

COMMENTS ON WRITING AN ACADEMIC PAPER WITH A SIMPLE QUALITATIVE VISUAL GUIDE

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ABSTRACT

Academic writing does not have to be complex, authoritative, dry, and well traditionally academic. But, can be simple and colorful while retaining the elements of formality, higher level thinking, thesis focused and with arguments driven by evidence. Having a simple model of what an academic paper should be like would help bring papers to the fore that may not have been written or relegated to lower tier journals or conferences. Simplicity is more so for those whose first language is not English (author and reader) or professionals looking to expand the way they work. Also, by having a simpler style model, where other forms of linguistic nuances can be incorporated adds to the dynamism of language and transferability of the model presented. A balance paper model also allows for better readability of articles in multilingual writing. Based on editing documents (management, human resources, operations, professional, etc.) and extensive reading for my doctorate in management (decision making) I am suggesting a simple visual qualitative guide for writers particularly those based in the Asian region and whose first language is not English. The proposed model is relevant for those wanting to bridge the gap between academics and professionals, gain a realistic aspirational quality of paper, maintain rigor and establish a base for further enhancement of writing. Writing an academic article is not only about presenting academic material but also contributing to wider society. A balanced approach, where all sections are equally attended to would benefit both academic (sharing information, ideas for replication studies, etc.) and professionals (who may be turned off by the pedantic style of academic articles).

Keywords: academic writing, simplicity in writing, balance model, variety of styles

Introduction

Academic writing does not have to be difficult or complicated. Both writer and reader need to appreciate what is written. By understanding and being, hopefully, persuaded by the writer, a reader would be more likely to use the paper or refer the paper to colleagues. However based on my reading, academic writing, presenting at international conferences, and editing academic papers one could profile an author by his writing. An author's country (or region), first language, academic and professional background, and more.

Critical reading is the first part of any writing. One must understand the material themselves, how similar material is presented in different forums, what aspect of the content is important to present, why the material is relevant to others, how the material might be interpreted and where to present the material. "Writing and reading are both creative and interpretive acts..."p.72 (Kara, 2013) which contributes to writing being seen as a complicated act.

Choosing the right journal or conference are among the issues that influence writing style. However, the aim is to have a broad appeal based on presenting balance and usability to whatever is written. The author's first language, editor, and training are the factors I see as most important to those papers written in Thailand. Jaroonkhongdach et al (2012) showed that despite approximately 3250 studies being carried out in English language teaching only 18% is published in any form with 1% in international journals.

The style of writing of this paper may appear non-academic and lacking rigor in some areas, but the personal approach is deliberate. Hence some may ask for more supporting literature and larger literature review but the point is presenting a simpler and balanced approach to academic writing. Emphasis is on content idea and presentation. Contextualization is important but so too are other areas. Think about readability when faced with many sentences being broken by unnecessary references. Consider how many academics read or do further investigation into a paper's reference list. Ask how much value does a reference add besides grounding (or burying) the paper in academic sources. Originality and contribution of material frees the researcher to some extent of the attachment to what was done before.

Hyland and Jiang (2017) discussed the perception that academic writing is becoming more informal, but their study found that it has by only a small margin (<2%) which could be because the volume of writing has increased. However, the idea is that academic papers should be accessible to the reader and not work and thus a variety of elements of styles should be included. However, Rothman (2014) mentioned perhaps for academic writing needs to be expansive again and reach a wider audience.

Keep it simple is the guiding principle in writing. However academic writing has tried to develop an air of complexity that is above the ordinary and in some ways excludes simplicity. However being able to quickly and easily explain one's research (simplicity) is a requirement for most academics at conferences and seeking research grants. Yet papers tend to be dense and cerebral. Usability beyond citation is not considered significant. Working professionals, even with advanced degrees, want supporting material beyond what is presented in an abstract.

Replication studies are relegated and not often done. Sheppard (2015) looked at replication studies as not adding much to the stock of knowledge. But, Baker (2015) found that most replication studies fail to replicate the original research yet methodology, appendices and other supporting material rarely presented. Having details of how the research as done helps in the possibility of replication by future scholars. Usability is critical.

A list of top journals is compiled by the (Chartered) Association of Business Schools with summaries available on websites of Times Higher Education among others. In management, Academy of Management Review and Journal tops the list (TES, 2015). These articles tend to be very attractive at the start, quickly go over methodology and are straight forward at the end.

