

Reflections on the Craft of Clear Writing

Ragins, B. R. (Ed.). (2012). Editor's comments: Reflections on the craft of clear writing. Academy of Management Review, 37(4), 493-501.

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Contents I

Background

- ▶ Writing is hard work.
- ▶ Writing can be frustrating, more so for theory papers.
- ▶ Gets worse with journal rejections comments.
 - ▶ *I am not sure what the author wanted to achieve in this paper...*
 - ▶ *After reading the paper thrice, I am still not sure what it is all about.*
 - ▶ *The first 10 pages were an endless literature review.*

Objectives

- ▶ The key to clear writing is to understand the reader (Ragins 2012; Williams and Bizup 2014; Zinsser 2006).
- ▶ This is more easily said than done.
- ▶ The goals of this article are:
 - ▶ Share reviewers insights and reflections on clear writing.
 - ▶ Add to the topic of clear writing which is key in all areas, and especially academia.

Method

- ▶ The editor interviewed current and past editorial review members of AMR.
- ▶ The author engaged the subjects on the following issues in the survey:
 - ▶ Input on writing styles, organisation, and presentation of theory papers.
 - ▶ Thoughts on why authors engage in poor writing.
 - ▶ Advice and recommendations on writing clear theoretical articles.

What is Clear Writing?

- ▶ Clear writing commits to express ideas with;
 - ▶ Clarity,
 - ▶ Directness,
 - ▶ Precision.
- ▶ Clear writing is elegant, not pretentious.
- ▶ The goal is not to show readers how smart you are.
- ▶ The goal is to take the reader on a clear, logical, and direct journey.

What is Clear Writing?

- ▶ Clear writing is simple but not simplistic.
- ▶ Clear writing points the readers to the key points and logic without having to re-read the content.
- ▶ Clear writing focuses on the reader, not the writer.
- ▶ In fact, clear writing keeps the writer invisible as the message passes across.

What Makes Writing Bad?

Foggy Writing

- ▶ Use of complex words that obscure meaning.
- ▶ Using complex language/ dense sentences for straight forward concepts.
- ▶ Using more than one term without prior clarification.
- ▶ Use of passive language — big issue. Difficult on the mind as the reader has to figure out who is doing what.

What Makes Writing Bad?

Why Do Authors Foggy Write?

- ▶ Writing to “IMPRESS” rather than “EXPRESS”.
- ▶ Position your idea as novel by describing it differently.
- ▶ Afraid to reveal how simple our ideas are; feels devaluing.
There is beauty in simplicity.
- ▶ Insecurities, misconceptions about writing,
- ▶ Lack of clarity in their mind about what they are writing.

What Makes Writing Bad?

Remedies to Foggy Writing

- ▶ Dissect your ideas to the core and present them with minimum jargon.
- ▶ Knowing what you really want to say helps in writing clarity.
- ▶ Get a reviewer that will be VERY honest about your writing. This requires putting our EGO aside.

Read my Mind

- ▶ Cousin of foggy writing.
- ▶ Presenting the reader with concepts, jargon, and acronyms that are undefined or used inconsistently in the article.
- ▶ Assuming that the reader is inside your (the writer) mind.
- ▶ Use of un-necessary jargon and incomprehensible text.
- ▶ Its like readers need to learn a new language to follow your text.

Read my Mind

What Causes the Read my Mind Problem?

- ▶ Lack of empathy and perspective. Put yourself in the readers shoes.
- ▶ Being too close to the subject (expert-wise). You assume others grasp it as well as you do.
- ▶ Self serving purpose: If I don't define this term, there is less risk of criticism.
- ▶ If I keep the definitions ambiguous, I can stretch them at will.

Read my Mind

Remedies

- ▶ Never lose site of your reader.
- ▶ Have a non-specialist read your work. If they can't follow, it is too complex.
- ▶ Read aloud the text with your co-author, friend. This also catches typos. Text reading software can help.
- ▶ Introduce jargon for 2 to 5 concepts. For other jargon, just include their relevant context.
- ▶ Leave your paper for a few days then reread it. If you struggle to understand any part, your reader won't get it either.

What is the Story?

- ▶ A clear story is clear, direct, and compelling.
- ▶ A clear, direct, and compelling story hooks the reader and carries them to the end without struggle.
- ▶ In contrast, bad writing is fragmented, has no thread, and tells no story. What causes this? Next

What is the Story?

Causes

- ▶ Bad introductions. The key to a clear, compelling story is a good introduction.
- ▶ A good introduction should;
 - ▶ Tell the story in a nutshell.
 - ▶ Embed the paper in its research context.
 - ▶ Explain the contribution of the paper to the literature.
 - ▶ Draw the reader to the story (hook the reader).

What is the Story?

Causes

- ▶ Failing to 'problematize' the literature.
- ▶ "Problematization" is the core to justifying your write up.
- ▶ Answer the question, "Without this work, what can't we understand"?
- ▶ Stating that a gap exists is not enough. Not all gaps need to be filled.
- ▶ **STATE YOUR CONTRIBUTION EARLY.** Hint it in the first paragraph and present it more broadly within the first few pages.

What is the Story?

Causes

- ▶ Too many cooks in the kitchen. Sharing out different paper sections to different authors.
- ▶ Trying to do too much in one manuscript. Scope your work realistically.
- ▶ Give your paper to a non-specialist to read and then ask them what the story is about. If they can't state in simple terms, there is a problem.

Conclusion

- ▶ Clear writing reflects a clear thought process.
- ▶ Striving to write clearly invokes thinking.
- ▶ Do not write to impress. Write to express.
- ▶ Keep it simple.
- ▶ Present your intent early. Research article is not a suspense novel.

Conclusion

- ▶ Be keen on the introduction.
- ▶ Minimize or eliminate passive language. Always active.
- ▶ Have your work read by specialists and non-specialists before submission for publication.
- ▶ Always give an outline of the study.

Conclusion

- ▶ Read the topic sentence of each paragraph alone to gauge the progress.
- ▶ Write the entire story line as bullets on one page, ensuring that the different key terms and relations cover the main aspects and are related in a logical, sequential way.
- ▶ Go back and justify the need for each para[graphs] written. This forces you to make connections between the different ideas in the paper and develop a good map of the overall landscape—which then helps the reader and makes it easy for them to follow your thought process.

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