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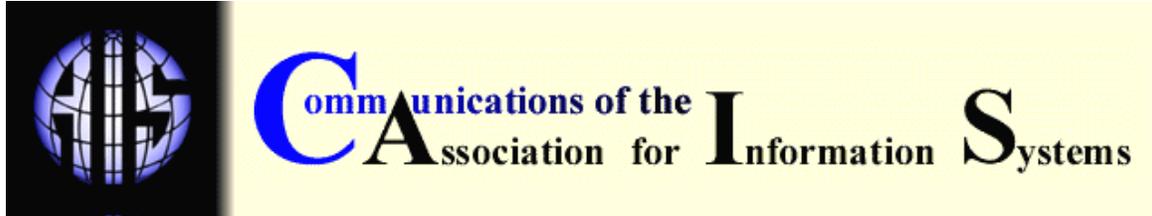Follow this and additional works at: https://aisel.aisnet.org/cais

CRAFTING A PAPER FOR PUBLICATION

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between doing good research and getting the research published is not a causal one. At best, there is a correlation between the quality of a research paper and its being accepted for publication. A research paper's becoming accepted for publication is ultimately a social process, which exists in addition to and is no less important than the content of the paper itself. In this article, I examine how the social process can influence the crafting of a paper for submission to a journal, and re-crafting it in the event that the journal's editor asks for a revision.

Keywords: writing, ethics, review process, scholarship, theory

I. INTRODUCTION

Gary Dickson entered my life in 1986. I was an untenured assistant professor at Northeastern University, eager to do everything needed to get tenure. Earlier that year, my dean's office asked me to attend the AACSB Faculty Development Institute for five weeks in the summer at the University of Minnesota. A realization of the core value, held by genuine scholars, that the endeavor to learn is as much of a virtue as the endeavor to teach, the institute provided the opportunity for professors, new to information systems, to take the very information-systems courses that they would be teaching. Few, if any, other information-systems professors have ever had, much less taken advantage of, such an opportunity to learn how to teach. A founder of the institute and a champion of its values, Gary was in charge of the institute that summer.

Having achieved no recognition for my research and hoping to get advice from a luminary, I armed myself with a bunch of my working papers when I approached Gary for his advice about how to get published. He listened patiently as I recounted all the injustices and indignities I experienced in the rejections of the papers I had submitted to numerous journals and conferences. Sure, Gary gave me substantive advice about how to do good research, but he also impressed upon me a lesson about everything else – i.e., everything *in addition to the good research* – that requires attention for getting one's papers accepted for publication. A research paper's becoming accepted for publication is ultimately a social process, which exists in addition to and is no less important than the paper itself. In other words, the relationship between doing good research and getting the research published is not a causal one. At best, there is only a correlation between the quality of the research and its being accepted for publication. The least that I can do, in acknowledgment of the difference that Gary has made to me, is to pass the lesson on to others, where I call upon my experiences over the past 20 years to flesh out and build on the lesson.

II. THE CONTEXT FOR CRAFTING A PAPER

"To craft" means "to make or produce with care, skill, or ingenuity."[1] Simply writing a paper does not, in itself, rise to the level of crafting a paper. A researcher needs not only to write a paper so that it contains valid content, but also to craft the paper so that it addresses the larger social and intellectual context in which the researcher is forging his or her overall research career. The context includes the research project of which the given paper (and hopefully, other papers) will be a product, and also the foundational research program, established by the researcher, which has given rise to this research project (and hopefully, other research projects). The research worthiness of a paper is tied to the research worthiness of the overall research enterprise from which the paper emerges. And then, outside of the given research enterprise, there is the additional context of the community of scholars, which includes their institutions, such as journals, and their social practices, such as the review process.[2]

Doctoral students and assistant professors often share with me their enthusiasm about the research papers that they are planning to write. More often than not, I see that the planned research is good. I emphasize to them, however, that good research is not enough. I ask them if there are articles published in top research journals that provide the theory, the basis for the theory, or the theoretical framework which they plan to use when conducting their research.   If yes, then I ask them to identify the specific articles. Unless the paper to be written will draw on and contribute to theory already in existence in published articles, there will be no audience for the paper – which, in turn, means there will be no reviewers or editors familiar with the research that the paper conveys. In other words, without prospective customers for the research reported in a paper, the paper will have no buyers.

