Back to Basics: Twelve Rules for Writing a Publishable Article

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The following essay aims to consolidate the learnings of a year-long internship at The Review of Politics, *during which time the author read and wrote reports on some hundred articles submitted to the journal.*

The art of writing is one of the most neglected subjects among academics, from graduate students to fully tenured faculty. The ruling presumption seems to be that anyone who can "make it" to graduate school and, *a fortiori,* anyone who can "make it" to a tenure-track academic position, must already know how to write well. Of course, in itself this seems a sensible assumption to make, yet all too often it obscures the crucial question: *how well* do academics write? Are our writing skills always as well-honed as we like to think?

Having worked as an internal reader for a well-respected political theory journal for one year, I can attest to the fact that the quality of academic writing, at least in this field, leaves a lot to be desired. What is particularly alarming is the frequent disproportion between the depth of insight and creativity evinced by many submissions, and their overall writing quality. When I frequently found original and striking ideas articulated in a dull, shoddy, or middling writing style, I could not help wondering how scholars with such intellectual talent could make it this far without picking up the fundamentals of good writing along the way.

In this essay, I review the fundamental ingredients of a successful, *prima facie* publishable, academic article. By successful, I mean an article that is readily recognizable as a good instance of the genre "academic article," that is, an article that is substantively rich and stylistically and structurally well-crafted. Many successful articles are not published, since publication is ruled by a host of contingencies from editorial policies and the outlooks of reviewers to supply-and-demand dynamics. Having said that, to the extent that an article measures up to these standards, its prospects for publication should, *ceteris paribus,* be greatly enhanced.

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Twelve Rules of Thumb for Writing a Publishable Article

Write with a Purpose in Mind and Make that Purpose Explicit

It may seem obvious, but academic writers often fail to write *purposefully*. It is often far from clear how various parts of the paper serve the author's overarching purposes. Usually, an article aims to make a case for a particular thesis or set of inter-related theses. These theses may amount to a special claim by the author, or a particular interpretation of a historical event, a piece of literature, or a scholarly debate. Whatever the nature of your purpose, a well-written article should be animated by it from top to bottom. This purpose structures the essay or shows that it has a point. Even a digression has some point, and probably bears in some interesting way on the thesis to be advanced. You should not take for granted that the reader follows your own implicit line of reasoning or understands how your arguments serve your purposes. To make the structure of your essay transparent to the intelligent reader, make sure to indicate how different parts of the essay contribute towards the thesis (or theses) of the paper.

State a Purpose as Early as Possible, and State a Clear Thesis at the Appropriate Juncture

This aspect of writing purposefully deserves special attention. Sometimes an author will dance around, hint at, or leave it up to the reader to guess at, the point of his paper. This guessing exercise can be quite frustrating for a reader. This is why it is crucial that at least the purpose of a paper, if not its thesis, be stated clearly as early as possible. For example, you may aim in your paper to solve a particular enigma or paradox. You may not want to present your conclusion—the thesis to be defended—until the end, but this does not excuse you from stating the central *question* of your inquiry at the outset or close to the outset of the essay. Alternatively, it may be quite effective to state the thesis explicitly at the outset, and then go about defending it. Either way, the reader has orientation and some standard of success against which to judge the author's endeavors. Reading a paper without a stated purpose is like getting on a ship and attempting to judge the skills of its crew with no idea of where they want to get to.

Even if the thesis is not stated at the outset, it is important that a central thesis be formulated at some point, and given pride of place in the essay. This shows that you are not only capable of recognizing a puzzle, but are capable of offering a constructive interpretation or solution, however partial or tentative. What is important is not that your conclusions be "black and white," but that the substance of your conclusions, however provisional or tentative, be conveyed with confidence and clarity.

