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Basic but Frequently Overlooked Issues in Manuscript Submissions: Tips from An Editor's Perspective

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Abstract

This essay summarizes fundamental yet often overlooked issues in manuscripts submitted (and rejected) and offers insights from an experienced editor's perspective. These issues include basic requirements (alignment with a journal's themes, aims, scope, writing format, and required files) and more complex considerations. It highlights the importance of following key areas: demonstrating novelty and contribution, integrating overarching theories, designing multiple studies with multi-source validation, ensuring methodological rigor, and crafting compelling narratives from findings.

Keywords: Submission requirements; Originality; Contribution; Multiple studies; Methodological rigor; Storytelling

1. Introduction

For authors, few decisions from journal editors are more disheartening than a desk rejection—where papers are declined without peer review. While each journal's desk rejection criteria vary, the underlying reasons are remarkably consistent. Drawing on editorial experience with thousands of submissions (Wang, 2022), this essay highlights basic yet commonly neglected issues and provides practical tips to reduce rejection risks.

2. Knowing the Target Journal

Before submission, familiarize yourself with the journal's specifics. Most journals have narrow academic disciplines and research scopes, unlike broader outlets (e.g., Journal of Business Research and Journal of Applied Business & Behavioral Sciences). Please do the homework and make good preparations according to author guidelines (showing your dedication and work ethic) to ensure your manuscript aligns with the journal's subject areas and scopes.

Themes and scope: Verify subject area compatibility, with a clear line in relation to what is the research content of your study and what will be published by the journal to which the manuscript is intended to be sent.

Aims and focus: Clarify whether it prioritizes theoretical, managerial, or balanced contributions.

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Methodological preferences: Note journal's requirements or preferences on samples (e.g., student populations), multiple studies (vs. single study), modeling (vs. theoretical and narrative) approaches.

It is helpful to read recently published articles to know the content of the target journal and particularly the editorials, which reveal editors' preference. Minor oversights (e.g., missing title page or inappropriate format and abstract structure) may not disqualify a paper but signal carelessness (negligence to detail or lack of enthusiasm and preparation). I often observed submissions that have been "traveling" around (which is trackable from the submission system thanks to the advanced technology) and rejected by many journals (even without bothering to change the cover letter that address to another journal editor). The lack of work ethic leaves a poor impression on editors.

3. Showcasing Novelty and Contributions

The most common phrase appeared in a rejection letter might be "lacking of novelty and insufficient contributions." Indeed, making a high impact on the academic community or business practice is a vital criterion of most scholarly or applied business journals. Common problems in those rejected manuscript may include:

Addressing trivial, general, unimportant or ambiguous questions without original or provocative thoughts.

Replicating or revisiting overstudied topics that have been well-documented in the existing literature without fresh perspectives or new insights.

Proposing commonsense hypotheses or predictable outcome that we have already known before testing.

Neglecting theoretical and managerial implications for knowledge advancement in the field.

Many authors overlook the importance of the introduction section, which might be the first thing that an editor decides whether it is worth proceeding. A precise but fascinating introduction would quickly grab the attention of the editor. A strong introduction should showcase the originality by:

Identifying research gaps through extensive and updated literature reviews.

Highlighting tensions in existing literature and research motivations.

Emphasizing innovative ideas with clear contributions.

Research hypotheses must be intriguing and non-obvious, transcending common sense or well-documented relationships. Hypotheses should make insightful predictions, grounded in strong theoretical conceptualization, reasoning and logical justification, avoiding a long string of hypotheses that lack support but full of non-surprising common knowledge (e.g., X is positively related to Y).

4. Overarching Theory

A theory is a carefully thought-out explanation for observations based on evidence and capable of being tested. Therefore, it is critical to build your conceptual and hypothesis development on an overarching theory, which lays a foundation to explain and connect different observations and phenomena with a big picture to understand the research question. A robust theory provides a framework to explain research questions by integrating facts and hypotheses. Common pitfalls include:

Hypotheses not derived from theoretical predictions.

Post-hoc theorizing: Data collection precedes hypothesis development, leading to weak conceptual foundations and explanations.

Overusing generic theories (e.g., Stimulus-Organism-Response theory, Theory of Planned Behavior, and Technology Acceptance Model.) to describe known phenomena rather than generating novel predictions.

These problems frequently appeared in many studies that started without theoretical conceptualization. Instead, they are written according to a not well planned data collection and analytic results. Such studies usually collect data based on some general and ambiguous questions but without priori theoretical predictions. Then hypotheses are added afterwards in terms of the data-driven findings. Such a “putting horse before the cart” practice results in difficulty in finding appropriate or relevant theoretical explanations. There is an increasing trend of requesting preregistration to enhance the transparency and integrity of theory-driven hypotheses, help empirical studies to build on overarching theories.

