

FROM THE EDITORS

BEING SCHEHERAZADE: THE IMPORTANCE OF STORYTELLING IN ACADEMIC WRITING

We have two jobs as scholars: Answering interesting questions and telling the story. Numerous books, articles, and “From the Editors” columns are dedicated to the former, but precious little attention is given to the latter. Indeed, many in our field do not recognize the importance of storytelling to academic success.

The written word is the principal medium we use to transmit our ideas to the world. If we want our insights to influence management research and practice, we need to pay as much attention to the craft of writing and storytelling as we do to identifying and answering interesting questions. This applies equally to quantitative and qualitative researchers. Nothing puts a knife through our hearts quicker than someone referring to our job as producing “research reports.” If that’s how you think about what you write, the battle is already lost. Your interesting ideas and findings will be buried under a desert of barren prose, revealed only to those willing to endure the tedious archeological dig necessary to excavate them.

In this column, our goal is to highlight key elements of storytelling and how they can enhance the impact of your academic writing. We will not discuss writing and publishing in the social sciences generally (e.g., Huff, 1999), how to write clearly (e.g., Ragins, 2012), or the ins and outs of grammar (e.g., Strunk & White, 2000). While these are important topics, they’ve already been given excellent treatments. Instead, we focus on the narrative elements of storytelling, and the process of crafting a story. We draw insight from books on effective writing by novelists and writing experts. Unlike Scheherazade, the storyteller of *One Thousand and One Nights*, keeping our readers interested isn’t a matter of life and death. But, we can make our

stories stronger and enhance their impact by spending time inside the heads of master storytellers.

NARRATIVE ELEMENTS OF STORYTELLING

Although there are many important narrative elements relevant to storytelling, we focus on three: (1) the human face, (2) motion and pacing, and (3) titles.

The Human Face

Every story, even the driest, has a human face. Draw it well and put it on display, for to readers it is a mirror and a magnet.

—Flaherty (2009: 1)

One impediment to effective storytelling is the lack of a human face—actors acting and the human emotion imbuing all of our experiences (Flaherty, 2009). All too often, academic writers remove the human elements from their storytelling in an effort to sound “scholarly.” They engage in arid, context-free theorizing, of interest only to the most ardent specialists in their domains.

Novelist Stephen King writes, “[readers] want a good story . . . that will first fascinate them, then pull them in and keep them turning the pages. This happens, I think, when readers recognize the people in the book, their behaviors, their surroundings and their talk” (King, 1999: 160). This is often accomplished through anecdotes. Examples or rhetorical questions that readers can relate to on a personal level are also effective and can be more economical if space is tight.

New York Times business editor Francis Flaherty emphasizes that, “A story should be dry-eyed, of course. It should not be like some hysterical bad opera. But too many stories are bloodless and bland, with the human emotion washed out” (Flaherty, 2009: 13). The same can be said for much academic writing. This does not mean academic articles should be dominated by the research context. Nor need they employ flowery language. But, as scholars of human behavior and action, we

We would like to thank Jason Colquitt and our fellow AEs for helpful feedback on drafts. We would also like to thank Amy Colbert, Don Hambrick, and John Hollenbeck for their insights, and Ted Baker, Amy Colbert, Jim and Natalie Detert, and Kisha Lashley for their book suggestions over the years. All errors in syntax remain our own.

should be able to identify and portray the human face in our theorizing and storytelling without sacrificing theoretical focus or importance, regardless of the level of analysis.

One exemplar study for putting the human face on a powerful theoretical argument is Chatterjee and Hambrick's (2007) study of CEO narcissism. Chatterjee and Hambrick draw us in early, establishing the importance of CEO characteristics to strategic decision making, noting that "almost no attention has been devoted to one of the most vivid qualities seen in some CEOs: high levels of narcissism" (2007: 351). They go on to discuss the attention that narcissistic CEOs receive from journalists and analysts, providing quotations that readers can relate to and may have seen in the popular press. They quickly establish the academic veracity and theoretical importance of narcissism. In developing their theory, Chatterjee and Hambrick relate the tale of Narcissus from Greek mythology, move to the clinical definition of narcissism, and then demonstrate how narcissism is treated in organizational research. This sets the stage for their theoretical arguments about when CEO narcissism is good or bad for a firm.

