EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Maximizing the Chances of Securing a Revision by Focusing on the Essentials

By: **Susan Brown, Editor-in-Chief**

In this editorial, I discuss the challenges that new papers face at top journals and why they may ultimately get rejected in the first round. Over the years, multiple editors in multiple disciplines have addressed the topic of why papers are accepted and rejected. While many of the issues have remained the same, they are nevertheless worth revisiting. In addition, authors should be aware of some new issues that have surfaced, given the evolution in the types of papers submitted to *MISQ*.

Although the beginning (i.e., the introduction and motivation) and the end (i.e., the discussion of contributions and implications) are two of the most important parts of the paper, they often receive the least attention. We have been trained on how to conduct a literature review; how to design and write up a methods section; and how to select and conduct tests to demonstrate validity, robustness, and value of results, etc. For the most part, the middle sections of the paper are fairly well understood for most genres. In contrast to the well-defined middle parts of the paper, the introduction might feel like an obstacle to be overcome on the path toward publication rather than a significant element of the paper. Likewise, in many submissions, the discussion reads like a checklist of items and contains insufficient depth to be meaningful.

To maximize your chances of securing a revision, it is essential to take as much care in crafting the introduction, motivation, and discussion as you do with the middle sections. Whereas the middle of the paper provides evidence, the beginning and end communicate why a reader should be interested in your work, why your work is important to the world, and how your work will shape how scholars think and how various actors will behave in the future. This editorial provides insight into how to start and end an initial submission, as well as points to consider in the middle, so that editors and reviewers will be more likely to see the value in your work and support you on your journey to publishing high-impact research.

The Beginning—Motivating the Research

The first few pages can determine how reviewers will respond to the remainder of the manuscript. The opening arguments can encourage editors and reviewers to look for reasons to accept it, or they can highlight weaknesses in the paper that lead editors and reviewers to look for reasons to reject it. Table 1 of Rai's (2018) editorial articulates the key things that must be achieved in an introduction. Specifically, the introduction should formulate the problem, position the work in the appropriate literature, and highlight the "so what" of the paper.

Frame the research problem to answer: "Who cares?" To attract the attention of editors and reviewers, effective framing of the research problem is essential. The questions posed by Burton-Jones et al. (2023) can be helpful in thinking about how to frame the research problem. Ultimately, the "who cares" question should be answered at the outset to help position the paper. *Who cares, why do they care, and when will they care?* These can all be useful questions in helping you think about and communicate the problem studied in your research. The problem formulation should provide the groundwork for the rest of the paper.

Avoid gap spotting and other risks in the introduction. Gap spotting (Rai, 2017a) is perhaps the most common issue I see today with respect to problem framing. Focusing on research gaps rather than larger problems provides a narrow and potentially irrelevant research problem. A lack of research is not a sufficient reason to study a phenomenon. That is not to say that any paper motivated by research gaps will be rejected. Theoretical papers, for example, may be motivated by developing theory to explain such gaps. Gaps and paradoxes can be used to identify a tension in prior research and can provide an excellent motivation for research (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). However, papers of this sort require greater depth in their motivation to help the reader understand why the gap is important or why the paradox is not simply a function of different research approaches and participants.

Focus on the problem, not the data. The accessibility of a data set, while potentially interesting and unique, does not provide a strong basis for problem formulation (Rai, 2016). When the data set drives the study, it can become an exercise in applying analytical tools rather than addressing a significant problem. Many editors appreciate the interestingness of a unique data set. However, there needs to be a clearly articulated problem that the particular data set is useful for addressing. In the absence of such a problem, the paper will be unlikely to move forward.

Situate the paper in the IS (and other appropriate) literature. When writing the introduction, it is important to demonstrate that you are familiar with what has already been done to address the problem or problems like it. It may be tempting to position your paper such that you appear to be the first person to tackle this problem. But the reality is that even if *this* problem has not been studied, something similar to it likely has. Ignoring the other literature to make your work appear stronger will definitely backfire in the review process. Do not be afraid to highlight what we already know about this problem in developing your motivation. It will not diminish your contribution and it will demonstrate that you know the literature.

Focus on the IS aspects of the problem. Papers submitted to *MISQ* should contribute to knowledge in the discipline of information systems. Many problems today have an IS aspect to them, but this does not make them IS papers. In such papers, IS may serve as a context for the study but not the focal point—i.e., "IS" could be replaced with something else (e.g., a breadbox; Benbasat & Zmud, 2003) with the outcomes changing little if at all. True IS papers, on the other hand, bring the IS into the foreground. In such papers, removing IS from the paper would fundamentally alter the outcomes of the research. These are the kind of papers that belong at *MISQ*.

