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Unplugged - My Own Book Review

Anne Sigismund HUFF (1998), Writing for Scholarly Publication as a contribution to scholarly conversation,

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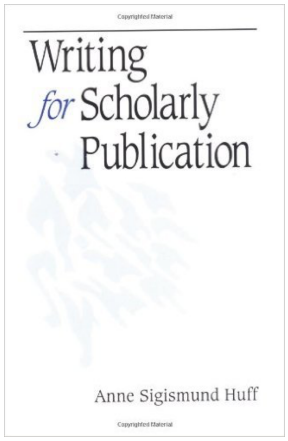
reviewed by Anne Sigismund HUFF, Dublin City University Business School, anne.huff@dcu.ie



The “unplugged” section seeks to experience new forms of book reviews. We regularly grant a wild card to a world-class scholar to review his/her own Classic. In “My own book review”, authors will tell us the story of "what I was trying to do" with sometimes some auto-ethnographic considerations. By recounting the building process of one seminal research with a contemporary lens, they may give some insights for the current craft of research and also share with us renunciations, doubts and joys in their intimate writing experience.

Academics are expected to carry out research and effectively report the results to various audiences. The demands for delivery continue to increase, as do the penalties for falling short. Unfortunately, there is much more formal support for learning how to carry out research than how to communicate it effectively.

I wrote *Writing for Scholarly Publication* to help readers become more interested in research and writing and more confident in making a contribution of their own. I also wanted to help attract a more varied group of participants to scholarship. This review first summarizes arguments from the book that I believe continue to be valuable on the basis of feedback from readers and workshops participants, as well as my continuing efforts to publish. I then consider several important challenges to advice given and conclude with a career puzzle that faces us all: In the light of pressures to focus on research, does it make sense to spend considerable time on other writing, teaching and service activities, as I did with this and a related second book, *Designing Research for Publication*?

CENTRAL MESSAGES FROM TWO BOOKS ON PUBLISHING SCHOLARLY WORK

I had a very difficult time getting even one manuscript into the journal review process at the beginning of my career, and some of my instincts and interests seemed to stand in the way. I was reading widely but indiscriminately, then trying to cram as much material as possible into what I was writing. I am happier with my publishing efforts now, but still learning. There are a number of good books about academic research offered to management scholars, some of which are listed in the annotated bibliography by Tobias Fredberg in *Designing Research for Publication*. The more unique aspects of advice offered in these books about communicating that effort can be summarized in five key claims.

1. Science is conversation. This is the most important contribution of *Writing for Scholarly Publication* in my opinion and in the opinion of most readers. After several years of unrewarded efforts to publish as a green assistant professor, I realized that I was still in student mode – collecting references, organizing them haphazardly, reading at various levels of detail, making notes that were extremely difficult to codify, then trying to find a connection with my empirical data. The clarifying moment came when I realized that I had to contribute to an established line of thinking.

Understanding academic work as a conversation I wanted to join meant that my efforts made more sense to me and editors/reviewers. My attempt to contribute something new had to begin by specifying context with several project-defining publications. In 'mature' fields with publications in clearly identified subfields of inquiry, this may take little or no effort, but specifying conversation is critical if your publication target addresses a more general audience. What is news in one conversation or subconversation is often of little interest to scholars in other areas of inquiry. Your contribution has to attract an audience interested in similar problems; one that understands compatible theories and methods. In a globalizing world with an expanding number of outlets and participants that is increasingly difficult.

The underlying claim is that science is a complex social endeavor. Even the most brilliant scholars thus must show how they build upon what has gone before – as Einstein (1916, 22) did when proposing his theory of relativity. He begins with the statement: "The special theory of relativity is based on the following postulate, which is also satisfied by the mechanics of Galileo and Newton."