We've all encountered narcissists and can think of narcissistic CEOs. Our ability to relate to and understand the construct, and the way the authors weave this personality characteristic into compelling theory about CEO decision making, keeps us interested in learning how they test their arguments and what they find. Their story is "dry-eyed," but not bloodless or bland. This may be why it received worldwide press attention and won a "Best Published Paper" award from the Organizational Behavior Division of the Academy of Management—a rare honor for strategy scholars studying firm performance.

Motion and Pacing

Good stories are a brisk journey, and the reader can always feel the breeze in his hair.

—Flaherty (2009: 70)

Another key element of effective storytelling is managing the story's motion and pacing. Have you ever gotten tired from reading an article, yawning and putting it down to grab coffee, check e-mail, or do something else to wake yourself up? If so, the culprit is a lack of motion and poor pacing. Motion results from action that propels the story forward. At the same time, "Writing requires pacing, an unhurried, uncrowded revelation of facts that allows

the reader enough time to pause over an idea, absorb it and reflect on it" (Flaherty, 2009: 86).

Motion and pacing can be managed in several ways. Flaherty argued that how the author employs action and commentary, and the mix of the two, is essential. If the story is all action with no commentary "[the reader] will speed along but will absorb little of the passing scene. The story will be spare and colorless" (2009: 75). However, if the writer provides all commentary and little action, "that story will be a still life—pretty, but without a ripple of motion" (Flaherty, 2009: 75).

Academic articles with too much action and too little commentary often include rapid-fire statements of findings from other studies (e.g., "Study [1] explored [X]"; "Study [2] found [Y]") but don't discuss how these studies relate to each other or use them to build hypotheses. Descriptions of the data and methods lack crucial details, and there is little interpretation of results or discussion of alternative explanations. These articles may be short and have motion, but the pace is a forced march, making them difficult to read.

Articles with too much commentary and too little action often have long front ends, extensive literature reviews, detailed descriptions of context, repetitive arguments, and long-winded descriptions of measures. They take us under the hood of statistical techniques (usually with lots of equations), overinterpret results, and report every robustness test ever imagined (footnotes were invented for a reason). Too rich in commentary and lacking action, their pacing is ponderous. Effective storytelling requires a judicious blend of action and commentary that keeps us moving forward, while explaining where we're going and why.

Another inhibitor of motion and pacing is cluttered language (Zinsser, 2006). Zinsser stated, "Clutter is the disease of American writing. We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless jargon" (Zinsser, 2006: 6). Indeed. Nowhere is this more common than in academic writing. Most books on writing advocate simplicity and invoke Strunk and White's (2000) "Rule 17: Omit needless words." Zinsser takes up this theme: "Every word that serves no function, every long word that could be a short word, every adverb that carries the same meaning that's already in the verb, every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure of who is doing what—these are the thousand and one adulterants that weaken the sentence" (Zinsser, 2006: 6–7). Weak sentences retard motion and pacing.

Why do authors do this? King's (1999) answer was fear. Unsure writers believe passive verbs and obscure words and jargon lend an air of authority. Arrogance and the desire to demonstrate intellectual superiority is another culprit (Zinsser, 2006). We agree on both counts, and beg you: Please, please use active verbs, employ personal pronouns (they're your ideas and analyses; take credit for them), avoid adverbs and redundant adjectives, and resist the impulse to show off. Zinsser (2006) suggested an exercise for simplifying sentences. After writing a draft of your article, go back through and bracket unnecessary words and phrases. It will sharpen your writing, enhance its motion, and help you pack more information within the pesky page-length guidelines journal editors impose.

