

# The Anatomy of a Paper

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Family Business Review  
26(2) 113–120  
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sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0894486513489078  
fbr.sagepub.com



When the editorial team at *Family Business Review* (*FBR*) solicited topics for this series of editors' notes, several scholars asked us to focus on the elements of a paper. As authors, we want to share our ideas and disseminate the findings of our research. However, for an article to get published and read, it needs to be crafted appropriately. Although authors spend considerable time preparing articles for submission, reviewers and editors are frequently frustrated in seeing interesting ideas poorly or insufficiently presented. Authors do not always structure their paper to showcase their ideas in the best possible light. At times, crucial information that reviewers look for is left undisclosed or hard to find. With this article, therefore, we provide some suggestions how authors can organize and structure content, to increase favorable perceptions of their paper. In doing so, we recognize that valuable commentaries on aspects of this topic have already been published, and one of our objectives is to draw attention to these so that *FBR* authors can take advantage of them.

An overall principle to keep in mind when deciding how to organize ideas into sections of a manuscript is to achieve a balance between novelty and conformity. While the ideas in a paper should be novel, their language, style, and organization should conform to the format familiar to the reviewers of a chosen journal. These gatekeepers look for particular types of content in specific sections of the article, and it is beneficial for authors that they find it there. Material presented in a familiar format frees reviewers and later readers to focus on the ideas in an article, without spending time or effort in locating particular types of information.

Conforming to expectations is not straightforward because manuscript structure varies both by content and by outlet. Different structures are needed for different types of articles such as theory-building papers, reviews, and empirical studies, and there are variations within each of these broad categories. But guidance is available. For example, Langley and Abdallah (2011) discuss ways of presenting different types of qualitative research. Bansal and Corley (2012) describe differences

in the reporting of qualitative versus quantitative research. And Short (2009) discusses the art of writing review articles. All these authors stress the importance of a good match between a paper's content and structure.

While most management journals use a similar format that we elaborate on in this article, there is significant variance across disciplines. For example, articles in accounting, finance, and family science journals often differ in language, style, and structure than those in management journals. Journal submission guidelines and editorials often provide specific guidance to authors; for example, Chenail (2009) provided suggestions for *FBR* authors to communicate their qualitative studies, and Reuber (2010) shares guidance on the literature review section. *FBR* submission guidelines are accessible online. As these are updated from time to time, it is good practice to check them over during the manuscript preparation stage. Failure to conform to a journal's submission guidelines sends a strong signal to the editors that the authors lack familiarity with the journal and the submission is not a serious one (Craig, 2010).

The importance of conformity combined with the variation of structure in practice leads to our most central piece of advice: If an author is new to publishing a particular type of research, it is best to find one or two recently published articles that report similar research either in the target journal or a high-quality journal of the same type and use them as templates to organize the content. Whether publishing a paper that is quantitatively testing a mediated model based on survey data, one that is building theory through a qualitative analysis of multiple case studies, or one that is developing a conceptual model based on the integration of different

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bodies of research, recently published papers doing the same thing provide invaluable examples to suggest what types of content should go where; what methods-related information should be disclosed and how it should be disclosed; what types of evidence, logic, and arguments are persuasive; and how figures and tables can be used effectively. Deconstructing different sections to understand what content must go where can be very helpful. For example, what does each sentence in an abstract communicate? How many paragraphs form the introduction and how is the research question justified and the paper's contribution expressed? How are the theory and results presented and discussed?

In short, although conformity is important, there are multiple models of an effective paper. It is best to follow the structure of a published article that is similar to your study in terms of the type of research question addressed, the analysis technique used, and (if empirical) the data analyzed. However, it is important to keep in mind that there is no one template that serves everyone's needs, and within the general form, it is important to find one's unique voice. The remainder of this article walks through the elements of a paper.

## Title

"Don't strain for the overly cute title, particularly if it brings up all sorts of unrelated phenomena and confuses the reader" advised Feldman (2004, p. 1). To this advice, Craig (2010) added that editors and reviewers are not likely to reject a manuscript because of its title. In other words, the negative consequences of a poorly crafted title during the review process are minimal. However, on the positive end of the spectrum, a title does have the potential to invoke the curiosity of a reader. If accurate in reflecting the content, it helps set the expectations of a reader in terms of content and approach used. This is especially important as the "reviewers judge a paper by the author's own yardstick" (Feldman, 2004, p. 2).

