

10. Suggestions for strengthening the discussion section and increasing your odds of publication success

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INTRODUCTION

What section of a paper do you read first? The Introduction? Did you know that many reviewers and editors read the Discussion first? Surprised? Don't be, as this section is **where readers learn about how a paper's story adds uniquely to knowledge**. An effective Discussion will identify the research purpose, the paper's unique insight, and then provide an elaboration of the contribution's meaning and implications. If your paper offers a new advance, the reader should find it in the Discussion. If your paper does not offer a new contribution, the reader will find that out too. In many ways, the Discussion section is where the author showcases the paper's contribution. You want it to be a big bang and not a whimper, which, I'm sorry to say, is usually what happens.

Using my experience as a long-term reviewer (20 years or so) and as an associate editor of three top journals for more than 12 years now, I want to share with you that I usually run into big problems when I read the Discussion sections of new manuscripts. These outcomes are disappointing, as authors have usually invested considerable resources in creating an impressive model and data set while reviewers discover that the authors do not leverage the uniqueness about their research to provide a new and meaningful insight.

There is good news though. Many problems with contribution can be anticipated and resolved before submission. In the following sections, I offer some suggestions on how to define and develop your paper's contributions and Discussion and align them with journals' requirements. Hopefully, these points will help you bring your paper to publication easier, faster and with more fun. And, critically, avoid the ever increasing odds of desk rejection.

SUGGESTION 1: OBJECTIVE

Consider first your motivation for writing a paper. If the purpose of writing your paper is just to publish it, then you might not invest the effort into making it interesting and novel, and your lack of enthusiasm may become apparent to reviewers and editors. If you are not interested in the work *per se*, then why expect the readers to become so?

When authors are passionate about their work, the motivation, argumentation and implications become exciting. Ask yourself: How can you make your paper's story poignant and compelling? If your purpose is to offer a strong, unique and confident voice to a conversation, then your story is going to be more engaging to the paper's evaluators. What is interesting about your research? Does it have broad appeal? Does it pertain to a critical social issue? Think about what makes your research interesting. Be mindful that reviewers will assess your paper's contribution in terms of the breadth and depth of the contribution and whether it is surprising and of clear importance (Rynes, 2002). You might think too about whether your paper may have a competitive advantage in the marketplace of ideas – what is rare and valuable about your paper's story (Bergh, 2003)? All of this begins with a clear definition of your work's objective and why it is important.

Imagine what Discussion sections look like when the authors are not vested in the work versus when they are. If the Discussion is boring and repetitious, focuses on empirical findings rather than on developing a story, and does not proclaim the advance and its merits, then do you really think the reviewers and editors are going to spend their time seeking out the paper's diamond in all of the rough that surrounds it?

SUGGESTION 2: MATURITY

Many papers seem to be submitted prematurely. In these papers, the conceptual stories are usually not well developed. Within the Discussion, the content tends to focus on the findings rather than linking them to supporting a story. I recommend that you prioritize your paper's story over the data and findings. Think about it like this: The evidence is used to support the contribution and is not a substitute for it. Think long and hard about what the findings and arguments really mean in terms of supporting a novel and valuable conceptual story before submitting the paper. Let your ideas ripen. Think too about what future research might sprout from your story.

Closely related to this point is the case when authors submit their papers to journals with the hope of receiving a revision outcome or to simply get feedback so as to revise the paper for submission elsewhere. Such objectives seem to ignore the major reasons why we read papers in the first place and why some succeed in the peer review process. If the contribution is not well developed, then authors will not likely receive comments on the most important aspect of their paper in the first place and will just waste the time and resources of everyone involved.

SUGGESTION 3: MOTIVATION

Contributions need to be built upon strong foundations. This matter goes for both the Introduction and Discussion. Different types of foundations exist and typically fall into one of two categories: theories or findings. Most problematic Discussion sections focus on the latter. However, if you are attempting to make a compelling case for your paper, the motivation for the contribution is generally more convincing if it is rooted in revising or expanding explanations and understandings. Can you challenge conventional wisdom?

I mentioned the problems with empirical motivations. Many submissions have a motivation of “resolving differences in reported empirical findings is the reason for my study.” This approach sets off alarm bells in my mind. I remember in graduate school being told by Professor Luis Gómez-Mejía to not write papers that attempt to “add a pebble to a pile of rocks.” Papers whose motivations are based on resolving differences in empirical findings can lose sight of addressing possible problems in explanations and descriptions. Frankly, if an author is really interested in addressing differences in empirical results, then adding another study to the mix is simply going to be considered as yet another pebble to support one side over the other. If the authentic objective is to resolve differences in empirical findings, then a meta-analysis that synthesizes a literature’s findings and empirically assesses the strength of moderators existing across some set of studies is more appropriate than another single study. Keep in mind that reconciling different theoretical explanations for a relationship elevates the conversation to the level that becomes necessary to make a meaningful contribution. From this perspective, findings can be construed as evidence for a conceptual insight.

I see motivation as having different levels. Empirical motivations are lower and less interesting than theoretical ones, which help us explain phenomenon and behaviors. In the latter case, the data take a supporting role.

SUGGESTION 4: STRUCTURE

A strong contribution will typically have three features. First, it will be clearly articulated relative to a research question. Second, the contribution will be defined, explained and developed. Third, it will be positioned relative to existing understanding so the reader can understand how the paper's unique story extends or revises current knowledge. Organizing a discussion around these three features will help reviewers and editors clearly interpret your paper's contribution, provide them with structure for offering their reactions to it, and ensure that the value-added of your research is clear and accessible.

SUGGESTION 5: TARGETING

Finally, contribution can take different forms and types. At least three exist: (1) a new advance for theory and topic; (2) a new advance for topic, but not theory, and (3) a new advance to theory, but not to topic (Bergh, 2008). The type of contribution offered by your paper needs to align with the journal's objective. Realize that journals seek to publish specific kinds of contributions. If you are targeting a top academic journal, then your paper likely needs to offer an advance for both theory and topic (see type (1) above). If you are targeting the next level of journals, then your paper might apply extant theory in order to derive a new insight into a topic (see type (2)). Many new submissions are rejected because the type of contribution that they can offer does not align with what the journal seeks to publish. From my experience, some papers can be shifted among these types, such that a paper's publication prospects can be significantly enhanced. This development often occurs during a revision process involving highly engaged authors and reviewers working together (Bergh, 2006). Still, leave the guesswork out and be careful to choose a target journal that most closely aligns with the kind of contribution that your paper strives to offer. You will save yourself much time in the publication process.

CONCLUSION

In closing, based on my experience as a long-time reviewer and editor, most new submissions do not include several of the above points. I recommend that you carefully consider Discussion sections and what you can do to make those in your papers as strong and compelling as

possible. Read them closely so you, and your readers, can better understand what any paper offers the literature.

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