Another way to enhance motion is by varying sentence and paragraph length (Flaherty, 2009; King, 1999; Sword, 2012). King (1999) claims you can determine if an article will be hard to read just by looking at the paragraph structure. Lots of short paragraphs give the article motion; long, dense paragraphs portend a slog. This doesn't mean every paragraph should be just two or three sentences long. You aren't writing for *USA Today*, and some ideas and arguments require careful development. But paragraphs containing more than one thought or topic should be broken into shorter, more digestible chunks. Doing so enhances motion and pacing.

Varying sentence length is another way to enhance motion and pacing (Flaherty, 2009; Sword, 2012). It creates a conversational rhythm that is easier to follow. Few people speak in long, compound sentences. So why write that way? If you can't read a sentence out loud in a single breath, consider breaking it into two sentences.

Titles

Like a hat on the head or the front door to a house, the title of an academic article offers a powerful first impression.

—Sword (2012: 63)

When you browse through a book store, how do you pick which ones to buy? You may have a genre or author in mind, but if you're like us, odds are that titles and cover art first grab your attention. Likewise, when you are browsing the *AMJ* table of contents, articles with interesting and informative titles catch your eye. Titles play a critical role in storytelling, because they represent your first and best opportunity to capture the reader's attention and convey the essence of your article. An effective

title stirs curiosity, engages the reader, and conveys essential information with an economy of words (Flaherty, 2009). It also sticks in readers' memories, increasing the likelihood of citation.

Klein, Lim, Saltz, and Mayer's (2004) title, "How Do They Get There? An Examination of the Antecedents of Centrality in Team Networks," is an effective example. The title starts with a pithy question that captures interest and reflects the topic, followed by a second phrase describing the study. By the title alone, we know the central content of this article. Although tastes differ, phrases from popular culture (song lyrics, movie titles, famous quotes, or plays on words) are useful ways to engage readers, but they must relate to the main theme of the article.

THE PROCESS OF CRAFTING A STORY

Effective storytelling rarely happens on the first try. It requires (1) writing a first draft and (2) getting feedback and revising.

Writing a First Draft

Shitty first drafts. All good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts.

—Lamott (1994: 21)

What constitutes a good first draft? A completed first draft. How hard can this be? Well, it depends. Is an imaginary reviewer whispering criticism in your ear? Does tenure lurk behind your screen? First drafts get sidetracked by lack of discipline, fear of failure, and perfectionism. You can neutralize these obstacles and complete a first draft by committing to consistent writing, in small pieces, without criticism.

Consistency. Write for an hour—or four—every day, in the same place, at the same time. Wear noise-canceling headphones. Shut off your wi-fi. All books on writing state that if you want to write well, you have to write regularly. In *How to Write a Lot*, Silva (2007) referred to "binge" writers, people who believe they are most effective if they write only when feeling inspired and possessing large blocks of time. Evidence suggests otherwise. Boice (1990) randomly assigned a sample of college professors to three strategies: abstinence (emergency writing only), spontaneous (writing during 50 sessions when inspiration hit); and forced (writing during 50 prescheduled and inflexible sessions). Writers in the forced condition wrote 3.5 times

more pages than those in the spontaneous condition and had 50 percent fewer days between creative ideas.

Small assignments. Novelist Anne Lamott (1994) wrote about her brother who sat—overwhelmed and near tears—facing a pencil, paper, a stack of books on birds, and a report deadline. Her father’s advice: “Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.”

One way to avoid binge writing and get your manuscript started is to give yourself short assignments (Lamott, 1994). Write the methods section; define your construct; describe a measure; write references. Commit to a piece of writing so small that it can be completed that day, even if you have only 30 minutes. As Clark notes, “tiny drops of writing become puddles that become rivulets that become streams that become deep ponds” (2006: 220).

Another approach to getting started is to “trust your hands” (Clark, 2006: 202) and let them write what they can. Write a letter to experts in the field about your amazing research. Write what excites or puzzles you about your findings. Write a 100 word summary. When you focus your attention on small bites, you’ll gain clarity about your contribution.

