

# How Reviewers Really Judge Manuscripts

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## ABSTRACT

This editorial discusses what reviewers are looking for when they make comments and suggestions on the manuscripts they receive for review. Contributors responded to an open invitation to reflect on the review process: what do they look for in each part of a manuscript (from introduction to conclusions), what are the mistakes that authors sometimes make, and what advice do they have to authors preparing their manuscripts for submission. Contributors also provided several overall comments on writing style, on making a good first impression, and on the need to address reviewer comments thoroughly in a revision. The editorial complements earlier editorials about writing and revising manuscripts, as it presents the perspectives of several experienced and respected reviewers, and provides insights on specifically what satisfies or frustrates them when reviewing manuscripts.

**Keywords:** Academic writing; review process; revising manuscripts; reviewers.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In two previous editorials (LaPlaca, Lindgreen, & Vanhamme 2018a; LaPlaca, Lindgreen, Vanhamme, & Di Benedetto 2018b), we provided comments and guidance to young authors on writing and revising academic journals. The first of these editorials was on preparing a solid manuscript for submission to a good journal, and it presented our suggestions on how to construct each part of the manuscript (title, abstract, introduction, literature review, and so on), as well as some insights on what to avoid. The second editorial offered guidance on the revision process: how to

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respond to the reviewers, what to include in the reply document, what do to in the case of a rejection, and what to do if the author needs clarification. Together, these editorials are meant to help authors, particularly researchers in the early stages of their careers, to avoid rookie mistakes in writing and revising, prevent desk rejection, and ultimately satisfy the editor and reviewers and get published.

We wanted to go further in depth, and to learn more about what reviewers really are looking for when reviewing a manuscript, from the reviewer's perspective. Accordingly, we asked several of our colleagues who are experienced reviewers to contribute some thoughts and insights on this topic and, specifically, asked for three to five pieces of advice for young scholars on this topic. We requested our contributors to think beyond the familiar such as "the introduction should position the manuscript clearly," and to provide insights gained from experience that would substantially improve the manuscript from the reviewer's viewpoint. Our contributors were encouraged to submit a few comments on what they look for in the abstract, introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusions sections, and what might encourage them to read forward with interest. They could also write about which parts they read first and why, or what are fatal errors that young authors need to be aware of. Although a few lines for each piece of advice would be sufficient, we asked the contributors to share a short story or two to illustrate their points.

Before presenting our contributors' advice on the specific parts of a manuscript, a good place to start is with some general comments on the role of the reviewer. Gerrit van Bruggen offers a reminder that, while we need to be aware of satisfying reviewers and editors, the author's target is the readership. If the contribution is useful for the reader, there is a much better chance the reviewers will be supportive:

This is an interesting question, and it seems that there is an increasing interest in it, as well as in how to deal with reviewers in general, given the number of workshops, conference sessions, and courses in Ph.D. programs. Mostly, these activities are targeted at Ph.D. students and junior faculty. Even though I recognize the relevance of the topic, I also feel somewhat uncomfortable with the (kind of) emphasis put on the role and value of reviewers. To me, it seems that we should not overvalue the role of strategizing during the review process. In some sense, this is just a tactical game, which at the best is just a minor part of a process. Authors should write for readers and, in some sense, reviewers are just gatekeepers. Their role is to secure that the research that is being presented meets methodological quality criteria and is sufficiently interesting to get published. So, what makes a manuscript relevant and useful for the reader will also help to get reviewers' support. Therefore, the question becomes, what makes a good readers' manuscript? (van Bruggen)

Audhesh Paswan would agree with this statement, reminding us of the gatekeeper role of the reviewer, allowing through only those manuscripts that make substantive contributions to the journal's research area:

As academic researchers, our role is to create new knowledge that enhances our knowledge in a particular field and helps various stakeholders. As a reviewer, I see our primary role as someone who ensures that the knowledge in the manuscript to be published in the journal adds to the body of knowledge in the focal field, and that knowledge helps focal stakeholders behave differently, if not better. (Paswan)

## **2. THE MANUSCRIPT'S INTRODUCTION**

Most of the contributors to this editorial agreed that the introduction needs to do two things: provide a positioning or “hook,” which encourages the reader (and reviewer) to keep on reading, and to clearly state the theoretical and managerial contributions. As noted in LaPlaca et al. (2018b), attention to these issues should help prevent the dreaded “so what” comments from the reviewers.

### **2.1. The Hook/Positioning**

Stephan Henneberg, Audhesh Paswan, and Gerrit van Bruggen all noted the need to intrigue the reader, and to provide evidence that what he/she is going to read is indeed important, and time well spent:

Set the hook quickly: I normally start reading the introduction and then immediately go to the nomological model (for empirical manuscripts, both qualitative and quantitative) or to a conceptual model/figure (for conceptual manuscripts). After reading this, I want to be excited: I need to have understood what the manuscript is all about, and I want to be intrigued (either because the topic is fascinating, or because I want to know the detailed argument or empirical evidence). Thus, in the introduction I want to know in the first paragraph what the manuscript is doing, and in the second paragraph why this is important. At this point, the manuscript (and for quantitative manuscripts, the model) must have passed the “I could have told you that before I had to read this manuscript” test. In other words, if there is something ‘non-obvious’ in the manuscript, this must be clearly visible/signposted early on. (Henneberg)

What is the story? Why is this phenomenon, topic, or the story important? How will it affect our lives, and make focal stakeholders behave differently? What is the magnitude of the impact or change? This, to me, is the most important thing in a manuscript. Also, the purpose or the objective of the manuscript should be presented early and clearly enough, with proper lead in using data from industry and/or the context. I call this the ‘slice of life’ approach to identifying research question. Although I understand that some research questions emerge out of ‘slice of literature’ approach where the authors try to fill a gap in the literature, even these, in my view, should be anchored in ‘life.’ (Paswan)