As for whether or not a research market exists for a planned paper, a good indication can be found in the articles already published in our top journals. I often recommend to new scholars that they identify what they consider to be the top four or five journals in our field, to scan the table of contents and the abstracts in each issue of them for at least the last five years, and then, whenever an abstract appears relevant to one's research interests, to read the entire article. Will one's envisioned research paper sincerely and substantially draw on and contribute to the research already published in the top journals in our field? If yes, then an audience for the envisioned paper exists, and one would have an audience to target when writing and positioning the paper. In other words, one would have customers interested in buying what the author wants to sell, where some important customers would be reviewers for journals and conferences, the members of one's dissertation committee, and the people who will be attending one's job talk   If no, then one would need to revisit and perhaps reengineer his or her research ideas. No audience means no customers to buy what the researcher is selling.[3]

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[1] *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* from Encyclopædia Britannica 2006 Ultimate Reference Suite DVD. [Accessed June 13, 2007].

[2] My own "foundational research program" has been to contribute to moving the information-systems field forward by introducing to it certain methodological and philosophical insights already achieved in and available from other fields. Within this program, one specific "research project" has been to advocate for, and to demonstrate the scientific status of, research approaches that go beyond the statistical. Within this research project, I have authored papers on case research, interpretive research, hermeneutical research, critical research, and action research and I have engaged in related conference activities. Also within the same foundational research program, another specific research project of mine has been to establish relationships between different research approaches. A researcher's foundational research program, research projects, and research papers (those completed and those in development) make up what I am calling the researcher's overall research enterprise.

[3] The buyer-seller analogy is only an analogy. This analogy holds that customers know what they want and they pay for it. An author, of course, does not get paid by readers, reviewers, or

In addition to the buyer-seller analogy, I also offer the goal-constraint distinction for a researcher to keep in mind when developing a research strategy. By "goal," I am referring to the end result that one wishes to achieve; by "constraint," I am referring to the availability or lack of power, ability, resources, or other means that one needs in order to achieve the goal. Whereas satisfying the customer is always a prudent thing to do, satisfying the customer is only a *constraint* that a scholar must satisfy; it is not the *goal* or end result that a scholar strives to achieve. The job of a true scholar is not merely to satisfy constraints, but also to optimize the extent to which he or she achieves the goal of making a genuine contribution to knowledge, moving the field forward, and perhaps even making a difference to the world outside of academia. The knowledge that one seeks to contribute ought to be knowledge that one passionately believes in – even if, and especially if, no one else (yet) believes in it. Such a goal would reflect the love of knowledge which motivated one to pursue his or her doctorate in the first place. Research that meets constraints only sufficiently to get published, and makes no contribution to knowledge, is not legitimate research. Sadly, there are some scholars who look upon publishing as a game, where getting an acceptance means nothing more than satisfying the utilitarian constraint of keeping one's job, getting a raise, or finding a job at a different institution.

In the field of information systems, some examples of a scholar's goal are 1) the contribution of new knowledge that explains the circumstances under which information technology will up-skill or down-skill workers, and liberate or restrict their creativity; 2) the contribution of new knowledge that will enable managers to improve the acceptance of technology in their organizations; 3) the contribution of new knowledge about how businesses can use information technology to become more competitive; and 4) the contribution of new knowledge about different roles that information technology can play in improving economic growth in developing countries. Examples of constraints are: 1) the availability of limited laboratory facilities or just one field site for collecting data, which must be completed in, say, a three-month period; 2) the resistance of the majority of researchers to the approach that one happens to prefer; 3) a certain minimum number of papers to be published within a span of, say, five years; and 4) the lack of experts in one's field (and hence the lack of qualified dissertation committee members, reviewers, and editors) who are familiar with the literature, taken from a different field, that one wishes to use as the theoretical basis in one's research program. Constraints can even compel a researcher to revisit his or her goal and, if the goal is retained, then perhaps to extend one's time horizon (where, for example, one continues to work toward the goal, but at a more modest and realistic pace, so as to anticipate achieving the goal only after one becomes a tenured professor rather than when one is still a doctoral student or assistant professor). Sometimes, constraints can be so binding that they require the researcher to take a fresh start, leading to a completely different research paper, research project, or research program.