Fortunately everyone already knows how to be part of a conversation, even those of us who wish we had more social skills. At a party, we gravitate toward talk that interests us, and we can see that good conversationalists first listen to understand what has been said before trying to make a contribution of their own. In other words, most of us already understand the importance of coordinating our interests with the interests of others. 'Coordinate' is perhaps a misleading word. *Good conversation and good academic work requires difficult but necessary subordination of idiosyncratic interests to collective concerns.*

2. Writing = Thinking. Most people assume that writing cannot happen until the author has a message. This book makes the opposite claim, as advised by Karl Weick (2005, 12, 18), that writers often *discover* what they think by seeing what they write. Many novelists say something similar. For example, Anne Lamott (1994, 22), whose book *Bird by Bird* is one of my favorite non-academic sources of writing advice, says "very few writers know what they are doing until they have done it."

The practical implication is that writing should begin as research begins. *Writing for Scholarly Publication* suggests a series of exercises to help you discover what you are beginning to know, test it, rewrite it, shop it to others, and rewrite again to clarify emerging understanding. The hard truth is that what we read in the academic literature is the result of many drafts and reiterations, and the knowledge conveyed has been significantly improved by this ongoing process. Even highly regarded scholars begin with imperfect drafts that help them clarify their thoughts. *The time to start writing is right now – even if you are a first year student.*

3. Subject domain is critical, often neglected, and influences identity. It interests me that many people give relatively little attention to alternatives when making what seem to be critical decisions of personal or economic importance – like buying a house (Huff, Huff, and Barr, 2001). Similar inattention often accompanies what might be described as drift towards an

academic's domain of interest, which can have unanticipated consequences. When one of my research projects goes well, it inevitably consumes more time than I expect, which means that other projects languish and often die. In addition, a publication can shift my identity as a scholar in the eyes of others and over time in my eyes as well, which means that the opportunities I see and am offered shift. This evolutionary path can support creativity, but it can also lead to less interesting and time consuming side excursions.

To more purposefully shape your career, I suggest making a conscious choice about what you do, but also do ***not*** do. Newcomers often define a very general subject and then happily sink into the more familiar detail of literature review and collecting empirical evidence. When another project beckons, new grass too often seems greener. Fortunately, Wallace and Wray (2016) have just published the third edition of an excellent book to help people identify and evaluate representative articles in a potential area of interest and make informed decisions about their relative quality and interest. I strongly encourage readers to follow its advice.

Writing for Scholarly Publication gives more fine grained suggestions for purposefully choosing among several alternative writing projects. It suggests that you a) first compare possible projects in terms of your level interest. This is the most important factor since you must choose to write when alternatives in your personal and professional life beckon. However, it is also important to compare possible projects in terms of b) accessible theory and methods for developing a contribution, c) the availability of compelling empirical evidence or models, and d) the demands of your other life choices. One of my most successful exercises asks participants to bring three projects they are currently working on to a workshop, and evaluate them on this 4 point diamond. I feel our time is well spent if after many participants realize they are giving time to one or more project that should be dropped (at least at this point in time) in favor of one or two more promising alternatives.

Further clarification is likely when you craft job application letters, which often ask for longer statements about your research, teaching, and service. Both of my books argue that it is difficult to maintain multiple identities when trying to win a job, or gain promotion. However, increasing attention is now being given to interdisciplinary work and thus the appropriate level of breadth varies. My advice is to identify institutions and people who have jobs like the ones you hope to have. Look at how they describe themselves on websites. These are the best sources of advice for how to publicly present your academic domain.

However, a critical question needs to be asked before proceeding. Is this general area of conversation likely to interest you for at least the next several years and ideally much longer? It takes time to understand what has already been said in a conversation and then plan how to take an additional step. Getting a contribution published takes even more time. *It makes a lot of sense to craft multiple contributions to the same or a closely related audience based on your hard-won knowledge.*

4. Conversants facilitate written contribution. Urging you to "join a conversation" may seem very abstract. The more practical advice found in *Writing for Scholarly Publication* is to identify 3 or 4 published articles that you would especially like to engage in your research and writing. Pin these 'conversants' over your computer (literally, if possible) and write with them in mind. One helpful side-effect is that you avoid books as anchors. Books send the writer of a single manuscript, even a dissertation, in too many directions. It may be helpful, however, to include a specific chapter in your set of conversants.

