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Editorial

The first impression counts: The essentials of writing a convincing introduction

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1. The Importance of the Introduction

Based on a survey of reviewers of high-impact papers, Grant and Pollock (2011) conclude that the introduction to a study is by far the most difficult section to write. Most respondents claimed not only that it determined what was interesting about a paper but also that it required the most rewriting. We agree with this and have noted that many letters from reviewers to authors commonly include suggestions such as "Position your work in the current literature better," "Present your research question more clearly," "Frame your research so it is related to the previous literature," and "Make the contribution of the paper clear." Too many promising papers are rejected at an early stage because they do not present the problem being addressed sufficiently clearly, do not define a clear relationship with the theory, and do not explain the contribution being made to the literature. Each of these issues concerns what we describe in the present editorial as the positioning of a paper, which is one of the main purposes of an introduction. We want to help authors improve their chances of having their papers accepted and show how they can increase their impact by focusing on the introduction section, the primary purpose of which is to position a study and lead into the story the paper will tell.

Writing a paper involves pressing the essential communication buttons that tell the reader why the paper is relevant, how it relates to the contemporary literature in project management (and/or in other fields), and in what ways it makes a unique contribution. Writing an introduction must include a clear problem statement, an explanation of how the problem relates to theory, why a discussion of the problem is relevant (to practice), how key concepts are defined, how previous studies have presented the problem, and the contribution the paper makes to each of the above.

When a paper is conceptually muddled, when it goes in too many directions, and when it lacks clarity generally, reviewers often refer to a lack of positioning. A clear position means that citations are carefully selected, practical and theoretical issues are highlighted, and key concepts and related constructs are well-defined (Martinsuo & Huemann, 2021).

Positioning goes hand in hand with the story line. Excellent introductions tell an exciting story by engaging and problematizing the current field in a way that draws the reader in (Grant and Pollock, 2011). The introduction lays the groundwork and promises the reader an important contribution (Nicholson et al., 2018). Finally, a well-defined positioning leads to a mature paper that fulfills the requirements of academic writing (Martinsuo & Huemann, 2020).

This editorial proposes a structured way to position a paper. We offer insights on how authors can write an engaging introduction and draw the reader's attention. While there are different ways of writing strong introductions, our intention is to inspire authors to think about how to position their papers more systematically and attract the attention their audience. Using an analogy to fishing, the end result of the introduction is "setting the hook" so you can catch the fish. We suggest that an excellent introduction, whether it be in an empirical, conceptual, or review paper, should answer the following questions:

- What is the topic?
- Why is it relevant and to whom?
- What do we know already?
- What is the research gap, and how will the paper fill it?
- What contribution does the paper make?
- How is the paper structured?

1.1. Topic

The opening paragraph in a research article is likely the most important one. It needs to be as specific as possible, and general statements such as "projects are important" must be avoided. A tight and focused story line wins the reader's attention and encourages them to continue reading. The theoretical constructs will guide the argument rather than the empirical elements. Having an interesting concept or theoretical idea will not only bring focus to the paper but support the author in the writing process to not expand into too many neighboring concepts or theories. Yet the beginning should also entice the reader to continue by adding a brief practice example early in the introduction. The beginning is all about elucidating the topic, catching the reader's

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attention, and leading them into the paper.

The recommendation is, therefore, that the introduction guides the readers into the definition of the core theoretical construct, the applicability of the theoretical construct, and key citations associated. Referencing key citations not only positions the paper in a certain domain but also shows in what “pond” the paper is located (Barley, 2006). Furthermore, an opening phrase clarifies the definition of key theoretical constructs and their conceptual premises and assumptions, as well as their relationship with other constructs (Pesämaa et al., 2021). In other words, a well-crafted definition of the study objective makes the topic clear to the reader. For instance, Lehtinen et al. (2019) suggest that “Megaprojects are multi-billion dollar, long-lasting endeavors that are established to create long-term value in society” (p. 43). While the multi-billion dollar premise can be directly measured, “long-lasting endeavors” and “long-term societal values” are more qualitative and therefore need to be operationalized indirectly. By doing so the result is likely to open up more qualitative elaborations beyond the study’s core objectives and lead to additional theoretical and practical implications. This approach to developing the introductory section inspires authors, therefore, to suggest variations to the primary latent construct that will more effectively position the authors contribution within the field. Citing key texts guides the reader toward the interesting work that has been conducted and how the current paper contributes to it. In addition, the opening statement helps editors to select appropriate referees; that is, those likely to be familiar with the literature. Furthermore, the opening statement provides direction to reviewers and editors regarding the focus of the work. Project management is an applied area in which the applicability of theories is orchestrated in practice by bridging a code, a proxy, or something else as a representation of the theoretical notion. The first paragraph of an introduction will, therefore, require authors to not only position the topic in relation to other studies but also help the reader follow the story line.