III. CRAFTING THE PAPER

After establishing that there is indeed a context that is sufficiently conducive for crafting a paper from one's research, one is ready to get down to the nuts and bolts of writing it. Ron Weber, who succeeded me as editor-in-chief of *MIS Quarterly*, offered six rules for enhancing the likelihood of a successful submission when he and I used to conduct the *MIS Quarterly* New Authors Workshop, held annually as a pre-conference activity in conjunction with the International Conference on Information Systems. At the last ICIS, I had the pleasure of conducting the workshop with Carol Saunders, *MIS Quarterly*'s current editor-in-chief. In the following, I present some of Ron's and Carol's points (some, verbatim) and combine them with my own points.

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editors, and they do not always know what they want anyway. And researchers have a responsibility to pursue innovative research even when it does not "sell" – that is, research that readers, reviewers, and editors do not (or not yet) see the value of. The buyer-seller analogy is similarly limited when one describes students as customers.

First, *an author should know the journal that she will be submitting her paper to*. It is a mistake to write the paper first and then, only subsequently, to look for a journal where it might go. Knowing the journal involves: 1) reading it; 2) knowing who and what schools of thought have published in it; 3) familiarizing oneself with the helpful information often found on the journal's Web site; 4) knowing the journal's different departments or types of papers (e.g., at *MIS Quarterly*, they are research articles, research notes, research essays, theory and review papers, and issues and opinions papers); and 5) reading the journal's editorial statements and noting how the journal's editorial policy may have recently changed. If the paper, once written, contains no references to studies already published in the journal, then the body of knowledge to which the author intends the paper to make a contribution would be located, if anywhere, in other journals, not the target journal; the author should then consider reengineering, not just retrofitting, the paper for submission to the target journal or submitting the paper to one of the other journals. (Reengineering involves a sincere effort to improve the paper's argument by changing it. Retrofitting involves only cosmetic changes where the preexisting argument is left largely intact. A paper that is retrofitted when it needs to be reengineered will not hold together when scrutinized by reviewers and other astute readers.) In any case, an author should be familiar with the target journal before writing a single word of the paper.

Second, *an author should try to write from the perspective of the readership of the target journal.* Ron has advised, "From the outset, craft your paper using the [journal's] genre" and "Don't use a thesis genre." A special case of the latter is the attempt to telescope an entire dissertation into a single paper. When screening manuscripts to determine their worthiness to be sent to reviewers, an editor can find these attempted condensations tormenting to read, with the result that the editor screens the paper out of the review process. The importance of writing from the perspective of the readership, not just one's own perspective, also emerges when we consider the difference between writing up and packaging a paper for a positivist American journal as opposed to an interpretive European journal. Unfortunately, the modus operandi of many an author seems to be one of ignoring whatever audience the reviewer or editor might be a member of and then simply downloading a multitude of ideas from one's mind to the paper. (This is what senior citizens in the information-systems research community might call the "core dump" style of writing.) An additional consideration is for the author to anticipate how readers could be misled or confused by the phrase, sentence, or paragraph that he or she has just written. Just because all of one's salient ideas have been downloaded into the paper does not mean that they are presented in a way that would allow a reader to grasp and appreciate them. Readers should be challenged, but they should be challenged by provocative ideas, not by reader-unfriendly writing. It is not enough just to write a paper; one must also craft it.