Narrow the Scope of Your Thesis to Manageable Proportions

A frequent mistake that can jeopardize a promising article is the practice of issuing irredeemable promises, or promises that can only be redeemed in an impracticably long paper. A good, thought-provoking, and challenging article neither confines itself to risk-free and boring claims, nor makes claims that cannot be rendered plausible in the space of one normal-length article. One ideal that suggests itself here is to render bold and surprising claims at least plausible if not compelling. In order to do that, you need to be realistic about just *how bold* a claim can be shown to be plausible—at least to many readers—in the space of one article.

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Adhere to an Uncomplicated Logical Structure

A clearly structured essay on an interesting subject is a pleasure to read, as it involves very little "reconstructive surgery" on the part of the reader. A coherent structure is one of the most important aspects of good writing and is closely related to purposefulness. Having established an overarching purpose for the essay, you need to structure the different parts of your argument so that the function of each part takes its place within a logical sequence and can be seen to contribute in some way to your thesis. Be especially attentive to transitions between sections and structural reminders (e.g., we have just established that . . . , I will now explore the implications of this conclusion . . .), which are invaluable ways of making the logical sequence of your argument more transparent. If you neglect structure and transitions, your essay is liable to be obscure to a reader who is uninitiated into your particular way of thinking.

Explicitly Acknowledge Possible Limitations and Vulnerabilities in Your Argument

Notice that I do not say, "Make an invincible argument," or "Defeat all objections in advance." Rather, show an awareness of the obstacles or challenges that your argument may encounter. Your case becomes more credible when you acknowledge an objection and admit your own incapacity to fully defuse it than when you by-pass it or appear oblivious to its existence. Similarly, intellectual modesty dictates that you should not argue for more than your premises will allow. Clarify what you are (and are not) arguing for. Be candid about the weaknesses and potential limitations in your position—perhaps they are preferable to the weaknesses and limitations in other positions. What undermines the credibility of an argument is not acknowledged weaknesses but blindness to, or complacency toward, objections—especially obvious objections—that might be raised against it. This applies not only to your main thesis, but to each discrete claim made in support of the thesis. Be sensitive to the difference between relatively unproblematic claims on the one hand, and contentious or easily disputed claims on the other. If you glide over contentious claims too often your argument will fast lose all credibility.

Take Seriously the Position of Your Adversaries

This is related to the previous point about acknowledging the vulnerabilities and limitations of your argument. Intellectual honesty and scholarly rigor dictate that you give your opponent's position the most plausible and fair representation that you can. This means that you need to enter imaginatively into the epistemic horizon of your adversary and search for the best, not the worst, arguments in his arsenal. If you treat credible adversaries in a dismissive or unsympathetic way, the reader will find it very difficult to trust your arguments.

Situate Your Argument in the Scholarly Literature

Think of an article as an intervention in an ongoing conversation. Normally, you do not barge into a room and blurt out your ideas or arguments without some sensitivity to conversational conventions and to the prior interests of other discussants. Even if you want to change the subject, there are more and less gracious and winsome ways of doing so. Now, it may be that *nobody* has published on a particular topic before, and you want to initiate a conversation on that topic. In that case, it is probably advisable to explicitly underline the novelty of your inquiry.

However, normally you will be joining an existing conversation, and so you will be expected to articulate what you see as the significance of your contribution to the conversation, what you will be adding to existing insights or prevailing notions. This need not involve an exhaustive literature review, but should involve reference to some of the key players in the debate you have chosen to engage, as well as a rough account of how your thesis bears on related theses or schools of thought.

While attention to the literature is crucial for your main thesis, sensitivity to existing scholarship should be shown throughout your argument. This means that if you drop a remark that flies in the face of scholarly wisdom, you should cite the relevant literature and indicate, however briefly, why you are dissenting, and so on. Similarly, if you find that you are occasionally taking sides in some controversy, even if this is incidental to your main argument, it is helpful for the reader if you cite the controversy and one or two representative texts on both sides of it. I cannot over-emphasize how much the credibility of a paper is bolstered by an author's patient attention to the scholarship and a genuine effort to demonstrate the significance of the argument in terms of existing debates.