1.2. Relevance

Papers may be highly cited when they bridge practice and theory in a focused and conceptually interesting way (Grant & Pollock, 2011). We share some examples of how authors provide practical relevance to their papers. Ika et al. (2020) state in their introduction that “in 70 years, trillions of dollars have been spent on international development projects, many times with little to show for it. Evidently, numerous projects fail to deliver much needed impact for beneficiaries” (p. 548). Similarly, Wang and Pitsis (2020) note that “from 2004 to 2008, China invested more in infrastructure projects than during the entire 20th century” (p. 85). Dahlin and Pesämaa (2021) also included a number of examples to quantify and estimate the effects of properly planned and executed projects. They point out that megaprojects often achieve significant positive societal effects that are sustained over a long period of time, whereas “poorly designed projects tend to have higher operational costs and result in numerous negative sustainable consequences” (p. 2374). Furthermore, Ninan et al. (2022) exemplified how organizations in an economically competitive environment are pushed to thin profit margins and therefore often need to adopt new practices and processes. These examples offer face validity to a problem—which means any reader can understand the context—by describing its societal impact. Thus, providing support for such statements with past studies or statistics will facilitate improved reader understanding that the paper is indeed a relevant topic, as we often see in project studies.

Writing a paper is in essence communicating a story to the reader. Successful papers target a specific audience—the audience of the journal. The readers of the *International Journal of Project Management* are researchers and reflective practitioners interested in more effectively managing projects (Huemann & Martinsuo, 2020) as well as policy makers and project scholars from related fields such as organizational behavior, operational research, human resource management, innovation, entrepreneurship, change management, engineering and sustainability. In addition, while the readers come from different contexts and industries, what they have in common is an interest in project management, including managing projects, programs, project portfolios, project-oriented/based organizations, project networks, and project societies.

While theoretical approaches might emerge from project management as well as from neighboring fields, the shared interest of the audience is managing projects. Thus, papers need to either engage in a current dialogue or open up a new debate and contribute to our knowledge on managing projects.

1.3. Existing knowledge

wAnother essential component of the introductory section is what is sometimes referred to as the *homework section* or *survey of the field*. It should demonstrate the author is knowledgeable about the topic. We sometimes refer to this section as the *state of the art*. While it is not fully theoretical, the author should use the core references to describe how these have made important contributions to the field described in the previous paragraphs. Here authors need to be selective, focusing on the most important studies. This section is difficult too because the author must avoid attacking earlier work and note any “gaps” they consider interesting. The overview should, instead, inform the reader that the author is comfortable with the subject and they have some ideas that go beyond the consensus. Their arguments should extend the boundaries, either by focusing on the high or low end or bringing out some additional nuances or dimensions. This section, therefore, tells explicitly what is known about the topic and prepares the reader that the author has detected an interesting and relevant gap in the research.

In science, opportunities most often emerge from well-defined problems. A poorly defined problem means an idea will also fail to reach out, inspire and grow into true opportunities. In this section, there is a need to problematize the issue of concern. The problematization process typically starts with telling the readers why this really matters and to whom (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011). Failing to tell the reader why the issue matters will lead to the question of why the study is important (Aguinis & Cronin, 2022). Alvesson and Spicer (2012) characterize it as functional stupidity—which refers to positioning a paper without defining, explaining, or adding meaning to concepts or theories. Aguinis and Cronin (2022) suggest that research is valid when the introduction can clearly argue how the paper could fill or complement an incomplete component of a theory, otherwise the study provides nonsense (Antonakis, 2017).

1.4. Explicit research gap

The story line is now at the point where the reader understands the topic—why it is important and what knowledge others currently possess. They must now be told what we do not know and how the paper intends to fill the gap. Gap spotting typically involves a major change in theory or incrementally adding a component to a theoretical framework (Cronin et al., 2021), such as an additional mediating or moderated relationship. This section is closely tied to the proposed research question.

Many researchers struggle with this section as the gap spotting should not be too simplistic. To claim simply there are not enough studies on the subject is not sufficient. Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) propose examples of gap spotting styles such as competing explanations, an overlooked area, and lack of empirical support, as well as extending and complementing existing literature.

This section should also explain the nature of the present study, for example, whether it is quantitative or qualitative in approach, a review, conceptual, or theoretical. The author should now state their research objective and pose the explicit question they will address in the papers. A concrete research question (rather than several) indicates the paper is

A convincing introduction

- Defines main constructs and provides conceptual clearness
- Anchors in theory and current literature
- Problematizes existing knowledge
- Identifies a concrete and relevant research gap
- Tells the practical relevance and usefulness of the study
- Draws the reader into an interesting story with passion
- Promises a contribution that makes a difference

Fig. 1. The essence of a convincing introduction.

focused. Numerous studies have explained how an interesting research question can be written (e.g., Gray & Wegner, 2013; Voss, 2003).

1.5. *Contribution*

After the research question and research objectives have been made explicit, the next step is to discuss the paper's core contribution. A bottom-line expectation is a paper has a well-motivated research question and an answer to the research question based on a thorough set of arguments (Barney, 2018). Yet answering a research question may not be enough. Whetten (1989) also emphasized that we want an explanation as to why the proposed contribution (e.g., a new set of variables or a theoretical extension) matters.

