

Back to Basics: Twelve Rules of Thumb for Writing a Publishable Article

NOTE: This is the final unpublished draft. For the published version, see

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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. If there was a consistent fit between mediocre writing and mediocre ideas or insights, there would be less cause for concern: for then, we could put mediocre writing down to a shortage of intellectual talent. But when one frequently finds original and striking ideas articulated in a dull, shoddy, or middling writing style, one

cannot help wondering how a person with such intellectual talent could make it this far without picking up the fundamentals of good writing along the way?

Having posed the question, I do not intend to, nor am I well-positioned to, give an answer to it. But the mere fact that such a question can be legitimately raised provides ample justification for the task which I set myself in this essay: to review the fundamental ingredients of a successful, *prima facie* publishable, academic article. By successful, I do not necessarily mean an article that is ultimately published, since publication is ruled by too many contingencies, from editorial policies and the outlooks of reviewers to supply-and-demand dynamics, to count as a fair criterion of success. Instead, 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. Of course, there should be some correlation, other things being equal, between qualitative success and the chances of publication. Nonetheless, equating the two would be a mistake.

The criteria I delineate are deliberately general, and many of them pertain to style and structure rather than substance. As such, they are presented as a list of desiderata moving between the essential and the highly desirable. The list cannot take account of the special substantive and occasionally structural requirements associated with particular academic topics. I do claim, nonetheless, that to the extent that an article measures up to these standards, its chances of success (in terms of its overall quality) and its prospects for publication should, *ceteris paribus*, be greatly enhanced.

One final caveat that I want to register is that the standards I offer here are rules of thumb or guidelines (rather than categorical imperatives!), some of which are virtually

indispensable and others are expendable for stylistic or other reasons. Only the good sense of the good writer can determine to what extent individual rules of thumb are binding in particular cases. However, I am confident that the rules of thumb I offer here do in fact hold in most cases, and that for the most part, a special argument would be needed for dispensing with any of them.

Twelve Rules of Thumb for Writing a Publishable Article

§1. WRITE WITH A PURPOSE IN MIND AND MAKE THAT PURPOSE EXPLICIT

It may seem obvious, but writers often fail to write *purposefully*. By this, I mean that 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 (or set of claims) being advanced by the author, or they may involve the author's interpretation of a historical event, a piece of literature, or a scholarly debate. Whatever the nature of the author's purpose, a well-written article is 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. The author should not take for granted that the reader follows his own implicit line of reasoning or understands how the author's arguments serve his purposes. Making the structure of the essay transparent involves indicating how different parts of the essay can be made sense of in light of the thesis (or theses) of the paper.

§2. STATE A PURPOSE AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE, AND STATE A CLEAR THESIS AT THE APPROPRIATE JUNCTURE.

This is one aspect of writing purposefully that deserves to be underlined. Sometimes an author will dance around the point of his or her paper or hint at it or leave it up to the reader to guess at. 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 at the outset. For example, the author may have a particular enigma or paradox that he or she aims to solve. 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 to judge the author’s endeavors against. 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 the author is not only capable of recognizing a puzzle, but is capable of offering something constructive by way of an interpretation or solution, however partial or tentative. What is important is not that the author be “black and white” in his or her conclusions, but that the substance of his/her conclusions, however provisional or tentative, be conveyed with confidence and clarity.

§3. NARROW THE SCOPE OF YOUR THESIS TO MANAGEABLE PROPORTIONS.

A frequent mistake that can jeopardize a promising article is the practice of issuing non-redeemable 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 even 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 (though interesting and provocative claims are rarely compelling if by that is meant compelling to the entire scholarly community!). 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.

§4. 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. This is perhaps one of the most important aspects of good writing. It 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 contributes in some way to your thesis. Be especially attentive to transitions between sections and structural reminders (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 to an intelligent reader. 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 about or approaching problems.

§5. 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 run into. It is a lot more credible to acknowledge an objection and admit your own incapacity to fully defuse it than to by-pass it or act as if it doesn’t exist. Similarly, intellectual modesty dictates that you do not create the impression of arguing for more than your premises will allow you. 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, all things considered. 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 of your discrete claims made in support of your thesis. Be sensitive to the difference between claims that are relatively unproblematic on the one hand, and claims that are contentious or easy to dispute on the other. If you glide over contentious claims too often your argument will fast lose all credibility.

§6. TAKE SERIOUSLY THE POSITION OF YOUR ADVERSARIES.

This is related to the previous point about acknowledging the vulnerabilities and limitations of your own 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 arguments in his arsenal, not the worst. If you treat credible adversaries in a dismissive or unsympathetic way, the reader will find it very difficult to trust *your* arguments.

§7. 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 get a conversation going on that topic. If that is the case, well and good, but it might be good to hazard some guess as to why nobody has treated the topic before, or at least to register your awareness that nobody has treated the topic before you.

However, in the ordinary course of events, 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 it 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 relates to 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 taking sides in some controversy from time to time, 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 samples 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.

§8. TAKE SERIOUSLY THE 'MARKETPLACE' OF IDEAS.

Situating your ideas in the existing literature is an important step towards showing that other scholars should take your ideas seriously. However, one could situate one's ideas in the literature and yet fail to market those ideas or sell them to the relevant audience. It is not enough just to show that you have something to say of some significance and relevance to existing debates: you have to show that you have something to say that people should sit up and listen carefully to, 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 they are studying the very same works. Find problems that are, or could be, of general interest at least in your field, and show how your essay sheds fresh light on these problems. You need to convince scholars in your field just from reading the first two or three paragraphs that this essay is really worth taking a closer look at.

§9. CLOSE THE PAPER WITH AN INTERESTING, RELEVANT AND THOUGHT-PROVOKING CONCLUSION.

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 of course: but the reader should at least get the sense that some task has been accomplished, that a narrative of sorts is drawing to a close, at least for now. Without this sense of closure, the essay loses its sense of purposefulness 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, whether on account of what has been shown or on account of new avenues of inquiry that have been opened up.

§10. 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 in your own mind between arguments that lend substantial support to your main thesis (or a sub-thesis) and arguments that are either irrelevant or do not significantly strengthen the thesis. A good rule of thumb is, 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 that there is an excursus that is more like an appendix or 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 can certainly be considered inessential and of limited value.

Basically, you need to assign a priority value to 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: try to eliminate these parts if it can be done without detracting from the integrity of the essay. The basic method for determining priority is, how much value does this or that element of the essay *add* to the strength and appeal of the essay as a whole, in terms of the claims to be rendered plausible (or demonstrated, as the case may be)?

§11. GET A THIRD PARTY TO READ YOUR PAPER BEFORE YOU SUBMIT IT.

Many of us find our arguments more persuasive and brilliant than the average reader will, partly because we are already bringing many background assumptions to our writing. Getting another scholar—and preferably one who has a different or even opposed perspective—to read one's work can be invaluable for helping one spot fallacies or weaknesses that may have been overlooked or glossed over for whatever reason.

§12. EDIT YOUR PAPER CAREFULLY BEFORE SUBMITTING IT!

Read over a draft of your paper several times to check it 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 and can be experienced as insulting and very shoddy to a reader who expects work that at least aspires to be of publishable quality. Sloppy writing risks alienating readers and inducing unfavorable attitudes irrespective of the substantive merit of your arguments.