In general, shorter, memorable titles are better than longer ones. According to Feldman (2004), titles more than two lines long are "pushing the envelope." When developing a title, it is often helpful to make a short list of the most significant contributions of the paper in terms of topic, methods, and/or findings. Draft a few alternate titles that capture the key words related to these contributions and select one that is the best fit and shortest. Retain the others in your notes and do not get too

attached to any particular one. Titles often get changed during the review process, either as key contributions become clearer or as editors and reviewers make alternate suggestions.

Based on our review of the 2012 Volume of *FBR*, we are encouraged by the informative and succinct titles in use by the authors. A few titles that we identified as inspiring curiosity while drawing attention to the key contribution of the paper are the following:

- "Why Can't a Family Business Be More Like a Non-Family Business: Modes of Professionalization in Family Firms," wherein Stewart and Hitt (2012) draw attention to the multidimensionality of professionalization. As the literature often equates nonfamily firms as professional, implying that family firms are unprofessional, by asking the question in the first half of the title, the article raises curiosity of the reader. While this may be a coincidence or reflective of its content more than the title, it is noteworthy that since its online release in September 2011, this article has remained among the top 10 downloaded articles of *FBR* every month.
- "Worlds Apart? Re-bridging the Distance Between Family Science and Family Business Research" by James, Jennings, and Breitzkreuz (2012). At this time in the evolution of family business studies, the collective realization of the urgent need to draw on the family science literatures is evident. This title offers hope to this rebridging, thereby drawing the reader toward it.
- "Faster Route to the CEO Suite: Nepotism or Managerial Proficiency?" by Salvato, Minichilli, and Piccarreta (2012) gently tease the reader toward this article by using a question that raises curiosity. The second half of the title indicates two possible answers, leaving the reader anxious to find out more.
- "Assessing Espoused Goals in Private Family Firms Using Content Analysis." While the previous three examples focused their key word usage on the topic or phenomenon of their study, McKenny, Short, Zachary, and Payne (2012) draw attention to the content analytic method and context of private family firms. Concerns have been raised in the field to expand the methodological tool kit and focus on goals as well as

private family firms. This short title deftly weaves the topic, context, and method of the study.

## Abstract

Title and abstract are the two most searched and used parts of an article by scholars from within the field and others alike. Thus, it is important to use terms that can be understood by a broader audience, while addressing the fundamental elements that the reviewers typically want to know about a paper. The importance of a carefully crafted abstract cannot be overemphasized because the online search engines of bibliographic databases typically list the title, authors, and abstract of a paper. Some search systems still use key words but most scan the title and abstract for these words or phrases.

The abstract frames the 3Ps of an article—Purpose, Procedure, and Principal findings (Craig, 2010; Koopman, 1997; Michaelson, 1990). For the author, preparing the abstract is a beneficial exercise as it helps strip away the peripheral information to expose the central purpose, process used, and the most significant contributions. For the editors and reviewers, it helps set the tone for the manuscript. Once the article is published, a carefully crafted abstract may encourage or discourage potential readers toward the full paper. Michaelson (1990) observed that “when properly written, the abstract becomes a definitive piece of writing for both author and reader, but when it is poorly written, *both* are at a disadvantage” (p. 31).

Crafting an effective abstract is not simple. In a few sentences, using succinct phrases that weave in key words, the author must convey the crux of the manuscript and entice the reader to the rest of the paper. The word limit of the abstract is specified by the journal, and for *FBR* the limit is 100 words. The abstract of an empirical article will read quite different from that of a theory building or a review article. In addition to using the abstract of a previously published paper as a template for your abstract, valuable guidance can be found in sources such as the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (American Psychological Association, 2009), Huff (1999), and Michaelson (1990).

In selecting an exemplar abstract of a recently published article in *FBR*, we shortlisted five that we found to be effective using our measure of clarity of purpose,

procedure, and principal findings and ran this shortlist by *FBR*'s editorial team. While each abstract had some notable elements and none was found perfect on all dimensions, the following abstract by Lungeanu and Ward (2012) was the most well received by our team because of its “clarity in describing with few targeted words the addressed phenomenon, conceptual lenses adopted, methodology used, and key result”. Further appreciated was the fact that it “gets to the point right away,” “follows the logical structure of the paper,” is “more precise with regard to the findings,” and “explains the contents of the article in a fairly straightforward way.” However, it was noted that the wording could be streamlined further and the last sentence could be more informative.