Third, *an author needs to know who sits on the target journal's editorial board* and how they feel about different kinds of research, especially the kind in the paper that the author is thinking about writing for the journal. Are there any editorial board members who are welcoming, or intolerant, of the author's methodology or school of thought? Are there any editorial board members whose own research the author can identify with (and perhaps should cite)? Doing homework on the personalities who sit on the editorial board becomes all the more important if the target journal allows an author to nominate, from its many editorial board members, one or more of them to serve as the editor for the paper submitted by the author. Doing such homework can include the following: visiting the editorial board members' Web sites, looking up their research in ABI-Inform and the Web of Science, actually reading some of this research, and going to conferences to attend panels and paper presentations where any editorial board members will be speaking.

Fourth, in writing up a paper so that it becomes something that "customers" (editors, reviewers, dissertation committee members) would buy, *an author should never give the store away*. Here, giving the store away means relinquishing one's goal of making a genuine contribution to knowledge, moving the field forward, and perhaps even making a difference to the world outside of academia. Packaging and positioning the paper only for the purpose of making it appeal to customers would be doing nothing more than only satisfying a constraint in the review process. Making a genuine contribution to knowledge would require, in addition, setting a goal and making progress toward it.

Dispensing with having a goal would undercut all the efforts that one had put into pursuing the Ph.D. degree in the first place.

Fifth, *theory must be present in and central to any paper to be submitted to a research journal*. We academic researchers are not necessarily smarter than journalists or laypeople, but we take a perspective and apply a research imagination that allows us to contribute knowledge (i.e., "theory") which is different from the knowledge that journalists and everyday people can contribute. "Theory" has many definitions, but whatever the definition, it is a necessary component in the knowledge developed by academic researchers. Without theory, a scholar would be making no contribution to scholarly knowledge.

Sixth, *an author should consider the merits of inviting a trusted colleague to be a co-author*. In her *MIS Quarterly* New Authors' Workshop remarks, Carol Saunders has pointed out that a co-author can bring data, have methodological or writing skills that the author lacks, provide support (as traditionally done by former dissertation committee chairs), help make the experience of researching and writing be more enjoyable, and provide learning opportunities (such as learning tacit knowledge about the review process). As for complementary skills, a good example would involve a quantitative researcher newly interested in case studies who, by working with a co-author who already knows case-study research, could more expeditiously craft a case-study paper likely to be accepted for publication.

Seventh, as Ron Weber has emphasized, *authors should reflect on ethical issues*. There are the ethics of provenance: is the research in the paper rooted in other papers or other research, whether one's own or others', and are all sources properly cited and credited? There are the ethics of resubmitting rejected papers: resubmitting a rejected paper, with no changes or only cosmetic changes, to a different editor at the same journal is unethical and, if found out, can damage one's reputation. Even if the paper were to contain some substantial changes, a prudent approach would be to make the original editor aware of the resubmission. And there are the ethics of co-authoring. Did each author (in particular, oneself) make sufficient contributions to deserve being credited as an author? Might certain assistants deserve credit as co-authors rather than simply receive a footnoted acknowledgment? In a future paper, is an author allowed to use, as one's own, material from an earlier co-authored paper where the material was contributed by the co-author? Ethical issues are often not easily resolved, but nonetheless must receive consideration.

Last, *a research paper needs to satisfy assorted hygiene requirements*. Is there any lack of subject-verb agreement? Are there any dangling modifiers? Is all punctuation correct? Is there any lack of parallel structure? Are the right prepositions being used and are articles (a, an, the) being used or omitted properly? Does the paper really have a beginning, a middle, and an end? Is the paper too long? Might the paper require a professional editor? Satisfying these and other hygiene requirements is necessary, but never sufficient, for a paper to get published. I have seen papers, including my own, become the target of cruel comments from reviewers for what they believed to be poor writing. A reviewer of one of my own papers suggested that I get a co-author who could write. I do not condone cruelty, but an author should avoid triggering it in the first place.

IV. SUBMITTING THE PAPER, AND WAITING

It is easy to format and electronically submit a paper according to a journal's guidelines. The hard part is the waiting afterwards. If the review process seems to be moving too slowly, what might the author do?