Once you have told a compelling story, it is important to follow that all the way through the paper. As a reviewer, it is always disappointing to see a paper that starts strong only to end with a contribution section that fails to address the initial problem. The problem you establish at the beginning of the paper should logically connect to the paper's contributions and implications.

The End—The Contribution and Implications

One of the most commonly listed reasons for rejecting a paper is insufficient contribution. Weaknesses in the contributions can often be attributed to a weak or incomplete problem formulation. Sometimes, even a well-formulated problem can have a weak contribution section. Although all papers have a contribution section, many papers miss the next steps—articulating why these are contributions to the IS literature and providing a meaningful path forward for the research.

Discuss why the contributions are meaningful. Ideally, a paper will discuss a contribution and provide meaningful arguments to support the impact of the contribution. Rather than listing a series of contributions that are exemplified by the results, authors should discuss each contribution. How does the contribution connect to prior literature? How will your work change future research or practice? Providing examples that highlight the connection between your work and these contributions can further strengthen the discussion.

Focus on the IS aspects of the contributions. Papers submitted to *MISQ* should contribute to knowledge in the discipline of information systems. It is important to frame not only the problem but also the contributions in terms of IS literature. How do your results inform IS scholars? How do your results contribute to the conversation in IS literature? This is not to suggest that you limit your discussion of implications to IS literature alone. However, if you ignore the contributions to the IS literature, the paper will not fare well in the review process.

Avoid simple applications of existing theories. Some problems in contribution stem from the practice of simply applying theories from another domain to the IS domain. This is what Gordon Davis referred to as the issue of whether gravity holds in IS. The fact is, it does. Theories developed outside of our domain can reasonably be expected to behave similarly when studying IS problems. However, this only becomes interesting if we have reason to believe that applying the IS context adds something significant to the theory. A simple application of an established theory from another domain to IS does not represent a sufficient contribution to IS literature.

Once you have aligned the introduction with the contributions, it is important to return to the middle of the paper to make sure that it logically connects with the motivation, the problem, the study, and the contributions. This is important because many papers involve multiple authors making countless revisions prior to submission, which can cause the middle to fall out of sync with updates to the introduction, motivation, contributions, and implications. To bring the full paper into alignment, it is important to ensure that there is a consistent message throughout the paper.

The Middle—Everything Else

Developing the literature review appropriately. In many ways, there is a "just right" when it comes to the literature review. While there is no need to cite everything ever written on a particular topic, being too narrowly focused can raise questions about how you determined what to include and exclude. Every paper should be approached as though you are entering into a conversation. To meaningfully enter a conversation, it is essential to know what has been said earlier. Just as you would with a conversation, it is important to distinguish between the relevant and irrelevant aspects of prior research.

Provide full details of the method. Although I have highlighted the importance of the beginning and end of the paper, a clearly articulated and executed research method is a necessary condition for the paper to move forward. My affiliation with the *AIS Transactions on Replication Research*, combined with my use of replication as a teaching tool in my doctoral seminar, has heightened my awareness of the importance of providing sufficient details in the research method section such that the paper can be replicated. When methods sections are written with this in mind, there are sufficient details that reviewers can use to evaluate the method. Failure to fully disclose the details of the method can lead editors and reviewers to wonder what the authors are hiding. More is better in this case.

Maintain consistency and currency in the paper. All aspects of the paper should flow from the problem. Choices that are made regarding the literature, data, analyses, benchmarks, etc., should be in the interest of addressing the problem. Papers that pose one problem but provide contributions related to another problem are unlikely to be successful. Likewise, papers that rely on outdated methods and techniques will face challenges in the review process. Ensuring that your study has logical consistency from beginning to end and relies on state-of-the-art approaches will be worth the effort.

Specific Types of Papers

In addition to the broader storyline, there are issues specific to different genres of papers. These issues are addressable with careful preparation.

Behavioral Papers

Reliance solely on perceptual data can be a challenge if other sources of data exist and are relevant to the work. However, ignoring perceptual data under the assumption that other data is somehow better can be equally problematic. As an example, relying on a user's memory of their system use may not be as strong a measure as data from system use logs. In contrast, there may be objective assessments of ease of use, but if actual users do not find the system easy to use, it does not matter how "objectively" easy it is to use. Whatever the case, it has become increasingly important to justify the decisions that are made when multiple sources and types of data are available. Further, when only perceptual data is used, it is essential to take steps to demonstrate that the results are not a function of common method bias, which typically requires the inclusion of a priori measured latent marker variables.

Construct definition and measurement is critical for the validity of a study. Papers that use vague, inconsistent, or poorly justified operational definitions for key constructs invite criticism. This point is closely tied to the need for the robust justification of data sources, as the way constructs are operationalized can affect the choice of data collection methods. Ensuring that constructs are well-defined and appropriately measured will strengthen the overall quality of the research.