To me, the most important thing by far is that a manuscript deals with an issue that is highly interesting and relevant to the targeted readership. This relevance should be so obvious that the manuscript does not need a lot of words or selling to make this clear. Intuitively, readers should immediately feel curiosity and want to start or continue reading. I personally feel that the criterion, “will my students (non-Ph.D.) enjoy reading this manuscript?” is a really good one. If I can include the manuscript in my course readings (for undergraduate to executive courses), that is a big plus. In industrial marketing, this means that every industrial marketer should immediately understand

why the documented research is important and relevant. An industrial marketer should be eager to read the manuscript. (van Bruggen)

Kristian Möller reminds us that getting the positioning right is harder than it looks, and why it is important to get it right:

I probably regard the ‘positioning part’ trickier and give it more emphasis than many. Positioning is significant from several aspects. The positioning indicates the theoretical stream the author seeks to contribute. Claiming novelty/contribution is not possible without arguing relevant knowledge gaps, omissions, or need for a new perspective regarding the existing knowledge base. So positioning is instrumental in arguing for the relevance of the entire manuscript, that is, why the manuscript should be read. The positioning sets the scene for the reader and provides the lenses through which the authors wish the reader to read and interpret their manuscript. In brief, positioning is essential in constructing and motivating the research purpose, and probably more narrow goals, and the way the author aims to research/fulfill these. Here, I want to emphasize the point that research goal/question/purpose should be constructed and not just plopped down to the reader.

A tricky issue in positioning the study is the relative theoretical narrowness or broadness issue. Paradigmatic research favors narrow focus within a chosen theory and research school. This, however, tends to offer only incremental and often rather dull results. Broader theoretical positioning involving utilizing more than one conceptual system (e.g., sales management research and control theory) offers better chances for more interesting contribution, as does challenging the taken-for-granted paradigmatic results or assumptions from a new theoretical perspective.

For me, this narrowness versus broadness issue is a bit of dilemma. As a reviewer, I would like to encourage highly relevant research, which, on the other hand, is more demanding to carry out. When facing very narrow positioning, and knowing that there is relevant research about the topic in a relating field, I recommend doing additional reading and trying to utilize it. Narrow readership is especially frustrating if the author makes strong, but unwarranted knowledge claims along the lines of “this aspect/issue has received very scant attention” when, in fact, there has been, say 15 articles, since late 1990s about the very topic, but seemingly outside the author’s radar. (Möller)

## **2.2. Up-front Statement of Theoretical and Managerial Contributions**

A critical component of the introduction is the statement of theoretical and managerial contributions. As John Nicholson, Chun Zhang, and Mark Parry have pointed out, a manuscript without this statement, or lacking a convincing argument of the importance of the contribution, faces the prospect of a quick rejection:

[The author must] convince the editor and reviewers that there is a scientific contribution by the end of the introduction section. If this is not done, the chances in my view are prejudiced in terms of having a manuscript desk rejected or returned as a major revision. Many authors under-claim their contribution, predicating their contribution on a single gap where often there is more in the manuscript. Also, by reducing the contribution simply to gap-spotting (neglect or confusion), authors miss the chance to claim that they are making much bigger challenges to underlying assumptions in a whole body of work. Equally, from a quantitative perspective, the possibility of replications of existing studies is shied away from and instead of celebrating this, it is played down

in favor of a claim for a much smaller contribution based on an insignificant area of neglect or confusion. (Nicholson)

Many manuscripts I reviewed can improve along the following two areas: (1) identify credible gaps and (2) frame counter-intuitive hypotheses by presenting alternative arguments and perspectives. I consider identifying credible gaps fundamental to crafting a good manuscript. One way I see how some authors identify gaps is to provide a brief review of the literature in the introduction and then state that their chosen research topic has not been examined previously and thus should be examined. I think this type of gap identification raises many questions. For example, is it possible that the research questions are unimportant? If the research questions are important, why have they not been examined? Is it possible that the authors have not done a broad literature review to identify all relevant research streams? In any case, it would be helpful for authors to explain why their research topic is an under-researched area and provide convincing evidence for why the topic is important. For example, authors first could present their research questions by citing alternative viewpoints. Then they could explain the gap and why such a gap exists by citing relevant literature. I consider this way of identifying gaps more credible...Regarding framing counterintuitive hypotheses, important relationships often have been debated from multiple perspectives. It would be interesting and credible if authors present alternative perspectives and then explain why they support a certain perspective. This can make the hypotheses more counterintuitive than authors presenting only supportive evidence for their proposed relationships. (Zhang)

The worst introductions briefly summarize a laundry list of articles related to the manuscript's topic. As written, the point of the laundry list serves no role other than to convince the reader that no prior article has done what the authors propose to do in their manuscript. The problem with this approach is the mere fact that something has not been done does not mean that it is worth doing. There may be good reasons why something has not been done. For example, the fact that an issue has not been studied in a particular country is not, in and of itself, justification for a study that simply replicates the methodology used in prior research in other countries. (Parry)

It is also important for authors to show how their theoretical contributions build on previous literature. This does not mean only the literature appearing in that journal, or even in that research stream, but wherever it may be available. What may be new and exciting to the author may not be too convincing to an experienced reviewer. Kristian Möller explains:

I often frustrate the authors by insisting that they should not 're-invent the wheel', but have a look at what was studied and reported in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. The kind of repetitiveness we face in marketing studies would not be possible in sciences. I feel that we reviewers are part of the solution; we should not accept the 'theory-of-the-month club' phenomenon. My minimum requirement for the authors is that they should recognize the availability of other relevant research streams and provide reasons for their theory choice, as well as reasoning why not adopting any other relevant literature. For example, if a manuscript addressing some aspect of say 'managing strategic business relationships' only utilizes Industrial Marketing and Purchasing-driven studies I refer to the availability of the extensive literature within strategy and especially within the management of strategic alliances. I realize that this is tough, but 'one-eyed' seeing is getting narrower and narrower, and an old hand like myself would like to read new openings. (Möller)