"Conversation" is thus something that you construct, but is tangible. The works you choose should be asking similar questions and using similar vocabulary with some overlap in references. Their authors are likely to have

compatible training and present at the same or similar conferences. It may make sense to add an interesting article from a different domain to help substantiate your contribution, but all conversant articles should be work you admire. "You are wrong" is definitely a conversation killer. If you have a grievance, find conversant articles that discuss why a particular line of inquiry is misguided; you are unlikely to change the minds of true believers.

Since the number of conversants is constrained to 3 or 4, if you follow this advice, you are likely to choose work by the smartest people in your area of inquiry. Once you overcome understandable nervousness about imagining yourself in their company, you are more likely to put forward your smartest efforts in response. Interacting with these references will help subvert a tendency to provide too much background information—because their authors already know it. They should help you be more focused, direct and engaging the rest of your manuscript as well.

In general, conversant articles do not include the publications that helped define the area of inquiry that interests you, though these will be cited. Conversants represent more current thinking. You should work to find out how the conversation is continuing to evolve, since publication typically takes several years. Look at websites maintained by the authors of conversant papers, search for their recent presentations, look for projects their students have underway, and so on. Most important, go to meetings where you can hear and see major players and ideally interact with them. Following this advice can be daunting, it takes time, it requires money and time to travel, but it reveals the human faces behind publication. It is typically much easier to write something of publishable quality if you are familiar with some of the colleagues you hope to interest through your work.

Of course, some attractive articles may be from a conversation that is out of reach. My advice is to avoid making that decision too quickly, because it is possible and in fact necessary to continue learning as an academic. On the other hand, there are many alternative conversational homes to be found in publications around the world and it makes sense to compare alternatives before making a choice. *Since scholarship is a social endeavor, choose authors you would like to spend time with.*

5. Writing mechanics are the necessary bones of a successful story. *Writing for Scholarly Publication* provides a set of exercises and several checklists. All focus on the idea that every structural expectation for what you write should reinforce a clear message to a busy reader. Since writing = thinking, this means that as you consider alternative words and phrases for your publication's title, abstract, key words, subject headings, table titles, and so on, you also are clarifying *your* understanding of the message you want to deliver. When the various aspects of writing finally work together, they help readers identify your project using search engines, quickly skim the article you write, and efficiently understand your basic argument.

As search engines become more central to how readers find relevant publications, the standards for attracting attention is going up. I now recommend advice found at http://olabout.wiley.com.jproxy.nuim.ie/WileyCDA/Section/id-828012.html a website maintained by John Wiley & Sons, the publishing house that has expanded into a broad range of services supporting publications in the sciences, humanities, social sciences, and professions. In addition to discussing "search engine friendly" titles and key word phrases, this website suggests much more repetition than I have recommended in the past. It argues that no more than five key words or short phrases should be reiterated in title, abstract, literature review, and subsequent writing. Most should be concepts you know are already being used in your field of inquiry and they should appear again in *your* subsequent publications. It may sound mechanical and restricted, but

must not be, and some helpful examples are given. I have tried their recipe in two recent publications and will continue to use it because I believe it is helping me to convey a core message more effectively.

A second way in which the demands for publication are going up involves increasing expectations for narrative skill. In "Being Shahrazade" Pollack and Bono (2013), editors of the *Academy of Management Journal*, say: "We have two jobs as scholars: Answering interesting questions and telling the story." They emphasize the importance of providing a personal face in academic writing, using motion and pacing to provide action in the story you tell, and (in common with all works on academic writing I know) writing titles that "capture the reader's attention."

More specific suggestions from Writing for Scholarly Publication include:

- Get mad about what's missing in your conversation to get over the timidity newcomers often feel.
- Cut 30-50% of initial drafts to reveal your core message. Good targets for pruning are often at the beginning of your paper and in transitions – writing tends to get better once you are underway.
- Ask for advice about title and abstract from different kinds of readers (family and friends, trusted colleagues, participants in writing clinics at professional meetings, etc.).
- Work on developing an "internal compass" to help sort inevitably disparate advice given
- Constructively review work published in your area of inquiry because the advice you offer is likely to provide insight into improving your manuscript as well.
- Identify good examples of the *kind* of work you want to write, which may not be about the subject that interests you. Once you've found work you admire, experiment with replacing their nouns, headings, etc., with your own to learn how you might more professionally phrase your contribution. This could be plagiarism if done mechanically and then presented in public, but your work is likely to be distinctive enough that you do not need to worry.

