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Conciseness is Critical

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Conciseness is Critical

Abstract

[Excerpt] Authors of empirical CQ articles must explicitly and clearly identify: (1) what causal relationship they are focusing on, (2) who should care about that relationship and why, (3) what existing research in all academic journals, not just hospitality journals, says about that relationship, (4) why additional tests of the relationship are needed and how their study will improve our knowledge about that relationship, (5) their study methodology and findings, and (6) the theoretical and practical implications of their findings. Clarity on these points is paramount, and authors should take as many words and pages as necessary to achieve it. However, they should take no more words than is necessary to clarify these points. As editor of CQ, I see too many papers that are longer than they need to be, and I am determined to correct the problem. To that end, this editorial explains why conciseness is important and identifies ways to achieve it.

Keywords

Cornell, editorial, publishing, empirical articles, writing

Disciplines

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Comments

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Authors of empirical *CQ* articles must explicitly and clearly identify: (1) what causal relationship they are focusing on, (2) who should care about that relationship and why, (3) what existing research in all academic journals, not just hospitality journals, says about that relationship, (4) why additional tests of the relationship are needed and how their study will improve our knowledge about that relationship, (5) their study methodology and findings, and (6) the theoretical and practical implications of their findings. Clarity on these points is paramount, and authors should take as many words and pages as necessary to achieve it. However, they should take no more words than is necessary to clarify these points. As editor of *CQ*, I see too many papers that are longer than they need to be, and I am determined to correct the problem. To that end, this editorial explains why conciseness is important and identifies ways to achieve it.

I define conciseness in writing as shortness of word count holding clarity and critical-content constant. Concise articles deliver greater value to readers by allowing them to acquire critical-content with less work. For this reason, more concise articles are likely to attract greater readership, which should translate to greater impact.¹ Furthermore, shorter articles reduce demands for limited journal pages and allow journals to publish more articles. Since *CQ* publishes only 440 journal pages a year, this latter benefit is particularly valuable to its authors and readers.

The three keys to writing concisely are to minimize redundancy, identify and eliminate non-redundant content that is not critical, and edit ostensibly-final drafts one more time to eliminate needless words. Academic writing requires some repetition of information. For example, the causal relationship a researcher is focused on must be described in some way in an empirical paper's introduction (where its importance is established), literature review (where previous tests of it are critically described), results (where the current tests of it are presented), and discussion (where its practical or theoretical implications are considered). However, that repetition should be kept to the minimum necessary for clarity of exposition. I see too much redundancy in *CQ* submissions. The most egregious redundancy is typically between the introduction and literature review sections, where the former is often nothing more than a condensed preview of the later. I strongly encourage authors to avoid this particular redundancy by limiting their introductions to the identification of points 1 and 2 from the opening paragraph of this editorial and limiting their literature

reviews to the identification of points 3 and 4. More generally, authors should have a unique purpose for every section and paragraph they write and should repeat information from previous sections and paragraphs only when it is necessary to achieve that purpose.

Writing concisely requires keen judgment about what non-repeated information is critical and what information can be omitted without compromising the paper's main contribution. I think *CQ* authors need to work on this aspect of writing more than any other. Submissions to *CQ* often present the following types of non-critical information:

- 1) descriptions of the myriad ways constructs have been defined or measured in the past; in most cases, only the definition or measurement you use is necessary for readers to understand and assess your empirical contribution,
- 2) explanations of why particular measures or statistical methods are used; unless the superiority of your measure or statistical method is central to your contribution, you only need to identify what measures or statistical methods you use,
- 3) detailed descriptions of previous studies and their findings that are often presented in a boring laundry-list manner; unless study details are used to reconcile conflicting findings in the literature, it is only necessary to indicate which previous articles have included tests of the relationship in question and with what results – e.g., “previous studies have found both positive (*citations*) and negative (*citations*) effects of *X* on *Y*”,
- 4) elaborations on, and hypotheses about, parts of structural models that have already been extensively tested and are merely being replicated; if your contribution to previous research showing that $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C$ is to argue and prove that *D* moderates the effects of *A* on *B*, then focus on that interaction and mention your replication of *A*'s indirect effect and *B*'s direct effect on *C* only in passing,
- 5) descriptions of obvious study limitations; if you are careful in describing what your findings do mean, imply and contribute, then there is no need to disclaim other meanings, implications and contributions.

Authors should delete these and all-other types of non-critical content from their submissions to *CQ*.

The largest gains in conciseness come from cutting redundant information and needless sentences and

paragraphs, but marginal gains can also be made through careful editing of words. For example, earlier drafts of this editorial were shortened by eliminating the underlined words in the following phrases “absolutely necessary,” “is so important,” “identifies some ways,” and “I find submissions.” Editing of drafts for needless words like these will probably not substantially shorten a paper, but it will marginally improve conciseness and ease of reading, so authors should do it.

No one sets out to write a paper that is longer than necessary. Many *CQ* submissions are too long, not because the authors strove to be long-winded, but because it is easy to misjudge what an empirical paper’s contribution is as well what content is necessary to

clearly communicate that contribution. However, such misjudgments are more common when conciseness of writing is viewed as a nice luxury rather than a critical necessity. With this editorial, I am telling you that conciseness is critical at *CQ*, so you must be ruthless in its pursuit if your paper is to be published here.

Michael Lynn

Note

1. Research finding that longer articles receive more citations than shorter articles seems inconsistent with this claim but is not, because all those studies confound article length with critical-content.