This article brings together research on philanthropy, family business, and governance to examine patterns of giving by U.S. family versus nonfamily independent foundations. The authors use a sample comprising the 200 largest U.S. independent foundations in 2007 to show that family foundations are more focused in their grant making than nonfamily foundations. Board size moderates this relationship. They also offer a new typology of family foundations to show that the generation stage of the family and the foundation board's composition are associated with different levels of grant making diversity in family foundations but in dissimilar ways. Scholarly and practical implications are discussed.

Through a long review process, authors, reviewers, and editors can overlook a manuscript's title and abstract, when everyone's attention is focused on the details of the paper's revisions, and they can come to be mismatched with the paper's content. Once a paper is at the Minor Revision or Acceptance stage, the author should check to see whether they need to be changed. They will be read and scrutinized more frequently than the paper itself, and so it is important that they reflect the paper accurately and favorably.

## Introduction

Grant and Pollock (2011) provide a useful discussion of how an Introduction should “set the hook” in terms of positioning a piece of research as interesting and relevant. First, it has to grab attention of the reader by showing that the topic matters or the core purpose of the study is interesting. (See Salvato & Aldrich, 2012, for a

discussion of what constitutes interesting research in the area of family business.) Second, it has to relate what we know and do not know about the topic already. The “do not know” part of this is important, because this is the gap or niche the paper is filling, and which helps situate and clarify the anchoring goal or research question of the paper. Third, it has to foreshadow the findings so that we understand the theoretical and practical contributions.

A question authors must answer is how much of each of the above to present in an Introduction. This is another balancing act: too many references or too much depth about theory, methods, or contributions raise reviewer concerns about redundancy in a manuscript. Yet a brief mention of all of these elements is expected in the Introduction. Feldman (2004) advises,

Refrain from lengthy exposition of your theory until you get to the Theory section itself . . . when in doubt, defer discussion of all methodological issues until the Method section. If you feel that your sample is particularly noteworthy or your methodology is particularly commendable, it is certainly appropriate to have one paragraph on these topics in the introductory section, but that’s about as much as reviewers want to see about methodology until later in the manuscript. (p. 2)

An example of a paper that sets the hook effectively is Björnberg and Nicholson’s (2012) paper on emotional ownership. These authors do all three things mentioned above succinctly in the very first paragraph of their paper. They highlight why the topic matters: “The survival of family firms depends on the involvement and inclusion of next generation (NxG) family members. Whether as employees or owners, the NxG’s commitment and willingness is the key to the continuity of the family firm.” They highlight what we know about the topic: “Commitment among NxG members has emerged as one of the key factors that contribute to the effective and smooth succession of leadership (Sharma & Irving, 2005).” They also highlight what we do not know, “The factors that precede such commitment and motivation.” Finally, they provide a snapshot of their contribution:

We argue that the antecedents of commitment and willingness to become a full-time member of a family business can be traced back to the psychology of the relationship between the individual and the family business system, consisting of family, business and ownership.

Crafting a good Introduction is hard work. Grant and Pollock (2011) report that it is common for authors of award-winning papers in the *Academy of Management Journal* to go through 10 iterations to set an effective hook and frame the article. But this short section, often no longer than three to four pages, is enormously influential in building the author’s credibility with editors and reviews and capturing readers’ attention.

## Literature Review

Although the literature review is a critical part of any paper, we are going to spend little time on it here because there is already a recent *FBR* editorial note on strengthening your literature review (Reuber, 2010), and an editorial in the *Journal of Management* on writing a review article (Short, 2009). However, it is important to point out that the literature review of a quantitative (theory-testing) paper is likely to be longer than the literature review of a qualitative (theory-building) paper (Bansal & Corley, 2012). In a theory-testing study, the development of a theoretical model to be tested precedes the discussion of the methods used to test it and the results of testing it. Thus, the literature review section of this type of paper is the key theoretical element of the paper and often has the label “Theory and Development of Hypotheses.”

In a theory-building study, however, theory is generated through data analysis. A literature review section is needed to show readers that the author is conversant with the constructs and relationships relevant to the research topic and will be sensitive to them during data analysis, but the development of a theoretical framework preceding data analysis is not useful. Indeed, such a framework can detract from perceptions of the paper’s contribution, because it begs the question of why the study was done if the theory could be formulated beforehand by looking at prior research.