Finally, John Nicholson reminds us that the introduction should be up front about the managerial importance, as well as the theoretical contributions, especially in a research area such as business-to-business marketing, which is so grounded in realistic, strategic managerial decision making:

[T]here seems to be great reticence to predicate a contribution on a practical problem area. Instead, the contribution in most cases is led from a theoretical weakness. Thus, how can we claim impact in what we do without stronger reference to practice? Instead, this impact tends to be an afterthought tagged on the end. (Nicholson)

### 2.3. Structured Introduction

In order to achieve these objectives, it is a good idea to structure the introduction carefully. Many editors or reviewers simply will not keep reading if there is no clear statement of the “research question” or “research objective” right there in the introduction. Mark Parry, Ad de Jong, and Kristian Möller all provide perspectives on the importance of clear structure:

In the introduction I am looking for the author(s) to briefly (1) identify a gap in the existing literature; (2) explain why that gap is important; (3) describe their approach to addressing that gap; (4) summarize their findings; and (5) outline the remainder of the manuscript. (Parry)

As a reviewer, I always have a careful look at the introduction section and especially how this section has been organized. It is this section that strongly determines my opinion on the quality of the study. For instance, a well-organized introductory section contains the following four paragraphs: A first paragraph, which gives a brief overview of the *status quo* of the literature. Then, a second paragraph that establishes the gap and carefully defines it. By doing so, it is also of importance to compellingly argue why this gap is worthwhile examining. If the author does a proper job in these first two paragraphs, this paves the way to writing the third and fourth paragraph. The third paragraph tells the reader about the topic of the manuscript. Finally, the fourth paragraph discusses the contribution of the study to the literature. (de Jong)

Although I am sure that all doctoral candidates and younger researchers have been instructed for umpteen times about the importance of the introduction, this section remains probably the weakest spot of most manuscripts. This is understandable, as the introduction should optimally contain the core aspects of the manuscript in a concise form making it very hard to write. Then what am I expecting to read in a ‘perfect’ introduction? First, I want to understand what the focal issue/theme/phenomenon the manuscript is addressing; that is, what the manuscript is all about. This is generally a broader view than the core problem or research goal of the manuscript. A closely related issue is writing about the research stream or theoretical perspective the author is using to address the core phenomenon. This discussion provides information on how the phenomenon and purpose of the manuscript is going to be addressed/solved. (Möller)

For the last word on introductions, we turn again to Kristian Möller, who reminds us to clearly state objectives and intended contributions in the introduction, while at the same time being modest and not overstating the contribution:

The introduction should address and provide argued answers to the traditional questions of what the study is about (at a broader level/canvas and narrow level/the focal issue), why the question is important to study (relevance), which theoretical perspective(s) is utilized, and why and how the research is carried, and for whom the manuscript is relevant. These aspects are obviously interrelated and should form a logical section. The authors should recognize that these issues reflect their choices and should as such be argued for. Often, researchers deeply embracing a certain paradigm do not recognize their choices as choices, but take many of these core issues for granted. This and inflated knowledge claims really annoy many of the reviewers. (Möller)

### **3. THE MANUSCRIPT'S LITERATURE REVIEW**

Literature reviews should describe, summarize, and critically evaluate previous work relating to the topic. These reviews must make a significant contribution to our understanding of the topic by providing integrative framework(s) and/or paths for further research.

#### **3.1. Critical Literature Reviews**

An important takeaway from our contributors is that a good literature review is not simply a list or report of what the previous literature states. A strong literature review demonstrates that the author is familiar with the literature and its ambiguities, clearly sets up the conceptual model and hypotheses, and provides a novel perspective that highlights what is missing in the current literature. The author should refrain from overstating the contribution of the research, and clearly show how the intended contribution builds on the extant literature stream:

The best literature reviews change the way I think about the relevant literature. Often this is done by organizing the literature in a new way and/or introducing a new perspective from a different literature (either within or outside marketing) and explaining why this perspective suggests existing research has overlooked something important. (Parry)

The literature review should demonstrate that the authors are not rediscovering the wheel, and there is ambiguity in the literature. It should also be presented in a manner which lets the reader logically and intuitively arrive at the proposed hypotheses. Authors should also avoid [a] "literature says this" [approach,] and use both inductive and deductive reasoning to arrive at their hypotheses. (Paswan)

As a reviewer, I put much emphasis on the conceptualization of key concept in the manuscript. For instance, the introduction of a new concept requires an elaborate discussion on the nature of this concept, as well as a carefully defining. In addition, authors should embed the new concept in the literature by reviewing how the concept differs from related, more established concepts. It should also be clear why the new construct is that relevant to be studied in the context of today's marketing practice. Ideally, the literature review nicely reflects a new phenomenon, trend, or problem in business-to-business marketing. The introduction of such a new concept should be careful without exaggerating the so-called benefits of this new concept and with keeping a constructive view on related, more established concepts in the field. (de Jong)

In the literature review, an essential aspect is not to just report about relevant research, but to analyze and ‘discuss with the literature’ using the perspective and goals of the current manuscript. It is more about constructing/refining/rewriting theory than just reporting it. The depth and tone of this discussion depends on the goals of the manuscript. The authors should pay attention to doing ‘conscious’ work, they should inform the reader about the choices made and provide justification for these. An additional aspect is the use of framework figures or tables. I appreciate illustrations when they depict the key aspects of the study, whether literature reviews, conceptual flow charts, or research designs. Based on my experience, figures and tables support the exposure and readership of the manuscript. (Möller)

## **4. THE MANUSCRIPT’S HYPOTHESES**

### **4.1. Clearly Written and Well-supported Hypotheses**

A common theme among our contributors is lack of care in writing or defending hypotheses. As Ad de Jong notes, each hypothesis should be stated simply, and with sufficient argumentation to support it. There should also be a consistent theoretical underpinning supporting the conceptual model and the hypotheses derived from it:

I always carefully go over the hypothesis section. A good section contains a limited number of hypotheses. These hypotheses then should not just be new, but intriguing, relevant, and not too straightforward. In addition, I always love to see some moderating hypotheses, as this type of hypotheses help to put things into context and usually allow for interesting managerial implications. Furthermore, the formulation of the hypotheses should not be too complex, but should be as simple as possible for the reader’s understanding. In addition, the text leading up to the hypothesis should contain solid argumentation. It is not enough to simply cite and refer to findings from prior studies to motivate one’s hypotheses. I insist on clarifying the causal mechanism underlying the hypothesized relationship. Authors really need to argue why A actually leads to B, or C strengthens the relationship between A and B, for instance. Finally, the arguments used to underpin the hypothesized relationship should be based on a similar kind of reasoning that stems from one theoretical approach. Authors who use arguments from different theoretical perspectives to motivate their hypotheses run the risk of encountering conflicting arguments, which is confusing. (de Jong)

Maja Arslanagić-Kalajdžić states that hypotheses should be clearly related to the initially-stated research question, and that they should establish the links between constructs as would be predicted by the theory used by the researcher. Careful hypothesis development leads to correct operationalization of constructs and choice of research method in later sections of the manuscript:

I assess rigor and relevance, as guiding principles of all top-notch research, throughout the manuscript. In terms of rigor, I inspect whether authors took care to clearly relate their focal research question to the existing theory (in the introduction section), whether they offer definitions of the concepts in line with the mentioned theory/theories (in the conceptual background section), whether the links between concepts have been established based on the mentioned theory/theories (in the hypothesis development section of quantitative manuscripts), whether the



operationalization of those concepts to constructs fits the definitions (in the methodology section), whether an adequate research method is employed in order to provide robust findings (in the results section), and whether the contributions are explicitly discussed (in the conclusions section). (Arslanagić-Kalajdžić)

Mark Parry adds that one must also be consistent in developing the rationale for hypotheses. Inconsistency may cause some reviewer suspicion, and can lead the reviewer to question whether the author has fully thought out the hypotheses and how they relate with one another:

If the authors develop multiple hypotheses, the rationale provided for each hypotheses needs to be consistent with the rationale provided for other hypotheses. As a reviewer, I try to ask myself whether the rationale explicated for one hypothesis has implications for any of the other hypotheses proposed by the authors. (Parry)

#### **4.2. Construct Definitions and Dimensionality**

Another trouble spot is construct definition. Authors need to be aware of competing definitions of a construct, or any evidence of construct dimensionality. Furthermore, authors need to be careful about how the constructs are linked conceptually, as this may lead to some real problems in terms of teasing out different effects. Careful hypothesis development should address this issue. Mark Parry explains:

Authors need to define their key constructs. If multiple definitions exist, authors need to explain which definition they will use, and why that definition makes sense given the purpose of their research... Authors need to be sensitive to the dimensionality of key constructs. I have seen many manuscripts in which the theoretical rationale provided by the authors indicates that the construct under discussion has multiple dimensions, but the authors treat the construct as unidimensional in their hypotheses and in their measurement scales.

Authors need to be sensitive to the number of mechanisms linking two constructs. I have seen many manuscripts in which the theoretical rationale for a hypothesis describes more than one mechanism linking two constructs, but the proposed hypothesis involves a single path between the two constructs. Perhaps this is acceptable when the two mechanisms are perfectly correlated, but when they are not, the authors should develop separate hypotheses for each mechanism. If one lumps the two mechanisms together in a single hypothesis and then estimates a single path between the two constructs, it is impossible to make a statement about the relative importance of each mechanism. In general, if there are two mechanisms that are not highly correlated, the impact of each mechanism should be assessed individually. One way to do this is to identify conditions that increases the importance of one mechanism relative to another. (Parry)

#### **4.3. Directional Hypotheses and Conflicting Predictions**

A related issue is the theoretical direction of hypotheses. Sometimes the literature is equivocal about the direction, or even the significance, of a relationship. The author should resist taking the easy way out (ignoring this equivocality, or arguing that “most articles say it is a positive relationship, so we will hypothesize a positive relationship”). Indeed, it may be the case that the direction or

magnitude is context-specific, so a better approach would be for the author to argue in favor of what would be expected for the context of that particular study:

Sometimes authors describe conflicting theoretical predications about the sign (positive or negative) of a relationship between two constructs. When this happens, it is the authors' responsibility to identify the conditions under which each prediction should hold. For example, what is the relationship between product innovativeness and ease of use? The answer is that it depends on the nature of the product innovativeness. Some kinds of product innovativeness increase ease of use, while others reduce ease of use. When one finds a conflict between empirical tests of a hypothesis in prior research, it is not appropriate to resolve this conflict by comparing the number of previous studies that have found a positive relationship with the number that have found a negative relationship, and positing a single hypothesis based on the weight of this empirical evidence. Instead, authors should develop and test hypotheses about the conditions under which one mechanism is expected to dominate the other. (Parry)

Finally, in hypothesis development, it is important for the author to make it clear that testing these hypotheses will provide incremental research value. For example, finding support for a moderating variable might explain why previous results (that had ignored this moderating variable) were inconsistent: that would be a contribution with some incremental value. Mark Parry explains this issue and provides illustrative examples:

If the authors are proposing a new theoretical explanation (new to the relevant literature) for an observed phenomenon, they need to identify the ways in which the predictions of their proposed explanation differ from the predictions of existing phenomenon. If the proposed explanation generates exactly the same predictions as existing explanations, the authors have failed to make the case for the incremental value of their contribution. Consider the case in which an author provides a new explanation for customer buying behavior and, based on this explanation, predicts that increasing price will reduce the quantity demanded. The problem with this prediction is that conventional pricing theory makes the same prediction. In this case, part of the job of the author is to identify and test predictions that differ from those of conventional pricing theory. It is not enough to observe that a proposed explanation is consistent with observed phenomena; authors need to identify the conditions under which their proposed explanation, relative to existing explanations, does a better job of explaining observed phenomena.