Behavioral studies must carefully consider the context in which the data is collected and how potential moderating and mediating variables might influence the results. Papers that overlook the influence of contextual factors (e.g., cultural, organizational, or environmental) risk providing an incomplete view of the phenomena under study. A thorough examination of these factors can significantly enhance the generalizability and depth of the findings.

Finally, although statistical significance is important, it should not overshadow the need to understand the underlying relationships, whether significant or not. Papers that focus solely on p-values may miss the broader picture, neglecting the practical and theoretical implications of their findings. Nonsignificant results, especially when unexpected, can provide crucial insights and contribute meaningfully to the advancement of knowledge. It is essential to discuss the full scope of the findings, including effect sizes, real-world relevance, and contributions to the broader field of information systems. A strong paper will demonstrate not only statistical rigor but also a deep understanding of the research context and its implications for theory and practice.

Data and Design Science

Most of the design science papers submitted to *MISQ* fall within the computational design science (CDS) genre (Rai, 2017b). These papers focus on developing novel computational algorithms and methods to solve problems. One of the challenges for CDS is the confusion between CDS research and computer science (CS). Papers that belong in *MISQ* design novel computational algorithms and methods for a particular context, i.e., a business or social context (Hevner et al., 2004). CS papers, on the other hand, develop context-independent algorithms (e.g., transformer models). Therefore, as with all papers at *MISQ*, CDS papers begin by identifying the business or societal problem they are attempting to address. Papers that have a context-independent orientation are likely to be rejected at *MISQ*.

One common issue in data and design science papers is the identification of appropriate benchmarks. The challenge is that the selection of benchmarks is not always straightforward. The *process* for selecting benchmarks needs to be articulated. (Saar-Tsechansky, 2015). By articulating the process, you are communicating to reviewers why these, and not others, are the appropriate benchmarks for the study. In some cases, it may not be clear to the authors which disciplines they should draw benchmarks from. It is best to position the research so that it can extend the state of the art overall, not just in information systems. Thus, focusing on the process for identifying benchmarks should help authors extend beyond research in information systems.

Articulating novel contributions in papers that attempt to combine multiple existing techniques can be challenging. In many papers, one or more of the techniques are previously unaddressed or represent a significant revamp of a prior approach. In these cases, the new components must be highlighted. If, however, the authors are combining preexisting algorithms, it is imperative to argue why the way the algorithms are being combined is novel and nontrivial.

Writing clarity is very important for papers of this type. The complexity of the models combined with the technical nature of the work can lead to papers that are difficult to process. It can be easy for authors to dive deeply into the interesting technical problems and choices in the paper, but it is important to not lose sight of the overarching research problem. Achieving a balance between technical accuracy and clarity in communication is critical for papers in this genre.

Qualitative and Theory Papers

Sometimes authors have access to a variety of data sources, but the analysis focuses exclusively on the interview data. Authors should not shy away from leveraging additional data to assist in the theorizing, even if that data is not "qualitative." Further, when sharing the data in the paper, authors need to make sure the qualitative data is not sparse or overly selective. Achieving the proper balance can be tricky, but the consensus is that providing more examples in the paper is better. Reviewers can always suggest removal if they feel there is too much data.

As with quantitative papers, it is important to provide a clear chain of evidence from the data to the analysis and theorizing. The challenge is that the steps are not as clearly defined for qualitative research as for the other genres. Thus, the onus is on the authors to provide the details necessary for reviewers to assess how they moved from the problem to the data to the theorizing and conclusions. One way to do this is to imagine yourself as a reader. As a reader, would you be able to follow the steps in your work and reach similar conclusions? If the reader cannot logically trace the process used to reach the conclusions, you are much less likely to survive the first round of reviews.

One common complaint about qualitative papers aimed at theory development is the failure to sufficiently anchor the work in the breadth of the IS literature. Although we often focus on the top three or four journals in IS, when developing theory, it is important to look beyond such a narrow set. Further, it is important to engage with the literature broadly, even outside the IS discipline if appropriate. A particular challenge in these qualitative studies is the potential to overlook existing literature during the data analysis process. Although qualitative research often emphasizes the importance of allowing themes to emerge inductively from the data, this approach can lead to analysis conducted in a vacuum, independent of prior research. This can result in redundancy and theories that are disconnected from what is already known, which ultimately diminishes the contribution of the work.

Small Things that Have a Big Impact

The remaining items are not associated with the content of the research per se, but its presentation. These are components that if not attended to, could lead to a rejection.

1. **Not having the paper proofread prior to submission:** I would encourage every author team to have someone read the paper carefully prior to submission. Grammatical errors can get in the way of the content of your paper. If a reviewer has to edit each paragraph while reading the paper, they will not be able to fully appreciate the message of the paper. They may also start looking for other problems in the paper: The reviewer might start to wonder how likely it is that the authors did a good job with the actual research when not even the "easy" things like spelling and grammar were addressed.