To build your theoretical contribution (see Bergh, 2003), the author must understand the core theory as well as its components. Conceptually speaking, a theory refers to a statement of relations that ties various key constructs to other constructs and delimits their applicability to a particular area with clear boundaries (Bacharach, 1989). A theoretical contribution is based on clearly key constructs and defines the exact nature of the contribution anchored in the current literature (Klein & Müller, 2020). Contributions may be theoretical, empirical, conceptual, or methodological. Academic papers suitable for IJPM mostly involve a theoretical contribution which is either broad, such as a more abstract programmatic theory, or involves a component of a unit theory (Cronin et al., 2021). While programmatic theory offers a broader framework that provides meaning, context, and boundaries for an entire theory, unit theory tends to be more concrete by enlightening management or the organization about specific questions, strategies, activities, and resources. Authors can avoid this by using adequate definitions, putting these into context, discussing boundaries and generalizability, and problematizing these in practice.

As we noted above, project management is an applied discipline, so *IJPM* encourages authors to present papers that make a theoretical contribution and have practical relevance. *Nothing is quite so practical as a good theory* (Van de Ven, 1989).

To this end, practical contributions too often seem like pseudo theoretical contributions. Authors "wave their hands" and write something practitioners do not understand at all, leading to a poor impression among practitioners of what academics actually do. Practical contributions should be as "ready to use" as possible. For this reason, practical contributions should state clear boundaries and context in which they apply. This is important for practice. If something boils only at 100°, then this is a boundary and should be clearly addressed. Practical implications should be forward looking by clearly suggesting how policy makers and project professionals can employ clear goals, routines and ultimately control these processes more effectively (Pesämaa, 2017). If these are concrete it is also helpful to practice. Using a practice language is important to establish the credibility of the authors with practitioners, which makes the contribution more likely to be accepted and applied. Informing and improving practice is a very important, and rewarding, goal of academic work. We as researchers can make a meaningful practice contribution and impact society.

1.6. *Overview*

Traditionally, the final paragraph of an introduction includes an overview of the sections that follow. This helps the reader to navigate the paper, so it is prudent to provide this aid.

1.7. *Takeaways*

An experienced senior professor and editor once asked his PhD students how much time they thought he spent reading a paper the first time. The professor then said he spent some 10 min. the first time. It tells us that some experienced reviewers, who process hundreds of papers annually, spend very little time on them, so authors have only a few minutes to attract their attention and invite them to put more time into reading the paper. Thus, the "first impression counts". Poor introductions are characterized by poor motivation, a failure to problematize the literature, and unfocused ideas (Grant and Pollock, 2011). The list in Fig. 1 increases the likelihood the introduction to your paper will be convincing to the reader.

This editorial is designed to help authors to make a good first impression with their introductions and convince the reader to spend time reading the paper. Our comments do not cover all of the different ways introductions can be written. Rather we discuss the main ingredients in the hope of encouraging authors to craft their introductions clearly and position their papers better. We also hope this editorial will inspire and guide authors to think about the uniqueness of their stories and how to package them with interesting and engaging stories. Needless to say, the authors are, in the end, the narrators. They should tell their stories honestly, with focus, depth, and passion.

Although this editorial offers general guidelines and a template, we wish to stress that authors can get into trouble when they try to overthink and second-guess what the editors or reviewers will think. This can lead to over defensiveness, a loss of voice, and subsequently the narration of someone else's story—one that will never be as authoritative or convincing as their own. Authors should take their time writing the introduction, take ownership of the narrative, and structure it in a way that best brings out the essence and distinctiveness of their work. Writing a convincing introduction is never about following an exact format. Such an attempt may only make it seem wooden and may not invite people to read the paper. Authors should try to write freely, poetically, and with rhythm, and to pique the interest even of those readers who are not particularly interested in the topic and invite them to read further, or perhaps to skip to the results and implications. Such an approach may spark some thoughts among readers as to how the study connects to their own work. There should be space for more rigorous and technical writing in the meatier section of the paper.

We have made suggestions in a way that recognizes the previous literature but goes beyond a simple overview of what we already know. This should also be the approach taken by authors who wish to publish in this journal. We have advised prospective authors on how to position their work in a way that suits the publication to which it is submitted. At the top of our editorial, we pointed out several of the admonishments routinely delivered by reviewers to authors, and subsequently demonstrated how they can be addressed.

Positioning means the topic is well defined, relevant, related to other studies, and systematically anchored in the key theoretical concepts. The introduction establishes the boundaries of the work, highlighting the gap in the literature and how it has been filled, drafting a meaningful research question, and telling the reader the methods that have been applied are of central importance. By story line, we mean that a well written paper has a narrative. The introduction leads the reader into it and then takes them to a higher level, steering their expectations and maintaining their interest. The first impression counts.

The insights we share in this editorial very much apply to *International Journal of Project Management.* However, the general guidance we provide relates to many other (project) management journals, especially *Project Leadership and Society*, the young sister journal of the *International Journal of Project Management*.

All the best for writing convincing papers that make a difference.

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