

How to Write a Painful Marketing Manuscript: Prose and Cons

Alan G. Sawyer

Bad writing is frequent in manuscripts submitted to marketing and consumer behavior journals. This poor writing leads to pain (irritation, anger) in the review process, likely lengthens the process, and results in some otherwise publishable manuscripts being rejected. This article presents a list of what not to do when writing a marketing manuscript.

Bad writing is a major problem common to all journals in marketing and consumer research. Donald Morrison (1982) stated that "the typical manuscript submitted to *Marketing Science* is poorly written. . . and painful to referee," and "our profession does not pay enough attention to writing style *per se*." Other editors have also bemoaned the quality of writing in marketing and management science (e.g., Armstrong 1982; Britt 1971; Ferber 1968, 1979). Some have blamed this deficit on a desire for obscure writing as a route to academic prestige (Armstrong 1980; Remus 1977) or the politics of catering to reviewers (Remus 1980). However, I believe that the problem also involves ignorance of proper writing style.

In a recent *Journal of Marketing* article titled, "A Note on Sodomasochism in the Review Process: I Hate When That Happens," Morris Holbrook commented insightfully about the review process in most marketing journals which inflicts so much pain on both reviewers and authors. He listed several good suggestions, including a few general writing hints for authors. I want to add to Holbrook's list and share with *Journal of Marketing Education* readers a summary of the writing style sheet I have followed over the years. *JME* readers who use this writing style will ensure that journal reviewers perceive their manuscripts as painful to review.¹ Like

Alan G. Sawyer is Professor of Marketing, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida. The author warmly acknowledges the comments of Peter Dickson, Hal Kassarian, Bill Perreault, Paul Peter, Cynthia Romano Sawyer, and Peter Webb.

the person who discovered he had been speaking prose all his life, many readers no doubt will recognize many of their own writing practices. Although the title focuses on research articles intended for publication in marketing journals, most of these recommendations are equally appropriate for student research papers, masters' theses, or doctoral dissertations. These writing suggestions are grouped into the categories of general writing style; literature review; hypotheses; method, results, and statistical analysis; and conclusions.

SUGGESTIONS

General Writing Style

1. Select the title carefully, as it is vitally important. Remember the 17 "cons." A title should be contrived, conspicuous, contemporary, controversial, conventional, and convenient: should condense, confuse (better), or conceal (best) the content; and should include as many as possible of the words "consumer," "conceptual," "concurrent," "confoundings," and "concave/convex." No decent title should be without a colon or contain less than 35 words.

2. Omit any statement of the objectives of your paper. This will make it much more

¹An April 30, 1983 *Peanuts* cartoon shows Charlie Brown delivering a note from "one of the magazines you send your stories to. . . ." Sitting on top of his doghouse with his typewriter in front of him, Snoopy reads: "Dear Contributor, Thank you for not sending us anything lately. It suits our present needs." It is an unfair rumor that this cartoon was sent to me by the editors of several journals in marketing.

difficult for a reader to discern that (a) you failed to attain your goals or (b) you never had any. You know you have succeeded when a reviewer writes, "This manuscript may contain something of value, but I don't know what it is."^{2,3}

3. When co-authoring manuscripts, choose only co-authors whose last names follow yours in the alphabet so you appear first. Alternatively, change your last name to Aaron, Adcock, or Aaker. Also, be sure to "warmly acknowledge" the help of omitted co-authors, granting agencies, and doctoral students who thought you did them a favor by allowing them to collect and analyze any data.

4. Avoid using headings and sub-headings in your paper. Run everything together. Headings might reveal a lack of organization in your paper. If you do use headings, forget about transitional sentences between sections.

5. Be sure to show off all the jargon you have acquired over the years. Never use a five-cent word that will do the job when you can find a fifty-cent one that will appear more impressive. Remember that the goal of vocabulary is to eschew obfuscation. (See Britt 1971 for some excellent suggestions about this.)

6. Avoid boring consistency: use the past, present, and future tense whenever you like. Skip around. If you are in doubt, next time avoid the present tense. Also, the passive voice should always be used. When it can be done, dangling introductory phrases containing pronouns with no referents will add interest and increase reader confusion.

7. Be sexist in your writing. Always use he or him—unless you are talking about housewives. If the latter, refer to them as *ordinary* housewives.