No critics. A third rule for first drafts is to suspend judgment. What you write in the first draft won’t be seen by others, but it serves an important purpose. It’s through uncensored writing that core elements of your story emerge.

Your worst critic is the perfectionist in the mirror. Lamott writes, “Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor . . . it is the main obstacle between you and a shitty first draft” (1994: 28). Clark affirms the importance of limiting self-criticism in early drafts. He writes, “There is enough hard critical work to do and enough criticism to face. So begin with a gift to yourself” (Clark, 2006: 235). Weapons against self-criticism include writing fast, writing small assignments, or writing in an unusual form, such as a letter. Thus begins your story.

Getting Feedback

In many ways, Eulah-Beulah prepared me for literary criticism. After having a two-hundred-pound babysitter fart on your face and yell Pow!, the *Village Voice* holds few terrors.

—King (1999: 20–21)

After polishing your first draft with at least a couple of major rewrites, you need feedback—but seek it strategically. Clark (2006) advocates the de-

velopment of a group of “helpers,” each of whom serves a well-defined role.

One helper is to keep you going. Although critical feedback is important, you need a supportive friend who says, “Keep going. Keep writing. We’ll talk about that later” (Clark, 2006: 228). You also need experts—on your topic, and on publishing. A common mistake new writers make is seeking only safe feedback, foregoing tough advice to protect their thin skin. If you want to improve your paper, get feedback from people more experienced than you, or who know more about your topic than you. A third type of helper is one with little expertise in your area. This might be your neighbor, spouse, or a first-year grad student. Their questions and reactions will tell you if your narrative is interesting, accessible, and clear.

If you haven’t been blessed with a Eula-Beulah to prepare you for harsh criticism, this one may sting. But, you need feedback from someone with deep expertise who lacks diplomacy. Rather than, “Keep going,” this person says, “If you submit junk like this, you’ll never publish in *AMJ*.” Don’t argue! Early in his career, Clark (2006) decided never to defend his writing, because learning results from listening and discussing, not from resisting. His advice is to react to the harshest criticism with a question: “Could you be specific about two major flaws in my manuscript that stand between me and an R and R?”

It’s important to ask your helpers for specific feedback (Clark, 2006). Nonspecific feedback doesn’t help because it contains no factual input (King, 1999). You might ask one person to report what they found most interesting or most confusing. Ask another about motion and pacing, or whether your analyses are clear. You can also ask your busy experts to review only small sections relevant to their expertise.

Your final helper is a copy editor. If a professional is unavailable, use the WritersDiet test (<http://www.writersdiet.com/WT.php>), a free source of writing feedback provided by Helen Sword. You’ll receive detailed, specific, and impersonal feedback. An early draft of this column was rated “flabby,” but this version is mostly “lean and trim.”

INVEST IN YOUR WRITING

Complaining about bad academic prose is like discussing the weather: talk, talk, talk, and no one does anything.

—Toor (2012)

