HOW TO WRITE READABLE PAPERS FOR MARKETING SCIENCE

RICHARD STAELIN
Editor-Elect, *Marketing Science*
Duke University

As part of the interviewing process for Editor of *Marketing Science*, I was asked to identify challenges facing a new editor. I identified three. They were to ensure that a) quantitative researchers submit their best marketing-oriented manuscripts to *Marketing Science*; b) these submissions are reviewed fairly, speedily and competently; and c) the best of these submissions is published in a format that will enhance readability and accessibility. In addition, I stated my over-arching belief that *Marketing Science* should facilitate the publication of academic research that can impact the understanding and practice of marketing.

Considerations such as these lead me to conclude that we as a profession have an urgent need to increase the readability of our papers. This does not mean that every article needs to be written so that a practicing manager can readily understand all of the material. In fact, I suspect much of the material published by a cutting edge journal such as *Marketing Science* needs to diffuse through at least two or three groups of people before it actually impacts marketing practitioners. However, if this diffusion of knowledge is to take place, we need to ensure that the articles are read by the relevant populations.

How can an author go about enhancing readability? Although there is no one right way to go about this task, there are a number of things authors can do. Here are my suggestions.[1]
(Reading, Writing, Publishing in *Marketing Science*)

1. Before You Begin Writing

All too often researchers start writing before they clearly identify their readers, their concerns and their current knowledge base. Answering a few questions before you begin writing can help you determine the style, level and focus of the paper.

1. Who is the intended target audience for your paper?
2. What business problem or issue are you addressing?
3. What progress have you made in extending the extant literature?
4. Why should these people be interested in your subject?
5. What are the most important take-aways of your paper, and why should they matter to busy readers?
6. What data and ideas merit emphasis? Which are secondary or of little importance?
   Look for the "Aha's!" and stress them.
7. What action do you want your readers to take as a result of reading your paper?

2. Writing Your Paper

As you begin to write, imagine that you are presenting your ideas to the relevant target group in a classroom setting. Just as you do when you develop a lecture, you should strive to engage the audience's interest, to clearly present information, to teach and persuade and to inspire questions, ideas and actions. The following suggestions for organizing and presenting your paper can help you achieve these goals.

Introducing Your Paper. The first contact people have with your paper is its title. Make it clear and provocative. The introduction to your paper then determines whether readers will invest valuable time reading it or simply set it aside. It is your opportunity to tell people how they will benefit from reading your paper. Identify the business/marketing problem you are exploring, why it matters and what is new and helpful about your findings. Then tell readers what they will learn if they read through the rest of the paper.

Bring the issue to life. The field of marketing is about people and organizations - their behavior, attitudes, actions and decisions. You might want to consider using a story or an anecdote or two to open the paper. Or, try posing the issue as a set of challenging questions.

The introduction is also an opportunity to prepare your reader for what lies ahead, describing the direction and highlights of the discussion to come. Give the reader an overview of the purpose and execution of your study. Note that none of the approaches suggested here requires extensive referencing of the literature. By the time readers finish the introduction they should know: 1) the issue you studied and why it matters to them, 2) the purpose and main features of your study, 3) why your perspective on the issues is valuable, and 4) what topics and themes will be explored in the pages to come.

Main Body. The core of most *Marketing Science* articles will contain technical material and complex ideas. Still, this material should be readable to more than the handful of scholars working on the same problem. Here are some suggestions.

- Explain the logic behind your research strategy, i.e., the steps you took and why you took them.
- Help the absentminded reader by providing signposts and reminders. For example, {First, Second ...}, {We now return to ...}, {Recall that Theorem 1 says ...}, {Remembering our prior notation, ...}.
- Show how your analysis led to your insights and conclusions. Don't force a person to jump from one equation to another without some guidance.
- Distinguish between data and ideas that must be developed in the text and those that can be more efficiently presented in a table, figure, or appendix. Use a "multimedia" writing style.
- Include only the information that is important for readers to know. Omit details, facts and figures that have little or no bearing on your main points.
- Use headings to direct readers to the sections that are of greatest interest to them.
- Keep in mind page limitations. *Marketing Science* rarely publishes an article longer than 25 journal pages (i.e., 45 typewritten pages). Longer is not always better.

In addition, you can greatly enhance the readability through a few simple style tricks.

- Activate your verbs. Take each paragraph and circle the verbs in each sentence. No paragraph should have more than two "is" verbs.
- Make sure the last sentence of each paragraph sets up a transition to the next paragraph.
- Suppose that the reader was reading only the topic sentence of each paragraph. Would the paper make sense?
- Clearly define your notation. Try to use commonly accepted notation. Don't go inventing your own unless it greatly simplifies the presentation.
- Use familiar, concrete words and phrases; avoid jargon and abstraction.
- Keep sentence structure simple. Sentences are easiest to understand when they start with the subject, followed by the verb.
- Make sure you have the correct spelling and usage for all your words. Also check for punctuation.

Conclusions. This section should state what has been learned, not what you have done. Put the findings in easy-to-understand terms. Don't overstate what you have shown, but don't undersell it either. Remember that some readers may only carefully read the introductory and concluding sections and skim the body of the text. Consequently, the reader should be able to comprehend this concluding material without a detailed reading of the main body of the paper.

3. What To Do After You Have Finished

Writing a paper is akin to developing a new product. Just like most firms find it best to test market their new offerings before introduction, you should ask a few peers to read your paper and make suggestions on clarity and readability before you introduce the paper to the review process. Get comments not only from those familiar with the topic, but also from those who have less interest and knowledge. Finally, I leave you with a quote attributed to Eitan Gerstner, "We will submit no paper before its time!" Most good writers find that if they haven't rewritten the paper a number of times, the paper isn't ready for submission. Remember, your objective should be to produce a paper that is read (and thus can make an impact) versus getting another line on your vita.