The Thai style articles that I have read and edited tend to be quantitative and heavy on the Literature Review. There is a reference for most things even statements that may be considered known. Possibly due to the language where numbers are easier to present and to show that there is a basis for what is said. Jaroonkhongdach et al (2012) mentioned that there mostly listing of previous works and little critical analysis of existing literature by Thai authors which may subsequently impact the quality of the discussion section.

Conference papers in the petroleum industry tend to be heavy on what was done and showing off results. Professionals want to know what works and how to use the tools to achieve their goals. Figure 1 shows a relative comparison of styles.

A simple qualitative guide follows Kara (2013) reminder of creativity and interpretation. Reinforcing the suggestion for simplicity and allowing potential authors to be more creative in their writing and papers. Writing by numbers can limit creativity while presenting a template for the author to follow. Having a more open outline is a nudge in the direction of individuality.

Literature Review –

Significant literature on academic writing (AW) and English for academic purposes exist, with several journals dedicated to the subject. Fayolle, 2014 mentioned that editors are looking for something new and exciting yet with rigor. Thus I am not going to repeat much of what is in literature but rather focus on presenting something new. Simplistic models and guides that are transferable among genres and languages are missing. Those looking for an extensive literature review will be disappointed (though significant literature was looked at in detail and less than a third used) but this is deliberate to remind the reader there are other sections equally important. A literature review is not to present everything written on the subject but guide to the reader to and through the paper's other parts using existing related works.

AW in General - Hengl and Gould (2002) suggest a five-part layout for research papers plus an abstract. Six sections plus an abstract is recommended and shown in Fig. 1. Simple rules of thumb given by Hengl and Gould is an attempt to simplify writing research papers and based on a writing course presented by the authors. Soule, Whiteley, and McIntosh (2007) also gave an extensive outline for writing based on a series of lectures given by eSharp Journal to writers and potential writers. The booklet is available online free of charge to help writers develop their skills. These are just two of many examples of guides available by editors on how to write academic papers.

Wingate (2012) mentioned that in teaching academic writing using journals, articles could be intimidating as it set an unachievable standard. However Wingate goes on further to discuss ways of making academic writing more doable by having instructions located in the discipline, online writing support, and courses to help with the journey.

AW from NNES perspective - Salager-Meyer (2014) discussed the role of regional journals as complementing mainstream journals while providing opportunities to academics to meet local needs and develop the writing skills to reach a wider audience. Tas (2010) mentioned that authorial identity markers exist in writing among similar groups (linguistic, experience, subject, etc.). Non-native speakers have an extra hurdle when writing for international publications, but they also have more opportunities for publishing in various languages and using different style elements.

One reason why Thai style papers may not have the impact that others have is that most Thai base authors are writing in their second language which is primarily restricted for educational purposes. Not being comfortable with English and using editors that may not be familiar with the topic limits the ability to make an impact in the Abstract. Jaroonkhongdach et al (2012) mentioned that articles published by Thai academics tend to be of lower quality than those by international authors. Phothongsunan (2016) highlighted the need for writing support for Thai academics who feel challenged at many levels (need, stimulating interest, handling feedback, etc.) when writing in English. Wingate (2012) mentioned the need for department writing specialist (subject matter fluent) to help other academics write. Gea-Valor, Rey-Rocha, and Moreno (2014) said that Spanish scholars also demand more training on English for Research Publication Purposes with there being two different writing cultures (and associated rhetorical and stylistic features) among bilingual researchers.

AW Models – Electronic programs provides templates for academic papers. Most of the articles I have edited at my institute follow a model that leans towards the quantitative. Lo, Liu and Wang (2014) showed off a genre-based writing tutorial system for non-native English speakers with the paper itself following the suggested template. However despite having hundreds of phrase templates and examples, unfortunately, models still leads to papers looking and sounding similar. One can identify the geographic zone of writers by reading papers. The template outline used can reduce color and individuality. Jalongo (2013) presented a template for writing academic articles and presenting at conferences which are based on self-assessment.

Texas A&M University's POWER Model aims to support academics in their writing, particularly those at the University. Other Universities have similar programs as outreach usually via their language departments. However, in Thai universities and other non-western style universities, this writing outreach is lacking.

AW alternatives -Bilingual authors, have an advantage by bringing elements of other forms of writing and expressions to academia. Kara (2013) is an excellent example of reflective writing that is academic yet uses a fictional style in its approach. Kara chooses a fictional approach to show the messier side of research including emotions. The emotional aspects of writing, rejections, and rewriting can be incorporated into an article. Spires et al. (1999) used autobiographical writing for their students to progress in writing. Adopting a similar approach, starting from the basics again, can help writers explore ways of presenting their research.