Given the breadth of family business studies, researchers often draw on and adapt theories developed outside the family business context (Zahra & Sharma, 2004). In this case, the literature review needs to cover previous family business research on the topic (if any), as well as the more general research related to these theories. Salvato et al. (2012) accomplish this successfully on the topic of CEO career patterns in family enterprises, and Kellermanns and Eddleston (2004) do so on the topic of conflict in family firms.

## Methods

Although there is a difference between the high level of prescribed content in a paper involving quantitative data analysis compared to the lower level in a paper involving qualitative data analysis (Bansal & Corley, 2012), at a more abstract level, the Methods section in both types of papers can suffer from similar problems. Zhang and Shaw (2012) reviewed rejection letters for *Academy of Management Journal* submissions and found that the Methods sections of rejected manuscripts tended to be weak because of issues of completeness, clarity, and credibility. They argue that for a Methods section to be complete, authors must disclose the choices they made in their research design and provide a detailed account of their data and how they collected it. To be clear, authors need to ensure that the reader understand the assumptions and definitions of constructs and relationships, as well as how they are measured in the case of quantitative data. To enhance credibility, it is useful for authors to legitimate the choices made with respect to sampling approaches, measures, and analysis techniques. Pearson and Lumpkin (2011) provide guidance on developing valid and reliable measures for the family business context, and Pearson, Holt, and Carr (in press) provide a comprehensive review of the available measures in the field of family business. Completeness, clarity, and credibility can be even more important in qualitative research, because with fewer Methods section prescriptions, it can be more difficult to establish the scholarly credibility of the author and the trustworthiness of the results (Bansal & Corley, 2012).

## Findings

Like the Methods section, the structure of the Findings section is less prescriptive for qualitative studies compared to quantitative studies. Focusing mostly on papers reporting the results of quantitative analysis, Zhang and Shaw (2012) discuss why and how completeness, clarity, and credibility matter to a paper's Findings section too. Bansal and Corley (2012) explain that the creative use of data displays can be influential in the persuasiveness of qualitative research results, since the data do not fit into the more standardized tables that are common in quantitative work. In presenting "templates" for the writing up of qualitative research, Langley and Abdallah (2011) provide a valuable emphasis of the tight connection between research questions, methods, and the rhetoric underlying presentation of a study's findings.

## Discussion

By the time a reader gets to the Discussion section, he or she is likely to be immersed in the details of the study's methods and the findings, and the Discussion section provides the author with the opportunity to remind readers of the research question that was emphasized in the Introduction and to emphasize the "so what" of the findings in terms of its relationship with existing bodies of literature. Geletkanycz and Tepper (2012) provide advice to help authors avoid common pitfalls in a Discussion section: (a) they should focus on discussing what their results mean rather than rehashing what they are; (b) they should focus on what their findings mean collectively, rather than articulating a wide range of only loosely connected implications, which lessens the overall impact of the study; and (c) they should avoid overreaching their findings and the theoretical perspectives already presented in trying to persuade readers that their research is important.

Gagné, Wrosch, and de Pontet (2011) provide an effective illustration of these ideas by reminding the reader of the core topic and question of their study and quickly moving to highlight the findings that were expected. Furthermore, they note the unexpected findings speculating some explanation for these. All this is done in a few sentences at the start of the Discussion section:

This research examined whether goal adjustment capacities facilitate retirement planning among family business leaders who are approaching normative retirement age. In addition, we explored how trust in the successor may influence the associations between goal adjustment capacities and retirement planning.

The study's results showed that high goal disengagement capacities were associated with more positive retirement expectations and exerted a marginal effect on predicting the setting of more concrete steps toward retirement over a 2-year period.

We did not expect the former result, namely that goal disengagement capacity would influence retirement expectations, and the only plausible explanation we have for it is that the capacity to disengage from goals may free up cognitive space to think more about the future. (Gagné et al., 2011, p. 299) [Note: We separated the text into paragraphs to highlight the goal of the paper, expected finding, and unexpected findings]

In their commentary on strong Discussion sections, Geletkanycz and Tepper (2012) make the point that

since the primary objective of a Discussion section is to highlight the theoretical contribution of the research presented in the paper, the question of what should go in a Discussion section is intimately linked with the question of what constitutes a theoretical contribution. Reay and Whetten (2011) discuss how to make a theoretical contribution in the context of family business and point out that it requires showing where existing theory is wrong or lacking. Thus, the Discussion section needs to demonstrate how and where the research presented in the paper provides constructs and relationships that fix incorrect assumptions or fill gaps in knowledge.