²"Cons" are helpful to remember in deciding about the general tone of your writing. For theory manuscripts, be confirming, conclusive, and confident; convoluted and conjectural; but never constrained or conditional. For literature reviews of your own research, be concerted, consistent, consecrative, and to-be-continued. For comments, be either congratulatory, constructive, contributory, and congenial or contemptuous, condemning, and contradictory. For rejoinders, be either conceited, condescending, and contending; contemplative, conscientious, contrasting and convincing; conniving and concocting; or conciliatory, contrite, concurring, and confessing. For applied manuscripts, be confidential and consulting contract seeking. For philosophy of science manuscripts, be constipated.

³Do not limit footnotes to clarifications or minor points that do not fit easily into the text.

8. Use a lot of long footnotes. Footnotes may interrupt the flow of the paper,⁴ but they make you look real smart.

9. Do not bother to proofread your paper. Typographic errors communicate to the reader that you're too important and busy to proof your work.

10. Do not first circulate a carefully written draft to colleagues for comments on both the content and writing style. Instead, directly submit your manuscript to the journal. The job of the reviewers and editor is to give comments. If absolutely forced to rewrite, do as little as possible. Simply "cut and paste" and reorder the same paragraphs while correcting most of the typos. If your manuscript is eventually rejected, ignore the editor's decision and revise and submit it again anyhow. Alternatively, ignore all the reviewers' comments and submit it to another journal.

Literature Review

11. Avoid the use of a conceptual framework to organize your literature review. Similarly, omit any table that might outline important methodological differences, results, and criticisms. If stuck for an organization scheme, discuss the literature in chronological order or, even better, in the alphabetical order of the first author's last name (or perhaps the last author's first name).

12. If an article that belongs in your literature review is difficult to obtain, forget it. Alternatively, instead of reading the article, rely on the descriptions of it in someone else's literature review. Only the person who wrote it can ever prove you wrong, and what makes you think he or she will read your article? If, in listing references, you cannot easily find the correct journal volume number, the exact pages, or the author's first name, guess; no one will ever check. Better yet, copy the reference from someone else's literature review.

13. Use a lot of references—the more the better. Be sure to reference any even remotely relevant work of the editorial board of the journal to which you plan to submit your manuscript, your doctoral advisor, all your friends, and anyone you think might return the

⁴See what I mean?

favor and reference your work in their manuscripts (see Andreasen 1975; Remus 1977, 1980).

14. Perhaps most important, be sure to reference virtually everything *you* have ever written—regardless of its relevance to the topic at hand (e.g., Sawyer 1969). If your dissertation never got published, be sure to include it so that at least the title is published. If you are really clever and prolific, you can pass the footnote test all by yourself.

Of course, in order to have as many papers as possible for others and yourself to be able to cite, be sure to split a study into as many articles as possible (see Broad 1981). This forces you to cite your other articles as a source for each additional article about the study. My favorite method for doing this is to do a factorial experiment with four independent variables and then publish four articles about the effects of the four combinations of only three of the independent variables. Another reliable, albeit more risky, strategy is to publish a paper with one mode of analysis and corresponding results and then to publish a second paper with a different analysis and results that indicate the first was in error. Of course, you should do both sets of analyses before publishing either paper, so that you will be sure to publish the wrong one first. Otherwise, you will kill the opportunity for the second. A variation of the above is to have a rival publish minor corrections or extensions to your first paper, and you can issue a series of comments, rejoinders, extensions, and new models in what Andreasen (1975) calls “ping pong publication.”

Hypotheses

15. Save space by not bothering to give any detailed conceptualization of the constructs in your study and their theoretical relationships. If you do decide to include a theoretical model, make it as complicated as possible. A diagram of your theory with at least 75 bi-directional arrows is a must. Include some dotted lines to indicate your uncertainty about some of the relationships.

16. If at all possible, avoid any explicit statement of hypotheses. One reliable way to get away with this is to say that your research is exploratory. This is especially advisable if your hypothesis or model was not supported.

If you do list hypotheses, state them in the null form so the reader will not know what you really expect. Never refer to your literature review to justify or explain your reasoning for your hypotheses.

17. Use a lot of formulas to impress the reader. Also, do not bother to define terms or explain the formulas. The less well they are understood (*u*), the more likely your paper will be highly regarded (*R*). [$R = 1/u^A$ where *A* equals Agostini's agonizing constant.]

