

How to Write for ASQ (and Other Top Management Journals)

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Dan was Associate Editor at Administrative Science Quarterly from 1995-2007 (and is still finishing up on revisions). During that time, he handled more than 1000 manuscripts and read over 3000 reviews.

Some Sites on Writing

- Darrell Bem

http://comp9.psych.cornell.edu/dbem/writing_article.html

- Barry Wellman

<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~wellman/publications/writing/writing.pdf>

- Linda Johanson ASQ

What Article Should I Write?

1. The article I planned to write when I designed the study?
 2. The article that makes the most sense now that I have seen the results?
- Often not the same
 - Correct answer is 2.

Bem: “the best journal articles are informed by the actual empirical findings from the opening sentence”

Scientific integrity does not require you to lead the readers through all your blind paths that led nowhere. You are not writing a personal journey of discovery.

Beat the data until they confess!

- Examine data from every angle.
- Fish until you find something interesting.
- Only one strategy for discovery – explore the data.

ASQ asks, “What’s interesting?”

Frame your paper around the interesting idea/results.

- Disconfirm widely held assumptions.
- Counter-intuitive findings.
- Competing hypotheses – based on theory.

ASQ asks, “Where’s the theory?”

- Theoretical contribution. #1 reason for rejection at ASQ.
- What it is not: a figure with boxes and arrows; a list of variables; a set of hypotheses; description of empirical findings from other studies.
- Theory motivates use of these things; determines research question, hypotheses, variables, level of analysis.
- Tells why the study was done the way it was.
- Ask yourself, “Why?”

How Should I Write?

- This is prose – not poetry!
- Accuracy and clarity (fuzzy writing shows fuzzy thinking).
- So your grandmother can understand it.
- Simple and direct.

How Should I Write?

- Bem: “It is not a novel with subplots, flashbacks, and literary allusions, but a short story with a simple linear narrative line.”

How Should I Write?

If the reviewers don't understand it, they conclude it is wrong!

When it comes to clarity, the reader is always right.

How Should I Write?

“Hourglass” style.

Begin with broad general statements, narrow to the more specific aspects of the study, broaden out again to more general at the end.

How Should I Write (some specifics)?

- Avoid jargon and field-specific shorthand. Is there a more universal way to say it?
- Avoid footnotes
- Avoid excessive quotations
- Figures and tables should be self-explanatory – avoid acronyms.
- Use examples, especially when developing complex conceptual arguments.

Introduction: The Research Question

- What is the one research question? It should be obvious early in the paper.
- Why is it important to ask this question?
- Question may be theory driven.
- Don't digress from research question.
- Ask yourself, "Does this information inform my research question? If not, dump it."

Introduction: The Research Question

- What do we know about this question from previous research?
- Are there inconsistent findings and what would account for them?
- What is missing from our understanding and why is it important? A lack of research is not a sufficient justification for doing research.

Introduction

- Tell the reader where you are going. This is not a mystery novel!
- This does not mean the often unnecessary paragraph that says you're going to present theory, derive hypotheses, provide methods and results, and then discussion. This is obvious.

Introduction

- Don't be overly critical of past research – “build” on previous work.
- Those you criticize are likely to be reviewers.
- Criticism is catching. Reviewers are more critical when authors are critical.

Developing Hypotheses

- Reviewers: “Hypotheses need further development.”
- Must follow logically from theory used to justify them. Typically theory will precede hypothesis.
- Include previous findings, but they are not sufficient justification for hypotheses.
- Consider your results, but don’t let results dictate hypotheses.
- Avoid obvious hypotheses. Is there any reason to believe this hypothesis might not be confirmed?

Methods

- Provide enough detail so that study can be replicated.
- Reviewers often ask for more information about sample.
- Check journal format for typical headings. Describe how you did study in a logical (often sequential) manner.
- Provide easily recognized and remembered labels (don't use abbreviations or acronyms).
- Include examples of actual measurement items. Referencing a previous study is not sufficient. Avoid appendix if possible.
- Give your reader a feel for what it's like to be a participant in the study.