Similar issues (i.e., if the proposed explanation generates exactly the same predictions as existing explanations, the authors have failed to make the case for the incremental value of their contribution) arise in the development of new approaches for making managerial decisions. For example, in case research targeting academic journals, it is not enough to show that a new process yielded satisfactory results in one or more practical applications. The real question is the magnitude of the incremental improvement in desired outcomes from the new process, relative to those obtained from existing processes. (Parry)

## 5. THE MANUSCRIPT'S METHODOLOGY

Regarding methodology, a recurring theme is the need to select the right methodology for the analysis. As Kristian Möller has pointed out, a proper choice of methodology will allow authors to support their claims for adding new knowledge and to achieve research objectives. There should be a clear justification for the selection of the methodology, and an appropriate acknowledgement of its weaknesses and limitations. It is also important to keep the importance of the methodology in context. As Stephan Henneberg reminds us, unless you are actually writing a manuscript about the methodology itself, your biggest contribution is your theoretical or conceptual contribution. While it is important to justify the selection of methodology, it is there to serve the manuscript's objective—it is the supporting actor, not the headliner:

When examining the methodological approach, data, and methods I pay attention to how these are related to the goals and positioning of the manuscript. That is, do the selected approach, available data/empirical material, and methods used provide effective means for achieving the targeted results? What do they enable (and not enable) the authors to say about their topic... When reviewing the empirical part of the study, I pay attention to the overall logic of the chosen research approach and its methods, that is, to what extent this research approach and these methods enable the authors to meet the new knowledge claims they have set in constructing the goal(s) of the study. Especially, in case-based research the designs are often not effective, that is, the authors have not utilized the extant theoretical knowledge, but goes for another single case study or 'deep description' in order to 'develop local theory'. Whatever research approach and methods the authors have chosen, they should make these selections transparent and argue for them. If there are problems or weaknesses/limitations—and there always are—these should be recognized and discussed. (Möller)

Methodologically, I often see references to core ideas outside of the journal, which is absolutely correct, but then many authors do not look inside the journal to see who else has applied this methodology within the subject area. Thus, for each seminal methodological principle, authors should add a few references to who has used this methodological principle in the target journal and how that has been adapted, changed, etc. (Nicholson)

Do not get excited by your method, or your context (e.g., industry or region). Both are usually not a meaningful contribution. Argue your concepts clearly (and outline your theoretical foundations). For me, the part in which most manuscripts fail is the concept discussion (not the empirical part). Here, you should provide very rigorous and dense arguments (if you run out of space, put some aspects of the method description or empirical analysis in an appendix; the reviewers will tell you if they want it in the main text). (Henneberg)

### 5.1. Issues in Using Quantitative Methodology

Many problems can arise from errors in applying quantitative methods. Reviewers are quick to focus on these, as they might undermine the arguments the author is making in support of the research

findings. A non-representative sampling frame, or careless data collection, will be identified by reviewers as fatal flaws that invalidate the quantitative results:

Is the sample representative of the population being studied? I once reviewed a manuscript in which the authors said their research purpose was to understand perceptions of non-adopters, but analyzed data collected from adopters. Is it reasonable to think the survey respondents have the information that they are being asked to provide? For example, is it reasonable to think that employees in one part of the firm can provide information about the operations of another part of the firm? If respondents are asked to predict future behavior, is it reasonable to think that respondents can accurately make such predictions? (Parry)

As for the empirical material, the critical question is to how well they represent or cover the core research phenomenon. For example, I have seen arguments that a specific survey data describes radical innovation decisions, when a closer look at the data showed that the major part of the data concerned relatively small-scale incremental innovations. (Möller)

Another potential problem area: did the authors conduct all the required tests to support their quantitative conclusions? This means that the authors used appropriate, strong tests of reliability and all forms of validity, and checked for endogeneity and common-method bias. Reviewers will search for evidence that the author has accounted for all of these issues:

Have the authors performed the appropriate tests for reliability and validity? I am always troubled when authors use confirmatory factor analysis to assess the validity and reliability of their measures, but then use a path model to estimate their structural model. Why did they not use structural equation modeling given that (1) structural equation modeling is a trivial extension of the confirmatory factor analysis model they have already estimated and (2) structural equation modeling controls for measurement error, while a path analysis model (in which items for each construct are averaged together) does not? My suspicion is always that they did not use structural equation modeling because the fit statistics were poor. (Parry)

What I check in much detail is procedures used and analyses conducted in the manuscript. Today, there are plenty of tools to demonstrate the validity and reliability of the research conducted. Author(s) need to confidently show that they master different methodological aspects. For example, a quantitative study using latent variables needs to clearly demonstrate construct reliability, as well as nomological, convergent, and discriminant validity. Furthermore, the manuscript should address the common-method bias issue, as well as show considerations related to the statistical power. (Arslanagić-Kalajdžić)

In many cases authors fail to account for the possibility of endogeneity. For example, this problem can arise when the direction of causality is unclear. Consider discussions of adoption and innovation attributes. What is the relationship between perceived ease of use and perceived risk? One can imagine situations in which perceived ease of use negative influences perceived risk, but one can also imagine situations in which perceived risk negative influences perceived ease of use. Endogeneity problems also can arise when an important variable is omitted from the analysis. For example, authors sometimes try to estimate the impact of A on B while ignoring the fact that unmeasured variable C influences both A and B. When C is omitted from the analysis, A and B will have correlated measurement errors, which leads to a biased and inconsistent estimator of the

strength of the relationship between A and B. This is especially troublesome when the existing literature has established that C has a relationship with A and B. (Parry)