A journal might provide a Web site where authors can use a manuscript number to look up their paper and see how many reviews have, so far, been received. If it seems that too few reviews have been received and too much time has passed by, an author might contact the journal's editorial office, which is sometimes staffed by a doctoral student or a full-time administrative employee; this is good for not bothering the editor unnecessarily. But if it is necessary to contact the editor, then e-mail provides a fairly unobtrusive way to do it. If communicating with the editor in a real-time conversation, an author should avoid giving the impression of negotiating the terms of a contract for his or her paper to be accepted.

The hardest part of the submission process is seeing an e-mail from the editor appear in one's in-box, where the subject line clearly indicates that the e-mail is about the submitted paper. Opening up the e-mail and reading it just before one goes to teach a class can ruin the class if

the e-mail contains bad or mixed news. Not opening up the e-mail but letting it sit in the in-box will ruin the class anyway. Then again, one might be lucky enough to have a co-author who takes care of submitting the paper and communicating with the editor.

V. RECRAFTING THE PAPER FOR THE SAME OR A DIFFERENT JOURNAL

Whether the editor decides to reject the paper or ask for a revision, the editor's and reviewers' comments can be quite effective in demolishing one's ego. To describe an author's typical reaction as feeling insulted, hurt, disrespected, misunderstood, maligned, attacked, denigrated, disparaged, vilified, abused, patronized, dismissed, and condemned would be an understatement – and this is when the editor is asking for a revision. Some authors, in the heat of the moment, are tempted to shoot off an e-mail to the editor, telling the editor everything wrong with the reviews. One should not do this. For many, the best course of action is simply to set aside the editor's and reviewers' comments for two weeks (even senior scholars do this) while getting on with one's life. And there is no need to tell anyone right away that one has heard from the editor, even or especially if the editor's decision was to reject the paper. In fact, sometimes there is no need to mention to anyone that one has submitted a paper to this or that journal in the first place (but an exception to this would involve schools where senior-level colleagues are closely following an assistant professor's research activity so that they can provide feedback and support to the assistant professor).

Two weeks are usually sufficient to provide the distance needed to approach the comments of the editor and reviewers dispassionately. Still, the author need not necessarily believe or accept everything that the editor and reviewers have said. The author should first diagnose the situation, as if from the perspective of an outside observer. The author should strive to diagnose, "What is the objective reality of what happened to my manuscript in the review process?" The following questions can be useful for unraveling a host of enmeshed issues:

- Does the editor or reviewer make comments showing that he or she is, or is not, qualified to understand and judge the research?

- Does the reviewer provide a well-reasoned and persuasive justification for his or her recommendation to the editor?

- Does the editor provide a well-reasoned and persuasive justification for his or her decision?

- Considered in the light of the editor's and reviewer's comments, does the submitted paper do a good job of reporting the research? And is the reported research itself perfect or is it really deficient in serious ways?

- Are the research project and the research program, of which the paper is a product, themselves fundamentally sound?

Addressing these questions can help an author judge the worth of the editor's and reviewers' comments and then to decide whether and how to act on them when taking the next steps with the research. These questions can also help to assure the author that "it's not about you!" in those situations where the rejection is really the result of problems outside of the paper, such as

an editor or reviewer who lacks the expertise needed to understand the research[4] or a reviewer who has a personality disorder[5].

With the diagnosis completed, the author is ready to take the next step, which is to revise the paper – whether for the same journal, if the editor is asking for a revision, or for a different journal, if the editor is rejecting the paper. The following actions need not be taken in the sequence suggested.

First, after attaining a reasonably dispassionate understanding of the editor's and reviewers' comments, *the author should triangulate with a trusted colleague*. A seasoned researcher, looking at what the author first thought were some scathing reviews, might conclude instead that the reviews are actually quite encouraging. There is no need for an author to proceed alone. Another pair of eyes can help.

Second, *the author should take advantage of the editor and reviewers as a "test market," regardless of how negatively he or she might be feeling about them*. The editor's and reviewers' reactions are likely indicative of some or many of the reactions that would be received from others.   Right or wrong, audience reaction is audience reaction. How might the paper be refined or reengineered to head off the same negative audience reaction next time?