In addition to theoretical contribution, the Discussion section of *FBR* must also clarify the practical implications of a study. For *FBR* articles, the focus of practice may be the family business owners, managers, or advisors. Oftentimes, scholars make distinctions within these stakeholders if the research findings point to different suggestions for each group. For example, Salvato et al. (2012, pp. 221-222) discuss the practical implications for the “managers—including next generation family members and nonfamily executives” and “family owners—through their boards of directors, promotion committees, and HR managers” separately in two distinct paragraphs.

A Discussion section must also address the limitations of the study and make suggestions for future research. All studies have many limitations, and there is space in a manuscript to identify only two or three. While acknowledging a limitation, an author can also provide an assessment of its probable impact. It is also sometimes possible to turn a limitation into an opportunity by showing how it leads to an interesting question for future research.

A recent paper that discusses the study’s limitations effectively is one by Lungeanu and Ward (2012). As is shown in the following quotations, in describing two limitations, they acknowledge each, discuss the probable impact of each, and suggest an opportunity for future research:

Limitation 1: “In this study we could only assume that behind the effects we observed is a strong determination to preserve a family’s socioemotional wealth, a concept rooted in the family business context. Our data do not allow us to measure specific dimensions of this concept, or to make predictions regarding its effects. We note, however, that in a family business, the expression of the different socioemotional dimensions is perhaps more constrained by

organizational or environmental factors. On the contrary, we hypothesize that family foundations are less subject to such constraints. We therefore propose family foundations as a fertile context where the different socioemotional dimensions can be more easily measured and their effects revealed more clearly (see Berrone, Cruz, Gomez-Mejia, 2012, for a review).”

Limitation 2: “Finally, an obvious limitation of our study is its focus on U.S. foundations. Although family foundations are common in the United States, they are less so in other countries, and therefore the results of our study are not easily generalizable. However, we suspect that decision making in non-U.S. family or nonfamily foundations is similarly confined within their boards. Comparative analyses of grantmaking strategies among types of U.S. and non-U.S. foundations thus represent another rich domain for future research.”

## References

How should authors decide what references to include in a manuscript? There are generally a large number of references on any one topic and authors need to be judicious in selecting which they include. Viewing publishing as a contribution to scholarly conversations (Huff, 1999), it is important to reference recent papers from the target journal and important papers on which an article is building on. But the challenge is how to avoid overreferencing in order to retain the focus of the reader on your ideas and the references that matter the most. Feldman (2004) notes, “References should be exhaustive rather than exhausting” (p. 5).

The website of *Administrative Science Quarterly*, in its guidelines for contributors, recognizes this issue and states that authors should “cite a representative set of references when there is a large literature.” In deciding which references should be in the representative set, it is beneficial for authors to include seminal references that reviewers and readers will be familiar with. It is also beneficial to include recent references from high-quality journals. Not only do such references signal that the author keeps up with those journals, they also lend greater authoritativeness to a paper.

Finally, in drawing on references in the text of the paper, it is important to show how the references relate to the points being made. A common mistake is to have a complex statement followed by list of references; for example, “Others have studied related constructs such as trust, altruism and benevolence (Cruz, Gomez-Mejia, &

Becerra, 2010; Eddleston & Kellermanns, 2007; Steier, 2001; Zahra, 2003).” In this sentence, it is not clear which reference relates to which construct. A better way to write this sentence is to show these associations less ambiguously, as Berrone, Cruz, and Gomez-Mejia (2012) do in the following sentence: “Others have studied related constructs, such as trust (Steier, 2001), altruism (Eddleston & Kellermanns, 2007; Zahra, 2003), and benevolence (Cruz et al., 2010).”

## Concluding Remarks

In closing, we want to emphasize that although we have focused attention on individual elements of an academic article in a piecemeal manner, there is a high degree of consistency and interrelatedness among these elements in well-crafted papers. Golden-Biddle and Locke (2006) focus on the importance of skillful storytelling in the presentation of qualitative research, and it is equally important in writing up quantitative and conceptual studies. From a paper’s title and abstract, to the research question and the theory associated with it, to the collection, analysis, and interpretation of evidence, and then back to the theoretical contribution made through addressing the research question, a powerful and convincing article keeps the reader interested in the author’s story from its opening to its resolution.

## Acknowledgment

We are grateful for the input and thoughtful comments from Allison Pearson, Pascual Berrone, Justin Craig, Trish Reay, Carlo Salvato, and Wim Voordeckers on earlier versions of this article.

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