## **5.2. Issues in Using Qualitative Methodology**

Qualitative methodology raises a different set of issues, which, if not handled well, can be red flags for reviewers. It must be clear that the chosen research is capable of adding new knowledge, so the choice of methodology must be strongly supported. As Kristian Möller points out, the author can make a much stronger argument for knowledge contribution if using multiple cases rather than a single-case study, so if the latter is chosen, the author must offer a convincing justification. It must also be clear that the questions included in the interview adequately cover the relevant domain and strongly support the results and propositions:

Especially in reviewing case-based qualitative research, I have often met with very loose statements concerning the research method like "...case research approach was chosen because it allows deep description of the core phenomenon in its real life context. A single case was selected (over multiple cases) since we can get more detailed material ...". This kind of vague approach can only be justified when the focal phenomenon is truly novel and unstudied, or when the research perspective proposed is novel (for an already studied phenomenon). When this kind of methodological choice is provided for research, where the core phenomenon has been studied say for over 10 years, and there exists well-developed theories about the phenomenon, I tend to criticize that approach strongly. The research design is just inefficient in producing new knowledge compared to clearly theory-based comparative multi-case designs or doing longitudinal research over a single case. (Möller)

A qualitative study using in-depth interviews should be able to clearly align the interview questions with the main research questions/domains to clearly address when and how saturation has been reached, and to use various methods such as meta-matrices and narratives in order to represent the results and support the resulting propositions. (Arslanagić-Kalajdžić)

## **5.3. Readability and Jargon**

Our contributors also cautioned against a reliance on methodological jargon. While we do need to show methodological rigor, we must at the same time not sacrifice relevance and, ultimately, readability of our presentation.

The method section should be written in a clear and legible manner. While most authors are methodologically proficient and good at the use of their tools, some get bogged down with research jargons. (Paswan)

With quantitative articles, there tends to be a focus on methods over methodology. Put another way, discussion starts with statistical rigor, and the relevance can be overlooked. This requires more methodological discussion and an argument why such rigor is relevant to practice. We must address the disjoint between academics and practitioners who largely are skeptical about what we do. (Nicholson)

## 6. THE MANUSCRIPT'S ANALYSIS

### 6.1. Construct Measures and Definition Alignment

Our contributors had much to say about construct definition and measurement. There may be a mismatch between the constructs that the authors intend to study according to the research objectives, and what is actually being measured. A misalignment between construct definition and measure may be due to the use of secondary data that do not exactly fit, or the use of vague or carelessly-worded definitions:

If the manuscript is an empirical manuscript, I look to see whether the measures used by the authors to measure constructs are consistent with previously introduced construct definitions. This is often a problem with empirical analyses that use secondary data. The secondary variables available to authors often do not reflect the theoretical definitions previously provided by the authors use to measure. A further complication arises when a particular secondary variable has been used to measure different things in different articles. One example is the use of the R&D/Sales ratio to measure aspects of the innovation process. If the same variable can be used to measure multiple things, how can one be sure which of those things is actually driving significant relationships with dependent variables? (Parry)

The 'definition alignment' problem also arises in manuscripts that analyze data collected by the authors. This is a particular problem when data is collected using existing measures before key constructs are defined. Consider the case of 'open innovation', which often is measured by the kinds of idea sources used by a firm. For me, a key question is whether the 'idea sources' measure aligns with the definition of open innovation provided by the authors earlier in the manuscript. (Parry)

A related problem involves construct sub-dimensions. For example, studies of perceived risk often distinguish among sub-dimensions such as performance risk, financial risk, social risk, psychological risk, etc. I have seen manuscripts in which some of the measurements used for one sub-dimension seem more appropriate for one of the other sub-dimensions analyzed in the manuscript. This also can be a problem in experiments. For example, I have seen authors theorize about customers in a particular situation, but the description of that situation does not align with the situation described to subjects participating in the experiment designed to test the authors' theory. (Parry)

Another problem that occasionally appears is a mismatch between research objective and measurement in terms of level. If the hypotheses are about individual employees, then individual-level and not firm-level measures should be obtained:

Over the years, I have seen a number of manuscripts that develop hypotheses about individual employees, but test those hypotheses using firm-level variables. This is a problem when there is considerable heterogeneity across individuals within individual firms, and when the pattern of individual heterogeneity varies across firms. In this case, the reasoning that applies at the individual level will not necessarily apply at the firm level. (Parry)

## 6.2. Interaction Terms

According to Mark Parry, few authors do an adequate job in assessing the interactions when analyzing a model with moderating effects:

A big problem I see in many manuscripts involves the reliability of the interaction term coefficients estimated by the authors. One issue is the small sample size used...small sample sizes raise serious questions about whether the reported interaction effects are replicable. According to Murphy and Russell (2016), “500 observations are needed to test a single interaction variable...[depending on the expected effect size] you might need samples of 500...to 3000.” I often see manuscripts with fewer than 200 observations and three or more interaction terms. Given the lack of statistical power, it is reasonable to ask whether any reported effects could be reproduced in subsequent studies...Another issue involves the range of variable values where interaction effects are significant...To address this issue, Murphy and Russell (2017) recommend that researchers identify the region where a moderator does make a difference. I have never seen this done in any of the manuscripts I have been asked to review. (Parry)

## 7. THE MANUSCRIPT’S DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps not surprisingly, reviewers expect a solid discussion and conclusion section, in which the author “closes the circle,” and shows how the research objectives stated in the introduction have been achieved. To achieve this successfully, be sure to stress how your study is not simply a confirmation of previous studies, but makes a theoretical contribution to knowledge in its own right. Also, summarize key takeaways effectively, presenting the relevance of the study to theoretical and managerial implications, and showing how the study contributes to the research stream as it has evolved in the targeted journal:

As a reviewer, I am always keen on the discussion of results. One rule of thumb is to take the results related to the hypothesized relationships as a starting point. This ensures that the discussion in terms of structure and focus is in line with the preceding parts of the manuscript. Oftentimes, the discussion of findings resides too much on the level of individual findings. Therefore, I always recommend authors to discuss at a higher level of abstraction and focus on the most important takeaways of this study, for instance, by drawing some overarching conclusions based on the findings. Furthermore, the discussion of findings should go beyond just confirming findings in prior research. I therefore carefully consider whether authors take a contribution perspective and discuss how the findings of the study expand the extant body of research. (de Jong)

In my experience, the discussion and conclusions do not contain game-stopper kind of problems. Generally, smaller issues are involved, which can be remedied with editing. One of the most common and more problematic aspects is the underdeveloped nature of the theoretical conclusions. As educators, we should give more attention to encouraging theory construction, not only methodological skills. (Möller)

In terms of relevance, I ask three main relevance questions: (1) how relevant the study is for the theory it aligns with (in terms of its contribution potential); (2) how relevant the study is for the

journal's readership (in terms of the manuscript-journal fit); and (3) how relevant the study is for practitioners (in terms of managerial implications). I believe that failing in any of the above-mentioned elements of rigor and relevance is a cause for major concern(s) and identification of fatal flaw(s) of the manuscript. (Arslanagić-Kalajdžić)

Good manuscripts are also holistic packages, that is, there is clear underlying logic linking all parts of the manuscript, from the Introduction to the Conclusions. This includes transparency; the author recognizes the choices made and provides arguments/rationale for them. (Möller)

Finally, bring the story together. What are the boundary conditions and limitations, and what are the key takeaways for focal stakeholders. In other words, explain who the hero and the villain are, and how the world is better because of this research. (Paswan)

## **8. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS ABOUT MANUSCRIPTS**

In preceding sections of this editorial, our contributors have commented on their expectations in each section of a typical research manuscript. Here, we present, in no particular order, some of their thoughts and observations pertaining to overall presentation, and what factors tend to lead to a more positive reviewer opinion.

### **8.1. First impression matters**

In academic writing, as in life, one does not get a second chance to make a first impression. There is no excuse for sending a poorly-written manuscript out for review. It shows respect for the reviewers, and the journal, if the author carefully follows the journal's style guidelines, and does appropriate spell-checking and editing. There also is no excuse for not revising a manuscript after rejection from one journal, before submitting to another. The first journal's reviewers offered comments and criticisms, which, if even some of these are incorporated, will improve the reviewer's first impression and substantially strengthen the manuscript:

First impression matters not only because in marketing we care of making an impression in principle, but because good manuscripts are by no exception distinguished from bad manuscripts by the ability to make a good first impression (primarily on the editor who sends it out to review and then on reviewers). From my experience, there are several traits that first impression covers: (1) clarity: title clearly reflects the content of the manuscript (and is short); an abstract shows an unambiguous summary of what has been done in the manuscript; and the intended contributions of the manuscript to the theory are explicitly stated in the introduction; (2) representation: my mind works better if manuscripts offer graphical depiction of the authors' research framework; this is not a 'must', but definitely helps in forming the first impression and getting a grasp of what the study is all about; and (3) diligence: I get really upset when I see some obvious (even if pretty minor) mistakes when reading the front part of the manuscript. For instance, it happened several times that I find spelling/wording errors in the opening paragraph. Then I ask myself, should I really invest my time and effort in this manuscript, when even the author(s) did not care enough to re-read what is written and did not turn the spell-check on. (Arslanagić-Kalajdžić)



Too often, we see a manuscript that clearly has been round the houses of other journals and re-submitted to *Industrial Marketing Management* without modification. For instance, I have seen several manuscripts that clearly have been written for international business journals and then come to *Industrial Marketing Management* by default. An author must build on a criticism and not just re-submit a manuscript. Many good, indeed classic manuscripts, have been rejected multiple times before acceptance, but the key is making the manuscript fit for the audience, that is, the readership of the journal. Thus, there must be reference to articles in the journal, or at least a strong case made why these previously unrecognized topics should be of interest to the readers of the journal. Using the same argument as used in previously rejected submissions is insufficient. (Nicholson)

## 8.2. Readability

Reviewers are not impressed by jargon. A good research manuscript communicates its content well. The author should consider the manuscript from the reader's, or reviewer's, point of view, and remember that the reader will be more receptive to a manuscript that is easy to understand and not weighed down by clunky writing style or too many references. The manuscript does not have to be unpleasant to read. Also, remember that a picture is worth a thousand words. Use figures and tables to illustrate points, and make sure they are easy for the reader to interpret! Finally, be sure to get informal reviews from academic colleagues (and even practitioners) before sending the manuscript out for review:

I find it really important that a manuscript is readable by a broad readership. This ideally even includes family and friends. Use of excessive jargon, overly complicated technicalities, and extensive references do not make a manuscript enjoyable to read. Especially, if these elements are included just for the sake of impressing or convincing reviewers, authors may be doing the wrong thing. Only write up things, which are needed to help readers get the message and learn and help them doing this in the most pleasant and effortless way. When a manuscript is fun to read for readers, it will be fun for reviewers as well. This also means that figures and tables should be completely self-explanatory and easy to understand. Do not just dump all the details that are available, but present those results that are instrumental to getting the message across. Details that are critical to evaluating the quality of the study, and the evidence presented, should be available for readers and in the manuscript. However, (web) appendices may be the perfect location for this.

