklund et al., 2019).

Impact: research towards political and social change; dissemination within diverse audiences (Wiklund et al., 2019).

If all the previous arguments have not convinced the reader of the importance of writing interesting articles, LaPlaca et al. (2018) offered a practical reason: they are more likely to get published and get a higher number of citations. If nothing else, as proposed by Bartunek et al. (2006) interesting research produces positive affect. Consequently, we are more likely to learn more from them.

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1.3 Ingredients in the recipe of academic writing in business journals (Duke Debrah Afrane)

Writing in academic journals has become a necessity that enables career progression for researchers within the business profession (Bartunek, Rynes, & Ireland, 2006). However, such writing exercise has been identified as very complicated and challenging for many researchers (Clark, Floyd, & Wright, 2006). This complication results from the processes that a manuscript (the academic writings of the researcher) has to go through before it is accepted as a publishable document (Bakker, Crane, Henriques, & Husted, 2019; Grant & Pollock, 2011). Key among these processes is the review section, where the manuscript is sent to potential reviewers (individuals who have expertise in the area of study), for it to be examined. Ragins (2012) suggested that in examining the manuscripts, the reviewers' job is to ensure that ideas in the manuscripts make sense to a potential audience. According to Bartunek et al. (2006) the most effective way an author can make sense to reviewers is to ensure that the research idea is an interesting one. Counter intuitiveness, quality and good writing have been identified as the main ingredients or settings that make a research idea interesting (Bartunek et al., 2006).

As a result, the author must put him/herself in the shoes of these reviewers and ensure that their manuscript contains the ingredients that make a research idea interesting (Grant & Pollock, 2011; Johanson, 2007). An example of an interesting research idea is the one that challenges already existing assumptions of other authors. Clark et al. (2006) supported this counterintuitive nature of a research idea when they stated that, simply replicating an existing idea in a different context does not convey any form of contribution to literature (adding to existing knowledge). That is, committed employees in an organization have been shown to result in several positive outcomes (Meyer, 2018). Confirming such knowledge in another context does not contribute to the literature; rather, identifying/examining environmental factors than can enhance or thwart these benefits of commitment will be more interesting to a reviewer. Such an idea has to be clearly developed at the outset of the manuscript (Bakker et al., 2019) as the manuscript becomes boring to read when a reviewer has to navigate through several pages to get the idea behind a manuscript (Grant & Pollock, 2011; Johanson, 2007; Ragins, 2012). See Figure below for summary of ingredients.

Figure 1: Main Academic Writing Ingredients/Settings

Having stated this idea, the next is to provide a roadmap on how the idea will be addressed within the manuscript (Johanson, 2007). Such roadmap (Methods of addressing the problem) must be rigorous and effective enough to enable the research idea to be realized. In so doing, Clark et al. (2006) identified manuscripts that do not adopt rigorous designs in addressing a research idea as likely to be rejected by reviewers. This denotes quality of the research (Bartunek et al., 2006). Underlying these ingredients is how well the entire manuscripts has been written (Ragins, 2012) devoid of typographical errors (Clark et al., 2006). Ragins (2012) identified writing as a craft and requires time and effort for a successful accomplishment (Grant & Pollock, 2011). Due to this, an author must endeavour to allow enough time to spend in the preparation of their manuscripts so as to succeed in the craft of writing; Grant & Pollock (2011) suggested that rewriting the manuscript will not be a waste of time if the goal of writing is to be achieved. In essence, the manuscript is used to take a reviewer (audience) on a journey through the author's idea and clear writing will streamline the journeying process.

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1.4 Academic writing as a sequence of practical steps (Thi Ngoc Dao)

In recent years, researchers have shown an increased interest in writing for publication in academic journals (Heyman & Cronin, 2005; Patriotta, 2017). Patriotta (2017, p. 749) defines the academic writing for publication as "an act of communication, based on an established set of conventions, involving a plurality of actors (authors, editors, reviewers, and other scholars), and aimed at conveying a core message (contribution) to an audience of scholars and practitioners".
In order to publish in academic journal, especially in business domain, previous research has established a process or a model of effective writing. Unruh (2007) points out that the writing process should be organized as a series of sequential steps. To be more precise, the writing process starts with choosing a topic, considering whether co-authors are needed, then choosing the right journal. After having a target journal, the next steps are paying attention to guidelines for authors, and planning for a writing strategy which includes the steps of setting time to write, writing and rewriting, and determining when the paper is ready to submit. When receiving the reviewers' feedback, the writers should take a positive stand towards their comments, or deal with rejection of a paper by using the negative feedback to revise and resubmit to another journal. Along the same lines, Martín (2014) suggests that the authors firstly should choose the proper journal since the different journal will have the different geographical, the journal scope and the different target readers. Then, from the chosen journal, they could define the content to publish and the way they publish their research. A broadly similar point has also recently been made by Bach (2015), who proposes the framework, so-called the 4Cs model of scientific writing and publication, to facilitate the effective process of writing for publicaiton. The 4Cs framework includes four steps: (1) choosing a relevant topic (Competence); (2) targeting the right journal (Course); (3) planning of the composition of the paper (Composition); and (4) applying theory and methodology to write the paper (Content).

In summary, it has been shown from this review that writing in academic journals in general, or in the business domain in specific is the sequential process, including the four mains steps, starting with choosing a topic, then targeting a journal, after that planning a writing strategy, and finally dealing with reviewers' feedback.

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