TABLE 1
Recommended Books on Writing

Book	What It's About
Clark, R. P. 2006. <i>Writing tools: 50 essential strategies for every writer</i> . New York: Little, Brown.	Covers all the elements of writing from grammar to flow to productivity. Organized around 50 "tools" with a "workshop" for practice at the end of each tool.
Flaherty, F. 2009. <i>The elements of story</i> . New York: HarperCollins.	Covers all the elements of writing effective nonfiction, including topics not often covered elsewhere. Written from a journalist's perspective.
Hale, C. 1999. <i>Sin and syntax: How to craft wickedly effective prose</i> . New York: Three Rivers.	A book on grammar that is funny and focuses on effective writing more than following the "rules of the road."
Huff, A. S. 1999. <i>Writing for scholarly publication</i> . Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.	Excellent coverage of developing and crafting academic articles in the social sciences.
King, Stephen. 1999. <i>On writing: A memoir of the craft</i> . New York: Pocket Books.	Memoir on the life events that shaped him as a writer, discussion of key elements of the craft, and recommendations on how to launch a writing career. Very funny and informative.
Lamott, A. 1994. <i>Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life</i> . New York: Anchor.	Memoir and reflection on writing and the writing process. Funny and very accessible.
Silva, P. 2007. <i>How to write a lot</i> . Washington DC: American Psychological Association.	This is a no-nonsense book on how to be a more productive academic writer. It challenges the validity of our most common excuses for not being more productive.
Strunk, W., & White, E. B. 2000. <i>The elements of style</i> (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.	Classic treatise on grammar usage and how to construct more effective prose. Should be on every writer's bookshelf as a reference.
Sword, H. 2012. <i>Stylish academic writing</i> . Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.	Systematic look at the practices employed by good academic writers across a variety of disciplines. Her goal is to make academic writing more interesting and accessible.
Truss, L. 2003. <i>Eats, shoots & leaves</i> . London: Profile Books.	This is a grammar book that made the <i>New York Times</i> bestseller list. Need we say more?
Williams, J. M., & Colomb, G. G. 2010. <i>Style: Lessons in clarity and grace</i> (10th ed.). New York: Pearson Education.	A classic used in many writing courses, with helpful exercises to improve your writing.
Zinsser, W. 2006. <i>On writing well: The classic guide to writing nonfiction</i> . New York: HarperCollins.	Discusses the key elements of effective writing and how to write different types of nonfiction. The first five chapters read like a novel while giving you technical advice.

We invest time at conferences and CARMA workshops (<http://carma.wayne.edu/>) to build our methodological chops, but most academics invest little in improving their writing skills. This is a call to action! Whether it's a week on summer break or an hour each Sunday morning, you'll become a better writer by reading about writing. Potential payoffs include more publications, easier revisions, increased citations, and greater influence on the prac-

tice of management. Bad writing is rarely the explicit reason for *AMJ* rejections; but diffuse, dense, and complex text is often a reason your reviewers don't see your contribution as clearly as you do.

Table 1 lists books on writing that are readable, practical, funny, and inspiring. They'll improve your ability to write a story with a human face, with engaging motion and pace, and with a captivating, informative title. They'll remind you when to shut

your door and write, and when to open it wide and invite the critics in.

Timothy G. Pollock
Pennsylvania State University

Joyce E. Bono
University of Florida

REFERENCES

- Boice, R. 1990. *Professors as writers: A self-help guide to productive writing*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums.
- Chatterjee, A., & Hambrick, D. C. 2007. It's all about me: Narcissistic chief executive officers and their effects on firm strategy and performance. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 52: 351–386.
- Clark, R. P. 2006. *Writing tools: 50 essential strategies for every writer*. New York: Little, Brown.
- Flaherty, F. 2009. *The elements of story*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Huff, A. S. 1999. *Writing for scholarly publication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- King, S. 1999. *On writing: A memoir of the craft*. New York: Pocket Books.
- Klein, K. J., Lim, B.-C., Saltz, J. L., & Mayer, D. M. 2004. How do they get there? An examination of the antecedents of centrality in team networks. *Academy of Management Journal*, 47: 952–963.
- Lamott, A. 1994. *Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life*. New York: Anchor.
- Ragins, B. R. 2012. Editor's comments: Reflections on the craft of clear writing. *Academy of Management Review*, 37: 493–501.
- Silva, P. J. 2007. *How to write a lot*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Strunk, W., & White, E. B. 2000. *The elements of style* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Sword, H. 2012. *Stylish academic writing*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Toor, R. 2012. Becoming a stylish writer: Attractive prose will not make you appear any less smart. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. <http://chronicle.com/article/Becoming-a-Stylish-Writer/132677/>. Accessed February 3.
- Zinsser, W. 2006. *On writing well: The classic guide to writing nonfiction*. New York: HarperCollins.