Many (industrial) marketing articles that are published nowadays have passed the hurdle of satisfying reviewers, but are not easy to read, let alone enjoyable. This means that creating impact will be difficult. Some of the most impactful articles address issues that make sense to a broad readership, but are also written in a way that make digesting the presented research easy and pleasant. Given the abundance of information that is available nowadays, all readers must make choices in what they will read and what not. A well-written text will increase the likelihood of being read. What will probably help authors a lot is reading broadly to get exposed to different writing styles and be able to discover the ones, which really work. Finally, never submit a manuscript before having received peer feedback from both academics and non-academics (i.e., ideally practitioners), and always use a professional copyeditor. (van Bruggen)

Use visualizations, which make the review easier, for example, by providing a bigger picture. This can be figures to show models or it can be tables. Even literature review tables can be made

insightful, for example, by showing what has been done, how it has been done, and what is missing, why it is missing, and how your manuscript addresses this gap. However, visualizations never argue a point by themselves; this needs to be done in detail in the manuscript. (Henneberg)

Is the story easy to read? I see so many manuscripts that become so unreadable because the authors get bogged down with academic and technical mumbo jumbo. I understand that there is limit to simplifications, but if the manuscript does not intuitively make sense, why should a member of a larger audience read it. (Paswan)

### **8.3. Work with the reviewers**

An earlier editorial (LaPlaca et al. 2018b) provided much guidance on how to revise well for resubmission. Several of our contributors had specific ideas that offer additional insight for the revision process. First and foremost, accompany your resubmission with a detailed reply document that shows the reviewers what changes you made to the document. Remember that the reviewers are making time to reread your article, so do not force the reviewers to work hard to find the changes. Also, be sure to address all of the reviewers' points. Reviewer are unlikely to be happy to see that their comments have been ignored in the rewrite. Finally, if there is some doubt about the review (you believe, for example, that the reviewer is mistaken on a point), do not hesitate to contact the editor and see what your options are:

In case of 'revise and resubmit', work with the reviewers, not against them. As a reviewer, I want to see that you are making an effort (even if you argue against my points). Reviewers and authors are there to make the manuscript better together to provide advancement to the field. Thus, when I get a reply-to-reviewers back, I want to clearly see what the authors have done, and how they have done it. I send manuscripts back which come with replies-to-reviewers that say: "Thank you for your comments, we have addressed them in the revised version." That is not enough for me to give up my weekends to do reviews. I want the authors to make my time worthwhile, which starts with making it easy for me to find out what they have done in detail without having to read the new version of the manuscript and compare it to the old. I am won over when I see that the authors have not just addressed and worked with my comments, but they may also have gone the extra mile, for example, collected more data/evidence, or introduced a new table or figure, even if not directly asked to do so by the reviewers. It shows the passion for excellence. By the way, I also read the other reviewers' comments (if the journal provides them) and have a look at how the manuscript addresses them. (Henneberg)

What I would recommend is to always try to see if you can accommodate (sometimes that may mean adding the extra analysis or request in the revision note to show that you have truly considered the reviewer's request) and then make it very easy for the reviewer to find out what exactly you did to accommodate/answer his request, both in the manuscript and in letter to the reviewer. (Joëlle Vanhamme)

It is also important how the authors respond to criticism. Do they take critical comments into account or provide plausible explanations for the criticized material/decisions. The worst kind of response is avoidance or 'near avoidance', that is, just mentioning the issue, but not really

addressing it. This is relatively common and can infuriate the reviewer who feels the time and effort invested to the review is not appreciated. I have found it highly useful to learn to ‘read’ not only the reviews, but also the reviewers. It is often helpful to group the reviewers’ comments into three categories: highly crucial, relevant, but minor, and, finally, off-the mark or plainly misjudgments. Authors must take care all of these comments, but they require different detail and justifications. In case a reviewer clearly does not accept a research approach, the authors need extra care to try to convince the reviewer. If this does not work, authors should contact the editor and discuss the dilemma. I have been in this position a couple of times, and contacting the editor has been helpful. (Möller)

## 9. CONCLUSIONS

This editorial sheds light on the review process, from the viewpoints of the reviewers themselves. We are grateful to all of our colleagues who graciously agreed to reflect on the review process, and what they prioritize when reading each section of a paper under review. The editorial complements earlier editorials about writing and revising manuscripts, as it provides insights on specifically what satisfies or frustrates these experienced reviewers when reviewing papers.

When preparing this editorial, we were struck by how much agreement there was among contributors. Time and again, we found there were critical things to do, and to avoid, which were generally agreed upon among the reviewers. This is an encouraging finding for authors. Even though reviewers may disagree in their opinions, it seems that there are certain fundamentals, which serve as starting points for the review process. It is advantageous for the author to know what reviewers are likely to respond positively to, and to avoid what most reviewers would consider to be fatal flaws.

We have already written extensively about the writing and revising processes in previous editorials (LaPlaca et al. 2018a, 2018b), so we will not add much here. But if we had one point to add to this editorial, it is: please read the webpage of the targeted journal! There are several benefits to be gained:

1. Most journals will have a clear statement of the journal’s aims and scope, or research objectives, on their webpage. As editors-in-chief, we see many papers that have little or nothing to do with business-to-business marketing, and have no choice but to desk reject them for poor fit. A quick online search would indicate to the author that *Industrial Marketing Management* would not be a good fit for their article, though it may be just fine for a different journal.
2. The webpage provides detailed instructions to authors, including all required format guidelines. Failure to use the correct format sends a strong signal that little care was expended

in preparing the paper for submission, so not following the guidelines is a red flag for editors and reviewers.

3. The webpage often has links to free sample recent issues or recent publications. If so, please download one or two of these, to see what kinds of articles the editors are seeking to publish in their journal, what format is typically used, how the papers are organized, and the kind of methodologies that are popular in the journal. If there are no free sample articles, download one or two articles through your university's online library.
4. The webpage usually posts impact factor statistics, which are helpful in assessing the reach and impact of articles published in the journal.
5. Finally, the webpage will list the contact information of the Editor(s)-in-Chief. If you have a question about a recent review or a specific reviewer's request, don't just guess -- please feel free to contact the editor.

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