Methodology –

A reflective approach using a living experience as a student, academic and professional simultaneously. Based on writing and editing academic papers, writing articles for media outlets, writing business documents for small businesses, being involved in technical documentation and reporting in large petroleum companies, presenting technical conference papers, and reading literally hundreds of papers (as a doctoral candidate, work and for fun), a suggestion is made on how to link the different styles of writings despite the different audiences. A short biography is given in Appendix A.

Matua and Van (2015) described how phenomenological studies have evolved into a more interpretive form where experiences are contextualized and further meaning made. Thus Finlay (2012) argued using a first person account can be a powerful way to bring lived experiences to others using a poetic-narrative form. Similarly, I have tried an approach where my current situation exposes me to many of the issues that others face. Hence preunderstanding is incorporated into the paper to help bring understanding to the idea.

Adapting Magrini (2016) call for a larger conversation among disciplines and the dynamism of education there is room for larger use of more poetic language of phenomenology in describing research. Language use can help engagement in the research. By looking at the various language employed in articles a bigger picture emerges, that is, the overall balance among the parts. Reading further to assess the various parts, especially being based in Thailand, one can get a sense of the different section strengths. Reading, reading and reading some more is the best way to understand the differences among the different styles of writing. Working in Thailand offers an opportunity to understand the nuances of writing. Those not working in the region can observe (or experience) a similar understanding through extensive reading. Numbers are not mentioned because understanding is subjective.

In cases where a phenomenological leaning approach is used there is rich use of language that is narrative, descriptive and interpretive. Thus academic language show richness in approaches. By trying to bring that variety to a wider spectrum of articles one is using what is available in a slightly different sense. Bradley (2015) mentioned that academic writing is an enjoyable adventure in thought with most writers going through several emotional and thought stages. Finlay (2012), Parry (2003) and Kara (2013) are examples that this paper tries to emulate.

Writing can be seen as a product of reading. Bramford and Day (1997) highlighted some of the benefits of extensive reading in relation to writing. Others have also highlighted the writing-reading relationship especially to second language learners. For writers, familiarity to the range of styles is crucial to writing better which does not mean more complex but rather simplifying the subject under discussion. A thorough literature review leads to extensive reading but seeking out other genres and styles is important to developing an overall style and understanding of putting forward convincing arguments.

The model

Model - A suggested model based on my findings aims for simplicity. The idea is not to aim for high impact but still be impactful. Not aiming for the highest level reduces the stress that an author may feel in trying to reach an intimidating level. Using an overall view rather than specific helps the writer place what is written in context and keeping the focus on the rationale for writing.

The abstract is the most important part of any paper, and most likely to be the only part to be read thus needs to have a strong impact. According to the Remlar (2014) writing in the Smithsonian Magazine mentioned that the citation rate varies among disciplines with from 88% in medicine (which have more researchers) to 18 % in humanities with natural science at 73% and social science at 68%. Abstract presents the crux of the paper and is also most easily available to those without access to different databases (and hence full article). Hengl and Gould (2002) said that while less than 5% published articles are read, but 50% of abstracts are, thus abstracts should present a standalone story.

The introduction can be more relaxed as the author is introducing the paper and setting the stage for the rest of the paper. At the start of the paper, an author can spend the time to develop the story outline in their words. Gea-Valor, Rey-Rocha, and Moreno (2014) study reflected what Flowerdew (1999) and others said however that the introduction is one of the hardest to write because framing an interesting story can be involved with the required prose and discourse style.

In the introduction also define terms and instill a sense of the why the author thinks the research is necessary. For an author, it would help reduce the number of hedging words used which adds a sense of caution to the writing (Oprit-Maftei, 2016).

A robust **literature review** is required for rigor and contextualizing the relative importance of what is written. Literature review shows the pertinent, seminal and supportive; not to show you have read have everything. Establish the support, show other

models and critics to place your work among the pantheon of academics. Jaroonkhongdach et al (2012) suggested critical engagement of the existing literature is important though cultural reasons may prevent this criticism. Not everything that is read need to be included. Focus on the work's relevance to building and supporting your story.

Methodology needs to be strong, but replication studies are losing luster and not done as much as before thus an author not need many details but still provide a structure that shows robustness, logic, and thoroughness. Consider how easy is someone to replicate the study based on the methodology. The easier it is for someone to repeat the experiment the better. Having a website link to further information and details is useful. Make it easy for others.