Results

- Provide the results in a logical fashion – usually following the order of the hypotheses.
- All results presented in tables need not be repeated in text. Highlight important results. Note confirmation (or not) of hypotheses.
- Do not interpret or discuss implications of results – this is for the Discussion section.
- No need to repeat theoretical reasons for hypotheses.

Discussion

- A brief overview of findings is useful, but not a repeat of Results section or theory from Introduction.
- Interpret results taking into account alternative explanations. Be sure to include discussion of why a hypothesis was not confirmed.
- Include all limitations. This does not weaken your study, but adds to your credibility as a researcher.
- Future directions for research often derive from limitations.
- Some journals will ask for “Implications for Managers.” What are the practical implications suggested by your results?
- Be careful not to “go beyond” your data and results. OK to “speculate” or “suggest.”

Conclusion

- Bring the reader back to the research question – concluding with a larger and richer view of the problem.
- Leave the reader with food for thought.
- Provide closure – go back to introduction to wrap things up.

Now that I have written it...

- Edit, Edit, Edit! Sloppy writing signals sloppy research to reviewers. The best writers labor over each sentence.
- Get critical review from colleagues before submitting. Most people are polite. Ask them to suggest what a critical reviewer might find wrong.
- Ask colleagues to suggest sections that are not clear. The reader is always right when it comes to clarity.

Pet Peeves

- “That is,…” Delete. If you need to restate the sentence, it is probably not as clear as it should be.
- An “interesting” study or finding. Delete. Avoid “opinion” words. What you think is “interesting” or “noteworthy” or “surprising” may not be what the reviewers think. This includes stating the “contributions.” The contributions should be apparent. Labeling them (numbering them) often irritates the reviewers. This is a scientific study, not the place to express your opinions.
- “In fact,” Delete.
- Missing references.
- Typos – sloppy editing signals sloppy research.

Know Your (Journal) Audience

- Most frequent reason for ‘return unreviewed’
- Reviewers often say, “This is more suited for another journal.”
- Check references for “where to send?”
If you don’t reference the journal, don’t send it there.
- Note journal “style.”

Now that I got a revision...

- Congratulations! Your chances for publication just went way up. 90% of first submission get rejected. Upwards of 50% of revisions get accepted. One revision policy at ASQ.
- Inform the editor! The editor handles a variety of topics – editor is not an expert on all of them!
- Acknowledge the reviewers – you don't have to agree, but never, never ignore comments.
- Don't let the reviewers sidetrack you. Remember the research question and don't go off on tangents. “A camel is a horse designed by a committee.”
- Don't write a new paper. Any new material is subject to new criticism. Remember, you got a revision because the reviewers liked the original.

Top Ten Reasons for Rejection at ASQ (would you settle for 5?)

1. Overall theoretical contribution.
2. Alternative explanations for findings.
3. Measures don't match concepts.
4. Incremental empirical contribution.
5. Insufficient theoretical justification for hypotheses

What Reviewer Like at ASQ

1. Clear, easy to read writing.
2. 2 studies better than 1. Second study builds on first. Combine lab and field.
3. Longitudinal research.
4. Interesting research.
5. Theory!

What Irritates Reviewers

(not fatal flaws, but puts them in a bad mood)

1. Straw-man arguments.
2. Overstating “contributions.”
3. Opinion words.
4. Claiming a lack of research in an area.
5. Promising too much in the intro.
6. Acronyms or abbreviations for variables in text or tables, or tables and text don’t match.
7. Not including “limitations.”
8. Missing references.
9. Poor writing (repeating things).
10. Not including measurement items.

Conclusion

- Bring the reader back to the research question – How to write for ASQ and other top management journals.
- Leave the reader with food for thought. What is the research question? What is the theoretical contribution? What's interesting?
- Provide closure – go back to introduction to wrap things up. Mine the data. Look for what's interesting. Be sure your research question is clear and theoretically sound. Know your audience.

Conclusion

See you in ASQ!