Method, Results, and Statistical Analysis

18. To save space, do not spell out names for different variables or conditions (hereafter referred to as DVOC). Instead, use weird abbreviations or acronyms that no one will ever decipher and/or remember. Make it difficult for the reader who really tries to understand and analyze your results.

19. Do not describe your method in sufficient detail to allow others to fully understand or replicate it. Be especially vague about your sampling method, characteristics of respondents and nonrespondents, and any data collection instruments. In the rare event that someone decides to replicate your study and fails to find similar results (a relatively *unrare* result [Armstrong 1982]), you can always blame the lack of confirmation of a failure to use the exact same method.

20. Remember that one picture is worth a thousand words. However, since Academic Brownie Points (ABP*) are directly proportional to the manuscript's number of words (NW) multiplied by a greater power (such as Wroe Alderson) (yielding the equation $ABP^* = NWe^{WA}$), omit any graphs, tables, or figures that might efficiently communicate your key results. Alternatively, include a figure or table to describe the effects of each of your 39 independent variables and resulting interactions.

If you decide to graph your results, make the graphs as confusing as possible. When measuring a key dependent variable in your questionnaire, label the positive end of the scale “1” and the negative end of the scale “7.” When presenting the results for this dependent variable, do not bother to reverse the scale. This enables you to include a figure which requires the accompanying footnote that “up is down.” This footnote can be very

valuable to the reputation of a reader caught reading the journal upside down.

21. Omit any justification of your chosen mode of statistical analysis and the underlying assumptions. Use the most convenient statistical test and your favorite computer package. Use simple univariate tests for complex sets of variables and multivariate tests for simple data (see Ferber 1979).

22. Never calculate statistical power or effect size (Sawyer 1982; Sawyer and Ball 1981a,b; Sawyer and Peter 1983).⁵ Also, never put "statistically" before "significant," so people will think you mean "important." Use "significant" for $p < .05$, "very significant" for $p < .01$, "extremely significant" for $p < .001$, and "nearly significant" for everything else. Finally, do not detail your means and standard deviations; just talk about statistical inference tests. Who cares about the actual data?

23. Always calculate statistics such as correlation coefficients or t-tests to the fourth decimal place—even if one standard error equals several units. Also, when reporting statistical significance, always report the exact probability to the fourth decimal place. Be sure to report "nearly significant" probabilities in exactly the same way (e.g., the .7812 level of probability).

Conclusions

24. Avoid making any claims about the relevance of your results to any theory or practical application.

25. Never tie your conclusions to your original objectives.

26. Make your conclusions go beyond your data. Alternatively, state confidently that the results cannot be generalized to any population other than the 20 red-headed introductory marketing students who were your subjects. However, always defend your sample as "relevant" (Ferber 1968).

27. Do not fool around with discussions of other explanations of your results that compete with your own. Otherwise, readers may prefer the alternatives.

28. Always end your paper with "more research is needed" (Webb 1978).

⁵ Remember suggestion 13.

CONCLUSION

Like Willie and Frankie in the *Saturday Night Live* routines, the reader has probably interrupted and finished many of the above suggestions or offered other more vivid examples of various pain-inflicting practices. I hope other *JME* readers write and add to this list.

Of course, writing is not the sole problem with unpublishable or long-in-the-review-process manuscripts in marketing. Manuscripts can be well written and still have fatal flaws in terms of the importance of the contribution, adequacy of the method, or other concerns. A rejection due to the content of a manuscript rather than the manner in which it was written is probably no less painful. However, bad writing can often obscure positive contributions, increase the likelihood of rejection, and in some cases cause a "false negative" reviewing decision in which an otherwise qualified manuscript is rejected in the review process. Whatever the eventual result of the review process, I am confident that a careful use of this list of writing suggestions before, during, and after each draft of a marketing manuscript can ensure that the pain and misery described by Holbrook continues or even escalates.

On the other hand, maybe we could use this list as things to *avoid* in an effort to reduce severely the writing problems in our manuscripts. For the sake of better dissemination of knowledge in the field of marketing, I sincerely hope for the latter. More painstaking (and less painful) writing and the use of this list as things *not* to do can and will remove a lot of pain from our manuscripts and the review process.

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