2. **Not following journal conventions:** Papers submitted to *MISQ* should look like they belong in *MISQ*. They should follow the approach of other papers of their type in *MISQ*. Occasionally, authors may want to try something different in their approach to a problem, such as organizing the sections of the paper differently to tell a more complete story. I appreciate this and, in many cases, it will work out fine. What I am addressing here are the components of the paper as well as the various tests or evidence that need to be presented to give readers confidence in the results and/or the theorizing. For example, for a survey study, failing to discuss the validity and reliability of the constructs would be seen as a serious omission.

3. **Not workshopping the paper prior to submission:** Although not a policy of the journal, it is good practice to workshop your paper prior to submission. If authors present their papers at workshops, seminars, conferences, etc. prior to submitting, they can leverage the questions they receive to improve the paper. Authors should disclose this in their cover letter to let the editors know that they have, in fact, shared this work more broadly. I fear that the pressure to publish has increasingly led authors to write and submit without having shared the paper beyond the author team. This is likely to have negative consequences in the review process.

Questions About Submissions and Desk Rejects

Since beginning my term as EIC, I have received questions about how the submission process works and other aspects of the first-round submission. Table 1 presents some of these questions as well as their answers. Many of you know this information, but for those who do not, I hope it helps open the black box.

How does the process work? The *MIS Quarterly* website has a detailed explanation of how the article submission process works. Please see https://misq.umn.edu/review-process.

Does MIS Quarterly have a fixed acceptance rate? There is a misperception that papers are rejected in order to adhere to some artificial acceptance rate. I want to be crystal clear on this issue—there are no constraints on how many papers can be accepted at *MIS Quarterly*. Papers are evaluated against a bar, not against each other.

Why do I have to format my paper THAT way? The rationale for requiring all papers to adhere to MISQ formatting guidelines is twofold. First, it helps the reviewers. If all papers that come into the journal are formatted similarly, it makes it easier for reviewers to process the papers—they know exactly where to look for certain paper elements (e.g., figures, tables, references). Second, it helps the authors. If all papers are formatted similarly, it further assists with the blinding of the papers. In addition, adhering to *MISQ* formatting guidelines ensures that the paper will look like it belongs at *MISQ*—not like it was rejected from another journal and simply sent in as is. The pre-processing can be seen as one way to level the playing field.

Why would the EIC desk reject my paper? The most common issue here is that the paper is not a good fit for the journal. An overarching issue for these papers is that they do not appear to be entering into a conversation that is relevant to IS. Often, there is little, if any, IS research that is meaningfully cited in the paper. Sometimes, the research problems are not IS problems. In other cases, the research has already been done (MISQ does not publish pure replications).

Why didn't I get the SE I nominated? SE workloads are the primary reason that authors do not get an SE they have nominated. The second reason is that the nominated SE might not fit well with the topic and/or methods in the paper.

Do editors really use the reviewers I nominate? The answer to this question is, it depends. It is important for all of your nominations (SE, AE, and reviewers) that you provide some justification for why this person is the right person to assess your work. Simply listing names does not help the SE and AE determine appropriateness. Please keep in mind that anyone you nominate should NOT have a conflict of interest. Please see https://misq.umn.edu/conflict for the guidelines on conflicts of interest. When conflicts are detected with any of your nominees, all nominations will be ignored. Submitting authors should check nominations with the co-authors to be sure that conflicts do not exist.

Why do SEs and AEs reject my paper without review? SEs and AEs are typically close to the specific area of your research. That means they have a deep understanding of the research problems, theory, and methods in your work. They are best able to identify critical flaws that would render the paper unlikely to be successful in the review process. In these cases, it may be a question of contribution, or the editors might have serious concerns about an aspect of your method. In some cases, the paper might not truly address an IS issue. When SEs and AEs see the problems listed in this editorial, they may reject the paper without review to provide you with feedback in as timely a manner as possible.

Table 1. Q & A on the Submission and Review Process

Concluding Thoughts

There are many things that authors can do to improve the chances that their papers will be reviewed favorably. A lot has been written about this topic and I am certain a lot more will be written in the future. It is my hope that authors will successfully attend to the essential items in this editorial in preparing their papers for submission to *MISQ* so that more papers can successfully move forward in the review process.

I wish to extend my appreciation to the *MISQ* senior editors who provided input for this editorial: Nick Berente, Panos Constantinides, John D'Arcy, Xiao Fang, Peter Gray, Susanna Ho, Julia Kotlarsky, Shaila Miranda, Maytal Saar-Tsechansky, Sumit Sarker, and Stefan Seidel. Their insights provided important information "from the trenches" regarding current concerns with paper submissions.

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