Take Seriously the 'Marketplace of Ideas'

Situating your ideas in the existing literature is an important step toward showing that other scholars should take your ideas seriously. However, an author may situate his or her ideas in the literature and yet fail to market or sell them to the relevant audience. It is not enough just to add something of relevance to existing debates: you must show that you have something to say that people should sit up and listen to carefully, something that will have a genuine impact on prevailing understandings in the discipline. There is no neat formula for opening and closing an "intellectual" sale. But you do need to take the perspective of someone who is not fascinated by everything you are fascinated by, someone who does not share your agenda and interests even if their field of study coincides with yours. Find problems that are, or could be, of general interest in your field of study, and show how your essay sheds fresh light on them. Aim to convince scholars in your field within the first two or three paragraphs that this essay is *really* worth taking a closer look at.

Close the Paper with an Interesting, Relevant, and Thought-Provoking Conclusion

Devoting extra thought and attention to the conclusion of an article can pay rich dividends: a strong conclusion can compensate for weaknesses in other parts of a paper, just as a weak conclusion can weaken an otherwise strong article. There is no fixed rule about conclusions: nonetheless, the conclusion should give the reader the sense that some task has been accomplished, that a narrative of sorts is drawing to a close. Without this sense of closure, the essay's sense of purposefulness evaporates and the reader is left wondering what the point of it all was. One good rule of thumb about conclusions is that they generally convey to the reader that the essay amounted to an interesting and significant scholarly contribution, both on account of its findings and on account of fresh avenues of inquiry that it has opened up.

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Distinguish Between the More and Less Dispensable Elements of Your Essay

By failing to distinguish between the more and less dispensable elements of your argument, you may well add parts to the essay that are more a distraction from than a contribution to the main argument. Develop the habit of distinguishing between arguments that lend substantial support to your main thesis and arguments that are either irrelevant or do not significantly strengthen the thesis. When it comes time to prune back your article, start by eliminating the irrelevant, the peripheral, and especially the more indefensible elements of your essay, and then move on to the inherently defensible but inessential parts. For example, you may find an excursus that is more like an appendix or a lengthy footnote that contributes very little to your main thesis: other things being equal, this should be considered dispensable. Alternatively, you may have four independent arguments for your thesis: if necessary, eliminate the weakest of them, as this is probably inessential and of relatively limited value.

Basically, you should prioritize the different parts of your argument in light of the overall goals of the paper (and occasionally in light of the interests of your readers or prospective publisher). Some parts of your essay, even if dear to your heart, may do more harm than good to your argument: eliminate these parts if it can be done without detracting from the integrity of your work. Consider this basic question when determining priority: how much value does this element *add* to the strength and appeal of the essay as a whole, specifically to the plausibility of its thesis?

Get a Third Party to Read Your Paper Before Submitting It

As authors, we often find our arguments more persuasive and brilliant than the average reader will, partly because we bring many background assumptions to our writing. Getting another scholar—preferably one who has a different or even opposed perspective—to read your work can be invaluable for helping you spot fallacies or weaknesses that may have been overlooked or glossed over.

Edit Your Paper Carefully Before Submitting it!

Read your paper several times to check for basic grammar, spelling, and stylistic errors. An essay riddled with grammar and spelling errors, as well as awkward turns of phrase, makes for an unpleasant read. Furthermore, sloppy writing risks alienating readers and inducing unfavorable attitudes irrespective of the substantive merit of your arguments.

These standards are rules of thumb rather than categorical imperatives. Some are virtually indispensable while others are expendable for stylistic or other reasons. Only the good sense of the good writer can determine to what extent individual rules are binding in particular cases. Furthermore, good writing is an art, not a science, and like all arts, it is acquired chiefly by imitation and practice. However, even the most creative and original work of art is guided by the rules of composition, and the art of writing is surely no exception. I would submit that the basic rules of academic writing do not function as a straightjacket, but as the oxygen necessary for the flames of creativity, beauty, and originality to burn bright.

Note

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