Another issue that is quite often overused in many submissions is to employ seemingly omnipotent theories that may apply in most contexts and conceptual framework. However, many times such generic theoretical frameworks are used to describe well-known facts or prescribe business practices, suggesting some common knowledge evidenced in the literature. For instance, we know our behavior is responding to environment stimulus through cognitive process (SOR); consumer behavior is often subject to social norms (TPB) or new technology adoption is influenced by easy access/availability (TAM). Such knowledge may have managerial implication and practical value but tells little new information to make specific predictions in your research hypotheses. The value of a good theory lies in interestingness that challenges conventional wisdom (David, 1972) and capability of offer predictive power to explain complex phenomenon. A scholarly paper should avoid simply recycling established knowledge; instead, use theory to drive innovative, non-intuitive hypotheses.

5. Multiple Studies and Multiple-Source Validation

A large proportion of manuscript submissions only proposes a conceptual model or a few general theories and then run a structure equation model based on a single survey to “prove” certain correlations between independent and dependent variables by connecting the paths of correlation. A major problem with relying on a single-study (one survey or one experiment or a secondary data) is simplistic and insufficient to generate valid and robust evidence. Such single study often reflects researchers’ simplistic mindset or superficial engagement behavior without investing reater effort. It may also indicate that a researcher is lacking a deep understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of the research questions or just taking a shortcut via integrating existing literature into a framework that suggests relationships between antecedent and outcome variables. As such, these studies have limited generalizability to draw conclusions on theoretical mechanisms and complex issues in real world.

More journals nowadays encourage or require multiple studies or multiple sources with heterogeneous populations, preferably, combining surveys, experiments, field studies and secondary data analysis with cross-validations. The advantages of multiple studies and multiple-source validation include identifying the true causation of the relationship between variables, further scrutinizing underlying mechanisms, investigating boundary conditions, revealing both behavioral intention and behavioral outcome, and resolving controversial and contrasting findings via ruling out alternative explanations.

6. Methodological Rigor

Rigor is essential for empirical research, both qualitative and quantitative studies. It requires a study that is well planned and precisely designed and conducted with high standards of accuracy, reliability, internal and external validity.

The inconsistency in construct usage and lack of operationalized definition may cause invalid findings (e.g., the test is not actually measuring what it intended or claims to measure but a different construct). This is particularly the issue when a manuscript is translated from a non-English version, in which the meaning of the original construct is changed during the translation process. I always advise non English native speakers to look at the definition of the construct from original English literature, instead of relying on the “second-hand” usage of the construct.

Surveys or experiments need to justify the variable selection criteria and goals in research design and empirical testing. Experiments do not clearly articulate experimental conditions, sample assignment, manipulation procedures and stimulus material, control and possible contamination, analytics and results interpretation.

When involving three-way experimental design, some authors only report the two-way interaction, but omit the third variable or three-way interaction. For moderating effect, the direction of interaction should be reported. A significant interaction does not always support the hypothesis, which might be in a wrong direction (this is more likely to happen when a moderating hypothesis does not specify the directionality). Due to the complications in experimental design, junior scholars with no sufficient experiment design skills may seek help from co-authors with more advanced knowledge in experimental design and analytics to ensure reliability, validity, strictness and accurate interpretation.

7. Crafting Compelling Takeaways

Empirical findings gain significance through storytelling (Wang, 2025). While data collection and statistical analysis are important in an empirical study, results purely based on interpretation of statistics could be meaningless unless they tell an interesting story that helps generate useful information for better understanding of perplexing phenomena or mysterious human behavior. A research paper can be a tedious read if it just tells which variable is related to another variable and/or what is the mediator or moderator between the relationship without indicating why such findings are important and inspiring.

A good manuscript not only requires methodological rigor and accurate statistical analysis, but also demands stimulating or thought-provoking takeaways from the finding. Some studies might indeed yield good results and important findings from primary or secondary data analysis, but their values are often not noticeable because the author either neglects the most precious takeaways or does not present the findings with strong narratives. Their true contributions are thus buried in a seemingly complex framework (composed of a long string of obvious hypotheses) or dull statistics. Good storytelling is to translate findings into engaging, inspiring, high-impact narratives, uncovering the meaning concealed within data as in the process of extracting gold from ore. Indeed, weaving a story around research findings will infuse life into data and make a manuscript more readable and appealing (Wang, 2025). Strong narrative explains “why” results matter, not just “what” they show.

8. Concluding Remarks

Successful research requires clear research objectives, well-planned research design and execution, and effective communication to present research findings. Oh, yes, these issues are basic and largely common knowledge, but unfortunately they are also the most common problems in those rejected manuscripts. Addressing the issues outlined here—largely preventable—proactively mitigates desk rejection risks. Prioritize preparation over luck, fixing the noticed problems whenever possible and ensuring your work meets a journal’s requirements and standards before submission.

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