Findings and analysis need to provide material that is useable by academics and professionals. Results of surveys can be added in this section or as an appendix so others can draw their conclusions. Visuals help break the monotony of text. Honesty and objectivity are critical. Presenting positive and negative learnings can be good. Most writers are uncomfortable showing negative results (Fanelli, 2011) but knowing what NOT to do can be just useful as what TO DO.

In the **discussion and application** section are sometimes limited because the academic is not a practitioner though producing tools that a practitioner can use. How to use the results is critical in the discussion. Gea-Valor, Rey-Rocha, and Moreno (2014) mentioned that the discussion section is one of the hardest for non-native English speakers (Spanish in their paper) to write because of the rhetorical and discourse features required. Presenting the usage of the research can help with the impact by focusing on practicality which requires a different set of linguistic tools.

A firm **conclusion** is needed as most people read the abstract then conclusion before getting into the paper. Repeat what is the point made by the paper and place the findings in context for future usage. Jalongo (2013) suggested moving from specific to general which is opposite from the introduction from general to specific.

One area not looked at is the title. A short snappy relevant and leading title helps. Think about one's elevator pitch or dinner talk. How easy is it to say your title and others to pass it on to others? The easier, the better. I have seen many titles that could be shortened and still give an idea what is in the paper.

At the end of the paper, during the review, an author should think of the paper and look over to see a balance among sections (see Fig. 1).

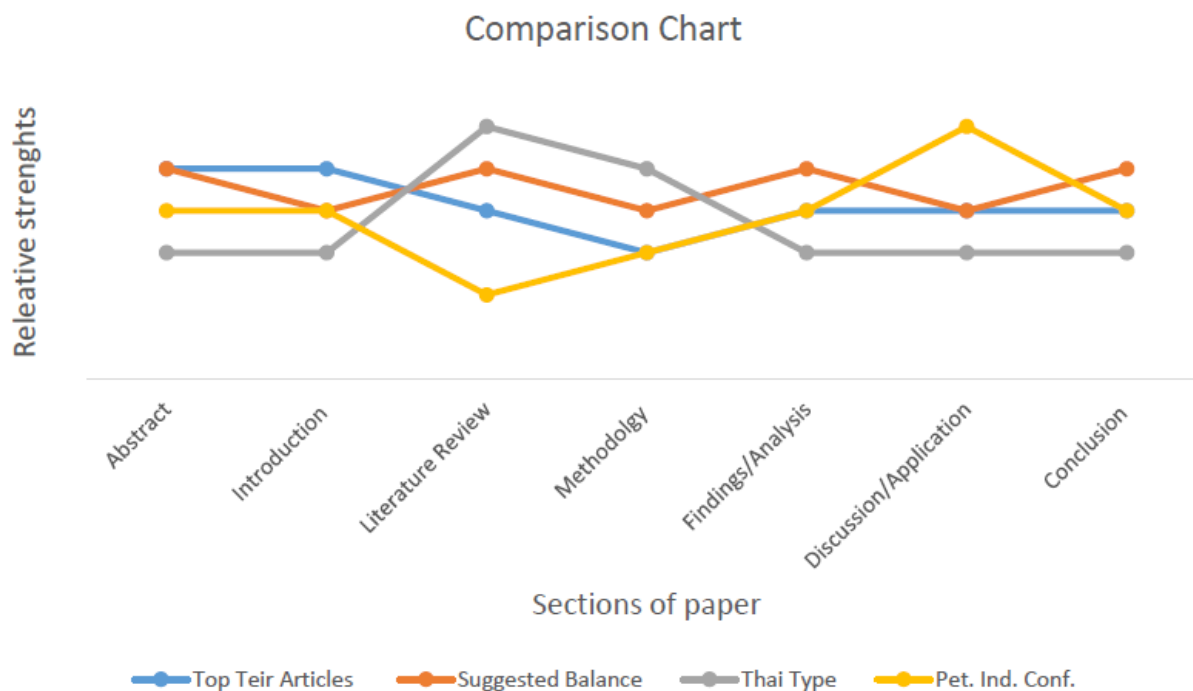


Figure 1 A comparison chart of different article types and relative section strengths

The model shows a balanced article where all parts carry the same weight. The idea is that there needs to be some linking with the professional group.

Discussion –

The approach shown here may seem simplistic and underwhelming after all a paper should be strong in all areas. Not aiming to be the best in all sectors might seem counterintuitive but the goal is to have a solid useable base that novices can realistically aspire too. Support for Thai academics and others from peripheral countries is needed to develop skills in academic writing with noticeable differences between native and non-native researchers in Thailand (Jaroonkhongdach et al, 2012). By presenting a realistically aspirational model those that may not have the support can still maneuver their way upwards.