It makes sense to delay submission until you feel you have something to offer, but please, please ask for assistance in making that decision. Important scholarly conversations are held with trusted advisors who help clarify which aspects of your work are most likely to interest others; often these points are not the observations most cherished by authors.

PERNICIOUS QUESTIONS

Academic work requires new voices to remain vital, and there are very legitimate concerns about the Ivory Tower's capacity to provide this needed variety. I wanted the message found in these books to be relevant to those at elite schools, but go beyond them. Thus I have always worked in government funded institutions that draw a substantial portion of their students from families with little previous involvement in higher education. I make contributions to programs that support gender, ethnic, international, and other diverse groups. And I have been involved for over twenty years with programs for professionals who write doctorates based on their experience in private, public and not-for-profit organizations.

I am happy working in these contexts, but they also are the source for several probing questions that do not have easy answers.

A. What about creativity, autonomy, and new ideas? Isn't this the necessary heart of academic work? I want to do something that hasn't been done before, rather than follow footsteps that don't seem to me to be going in the right direction.

I share the spirit behind this question, but strongly believe that an *independent* intellectual effort has little chance for impact, even though social media is increasing the possible reach of individual efforts. It may not be easy to find what I call 'fellow travelers', but I am convinced that your effort will be more successful if amplified by compatible voices. In short, your bold message is likely to be more robust, cover more intellectual territory, and connect with more social networks if your reference works with similar themes.

If you are reluctant to accept this advice, I wonder if it has more to do with style than content. My books are likely to appeal most to writers who work in a relatively structured way. There are alternatives, and *Writing for Scholarly Publication* includes an interesting conversation with Mary Jo Hatch, a well-known organization theorist who begins every day with free form writing. You might try following her lead, but note that we both move between more and less structured thinking and writing, which I think make sense for all who want to publish.

As a last bit of advice, if you are drawn to a bold project, I suggest making it part of a portfolio that includes other efforts with a clearer path to success. Publication is a question of probabilities. I do not think it makes sense to bet only on high risk, relatively untested projects.

B. I am not happy about focusing on contribution to just ONE conversation. The questions that interest me are multi-dimensional and do not fit that well into one academic silo.

Here again I am sympathetic to the concern behind this question, which is especially relevant to work on complex and important issues of our time, like sustainability, but is also applicable to most questions that interest management scholars. However, I have several concerns about abandoning the clear emphasis on one academic conversation found in these two books, even though it entails a problematic simplicity.

On a practical level, I am concerned by the page limitations of journal submission. I am always stressed by having to cut relevant complexity to meet the demands of a short article. It is more difficult to prune effectively when it is necessary to address more than one audience.

More broadly, it takes a great deal of time to master more than one scholarly area of inquiry, especially when the domains are in different disciplines. The few people I know who are multi-dexterous have spent years in preparation. Newcomers have to ask themselves whether they are willing to spend the time involved at this point in their careers.

A third concern is about audience size. I give relatively little attention to work that touches on one of my interests, if it is combined with other subjects that are not central to my work. The more complex and idiosyncratic a publication's frame, it might be argued, the smaller the audience in most academic publications. It makes sense to trial more complex arguments in presentations that emphasize new thinking, or to write for practitioner publications that require less grounding in previous publication.

It is also useful to realize that we are drawn to interdisciplinary work not only by the complexity we see in the field, but also by funding agencies and university administrators defining grand challenges. This recipe has become too widespread in my opinion, and is especially risky for newcomers who hope for academic careers. I worry about the future employability of people who do doctoral work or take first jobs in projects without a clear academic base. When the project has a laudable multi-disciplinarily objective it still makes sense to develop a clearly defined area of academic expertise in my opinion.