Third, rather than harbor resentment toward the editor and reviewers, *the author could spend his or her time and energy productively by identifying the changes that need to be made, and making them*. The author should seriously consider undertaking any drastic tasks put forth by the reviewers and editor, which could include dramatically expanding the literature review or even redoing the entire experiment. After all, in their comments, good reviewers and editors would be telling the author exactly what needs to be done for the paper to be published. (Whether or not the editor and reviewers are good is a matter for the author to decide. Whether or not the author's revision is successful in doing what needs to be done is a matter for the editor and reviewers to decide.)   In this situation, the editor and reviewers are providing a blueprint for the author to follow. It would behoove the author to follow the blueprint.

Fourth, *the author ought to revisit what constitutes the "inviolable essence" of his or her research*. If the editor is asking for a revision, but is also asking the author to give the store away, then the author should take his or her paper to a different journal.

Last, if the editor is asking the author to submit a revision, *the author should also write up a separate document that explains how the revision addresses each and every point that the editor and reviewers raised*. The author need not implement every suggestion; he or she has the option of addressing any point by disagreeing with it and providing a justification for the disagreement. In my own experience as an author when writing up such a document, I often slowly realize that the editor and reviewers were right, after all, in their critiques of my paper, even if they were overzealous in how they expressed themselves. A way of writing up this document is to create a two-column table where the entire text of the editor's letter and reviewers' reports appears in the

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[4] A reviewer of one of my papers claimed that I did not understand Allen Lee's definition of a case study.

[5] A reviewer of this paper commented: "How does the author know if the 'reviewer who has a personality disorder' is present? I am starting to worry as I complete this review!" To be fair, I must emphasize that one may only *theorize* that a reviewer has a personality disorder. For instance, one may note that a reviewer's comments are consistent with those that one would expect from a person with a particular personality disorder, but such evidence would, at best, only be consistent with, and would not prove, the theory. And as researchers, we all know, of course, that no theory may ever be proved true. Therefore, the reviewer who commented "I am starting to worry as I complete this review!" may rest assured that no one may ever offer an absolute proof that he or she (or any other reviewer) has a personality disorder.

left-hand column; the author's explanation, of how the revision addresses the points that the editor and reviewers raise, appears in the right-hand column. Writing up this document also forces the author to identify any remaining points, raised by the editor and reviewers, which the revision would still need to address. Some editors feel that such an exhaustive document is not a good idea, especially when it is longer than the paper itself. Whether or not to write up the document in such an exhaustive way is a judgment call for the author to make. An author should do what he or feels needs to be done and then accept the responsibility for, and learn from, the consequences.

VI. CONCLUSION

To perform the duties and to fulfill the responsibilities required in the formal roles that one takes in teaching, research, and service are only to be expected. Then, there is the matter of everything else – everything *in addition to what one is expected to do in one's formal roles* – that distinguishes a genuine scholar from those who are only doing their jobs. The duties to be performed and the responsibilities to be fulfilled in the "everything else" are largely tacit, but tacit duties and responsibilities are readily understood by those with vision and compassion. Manifestations of Gary Dickson's vision and compassion can be seen in his accomplishments, which include his being the founding editor-in-chief of *MIS Quarterly*, his stewardship of the AACSB Faculty Development Institute, and his mentoring of numerous aspiring scholars. His accomplishments exceed those of a professor just doing his job. And his accomplishments have opened up paths leading his former students and other mentees to do more than just their jobs and eventually, perhaps, to become genuine scholars too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allen S. Lee is professor of Information Systems and associate dean for Research and Graduate Studies in the School of Business at Virginia Commonwealth University. At the end of 2004, he retired from the *MIS Quarterly* editorial board after 15 years, during which he served as associate editor, senior editor, and editor-in-chief. He is a founding senior editor of *MIS Quarterly Executive* and a founding member of Chinese American Professors of Information Systems. He is a member of the Circle of Compadres of the Information Systems Doctoral Students Association of the PhD Project and, in 2005, he was named a Fellow of the Association for Information Systems.