Jalongo (2013) said, “Published writing is complicated because it tends to use all five modes of discourse at various times and to various degrees” p.18. Reducing the complexity on a macro scale would help lift the focus on the micro scale, which is the actual writing. Most guides tend to concentrate on specifics parts and transitions among parts but not overall.

English as a second language is another important consideration for the suggested balance approach. As there are more researchers publishing in the Lingua Franca that is English, there is a need for a model that makes publication reachable. One reason why some researchers prefer a quantitative approach is there is less need for that rich, thick descriptive writing that is expected in qualitative studies. More so for the Arts, Social and Managerial departments where case studies, ethnographical and phenomenological studies are particularly useful. By not aiming for the highest level at all levels allows the writer to be more comfortable in expressing himself using the nuances that may be more relatable to others non-native English speakers. Spires et al. (1999) showed that an autobiographical approach to writing lead to more authentic, expressive, helpful and if not fun. Writing as an expression of one self can help better communicate ideas especially if in one’s own words. Therefore academic writing can be diverse but getting a balance can be difficult especially if not in one’s native language.

Communicating at various levels and to various audiences (local and global) are important for academic who not only what to share their research, lift their profile and benefit the community. Salager-Meyer (2014) suggestion that local journals combine to lift standards while maintaining their role as an outlet for academics to reach the local community is supported. The idea is to reach an appropriate audience with a quality statement hence allowing non-native English speakers opportunities to write in the local language.

Academic writing can be fusty but having elements from various languages and styles can add color to the material in academia. Rothman (2014) said, “Academic writing and research may be knotty and strange, remote and insular, technical and specialized, forbidding and clannish-but that’s because academia has become that way, too.” Carrera (2016) mentioned the role editors play particularly to non-native English speakers' papers, sometimes taking out the authors' style and intent, and thus rendering the paper bland. Grammatically and linguistically correct but bland. However as Kara (2013) hinted to that academic writing may be more creative than seems.

Many lecturers and professors are concern about the impact factor thus aim to have their work published at the highest level as possible, and English is the medium that spread the word. However as Monastersky (2005) mentioned that impact factor is wrongly used. Also as stated by Larivière, Gingras, and Archambault (2009) there has been a decline in the concentration of citations with more available journals online, which may influence impact factor. Ironically usability helps with impact.

One concern not aiming for not aiming at the highest impact at all levels is mediocrity may set in. However, the focus is getting onto the ladder by setting a realistic target. As skills and ambition grow so to the desire to push to a higher level.

One eloquently put case for simplicity and effectiveness can be read in The Economist (2016) where the author argues why Trump’s basic rhetoric (simple, repetitive, easy to remember, unscripted talk) is good at reaching people. Perhaps using elements from outside academia to create a fusion of styles can help the writer, reader and wider community be more involved in the research work presented.

Limitations –

A metadata analysis on current literature would have been useful in persuading reader about the suggestion. Using an opinionated approach with minimal quantitative data brings the personal approach to academic writing which this author believes is important particularly to bridge the gap between academic and non-academic writing. Further studies can confirm or reject the proposed model.

Scientific writing is not considered in this paper but based on literature the issues are similar. There may be a better approach, and further investigation is needed.

Conclusion –

There is no one best way to write an article with dependencies on many factors (journal requirements, paper type, language, etc.) but as an overall view balance is necessary. Most academic articles this author have read in his management doctoral journey, as a technical professional in the oil industry and editor tend to lack balance. Though academic writing can be daunting, especially for non-native English speakers, it is does not have to be. Guides for academic writing exist however by adding a simple visual model to the literature the message can be enhanced, and the gap between academic and professional papers can be reduced. The impact of balance among the various sections is necessary while using simple, clear and coherent writing which can incorporate elements from different writing styles to accommodate those outside academia, non-English speakers and readers.

Appendix A

A short background of the researcher.

Mariano gained a degree in Geology from University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, an MBA from University of Strathclyde, Scotland, and currently pursuing a doctor of management with the University of Phoenix, USA. After teaching high school for one year in Jamaica, Mariano moved into the petroleum industry as a geologist which included writing technical reports and documentation in Trinidad and Tobago, Oman, United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. The author is, as of June 2017, working in Thailand as a lecturer in Management while writing as a freelancer for local media outlets, writing and editing material for small businesses in Pattaya and editing academic material for other teachers and researchers.

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