C. It seems that the advice in these books applies primarily to the western world and learning to publish in English-language outlets. How disadvantaged am I if I did not learn English as a first language?

Once again I have to say "you are right in some important ways" to people who ask variants of this question. Important insights do come from communication in a first language, especially if it is the language of those you study. Conferences and publishing outlets that promote scholarly conversation in multiple languages are thus important to rich understanding and I worry about the consequences of policy makers and leaders of academic institutions who try to increase their impact by importing structures and theory from English to other soil.

On the other hand, the basic idea found in these books is that one of the best ways to learn how to be a scholar is from sources within the conversation you want to join. American ideas and practices are being diffused around the world. To the extent that you see this happening in your area of inquiry and are interested in the direction taken, the advice offered in these books may be helpful precisely because it has an American flavor that I cannot completely erase.

D. To what extent is the future of academic institutions in jeopardy? I worry that publications in the field of management seem to have little impact on practice. More specifically, how can academic research be influential given its small scale and scope in comparison to the complexity and scale of global interactions?

One of the reasons academic work has relatively little influence is that most journals expect it to focus on work published in a few top-ranking journals. I am happy to support recent efforts to pull back from a system that thus tends to divorce ranked journal publications from work the public is likely to appreciate (Smart et al, 2016).

On an institutional level, an important discussion is now occurring in the accrediting bodies widely seen to be part of a problem that tends to diminish public impact (see for example, http://www.bizedmagazine.com/archives/2016/3/features/academic-research-into-public-engagement). These efforts are typically led by senior scholars with less to lose, but they will not have an impact unless a much larger group of scholars takes some stand on the arguments being made. Thus we all have a responsibility to do what we can where we are, and to remember our initial complaints even as we learn to succeed in the current system. Once again it may make sense to see these efforts as part of a portfolio that includes work with less controversial intentions.

CONCLUSION

I've spent a month giving significant attention to writing this review, which makes it yet another project that has taken more time than I predicted. The experience reinforces two questions I continue to ask myself: Does it make sense for me to spend so much time on non-research activities like the two books I've just reviewed? What is my career advice to others, given that the reward structure of most academic institutions rarely values this kind of activity?

I say "yes" but my response must be qualified by the fact that I became an academic when expectations were much less structured and regulated than today. I had tenure before beginning these projects, so could afford to be less concerned about career impact, although I was beginning to realize that new demands always accompany promotion. In addition, I grew up in the Western United States, home of rugged yet rather unthinking individualism, and I escaped to other parts of the country for education and employment only after 'winning' an

epic battle with a loving but authoritarian father. Also worth mentioning is that I am positive and curious by nature and tend to see my glass as half full. These things are all path determining but also facilitate path creation (Garud & Karnøe , 2001). Every reader has their own conditions to consider but most operate in more challenging circumstances than I do now. Thus everyone has to answer these questions for themselves.

From my point of view *Writing for Scholarly Publication* makes sense only because it was and is the major project in the 'discretionary' part of an academic agenda that primarily focuses on cognitive aspects of strategic management and the changing environment of academic institutions. These more traditional efforts have received much more recognition in terms of citation and they (along with luck and important mentorship) are the primary source of career options that came my way or I developed, including appointments in Europe for the last sixteen years. Though I can point to setbacks, I did not suffer unduly from writing these books or facilitating workshops on their content.

I knew the two books reviewed here were not likely to be widely cited before I started, and they have not been. However, more people have thanked me for writing them than have enthused about other articles and books I have published and I believe they have had a broader impact than these works. I am pleased that the books reviewed here have been used and cited by colleagues who I personally admire, but also proud that they are used in disciplines outside of management, and are citied in multiple languages. This is the diverse audience that I hoped to reach.

In retrospect I could have done much, much more to help all of the things I've published find a broader audience. I strongly encourage readers to be more proactive in this regard. But life is short. I focus primarily on choosing and developing projects that I think are interesting and might have a positive impact on others. And I have learned over time that a desirable but intrinsically uncertain outcome is not worthwhile unless the process is rewarding, whatever the outcome. I hope this experience helps readers to similarly define and achieve their goals.

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