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ESSAY

Liberate the Article! Proposals for Simplified Scientific Writing Conventions

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Abstract

A huge amount of advice and guidance has been provided on how to craft articles for top-tier journals. Simultaneously, research publications themselves have been criticized as formulaic or even nonsensical by some scholars. Despite this heated debate, the structural aspects of scientific texts have received little attention. The typical structure that articles are expected to follow and the typical story they are supposed to recount are presented as mere conventions that bear no consequences. In this essay, I discuss these taken-for-granted assumptions and analyze the significant costs and burdens generated by these conventions. I then propose to simplify writing conventions by focusing on the basic ingredients of research rather than the imposition of a rigid structure and a standard story. I argue that more freedom should be given to authors in the way they organize their papers. Such a reform would be easy to implement and would have mostly positive implications for all stakeholders.

Keywords: *Scientific Articles*; *Writing Conventions*; *Text Structure*

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Foreword

This essay criticizes the writing conventions that are imposed on research articles by academic journals. It might appear contradictory to submit this essay to a journal that itself implements these conventions (though, I must say, in a reasonable manner). 'You can't have your cake and eat it too', says the proverb. Simultaneously criticizing and abiding to rules can be seen either as an ethically problematic behavior or as a waste of time and effort. It might seem that, despite my criticism of ranked journals, I am eagerly seeking out the perks attached to publication in one of them. Unfortunately, with my career well behind me, I have very little to expect in terms of extrinsic rewards. Because I am deeply interested in the topic of writing, I simply hope that my ideas will be considered. Hence the second point: In the academic world, only published ideas have any worth. Ideas have to be published to be (hopefully) considered, cited, and discussed. This is all I aspire to.

Now, why *M@n@gement*? I confess that it was not my first choice. Recounting the editorial story of this paper tells a lot about its very topic. Aiming at the widest possible audience, I first turned to a highly renowned American review, then to a benchmark European journal in the field of management and organization studies. In both cases, I submitted my piece in the essay category. In both cases, I was told that my project did not fit with the requirements for essays. For the American review, I learned, essays should have a 'theoretical contribution' (among many other characteristics) because the review is a 'theoretically driven' journal. For the European journal, essays should be 'deeply personal' and 'authors should bring their own experience into the narrative'. Being still quite naive despite my years, I thus discovered that the essay, widely presented as a free form of writing, is in fact subjected to well-defined templates.

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While the second response was a rejection, the editor in charge of essays in the American review had encouraged me to revise my project and give it a theoretical grounding. However, I was not convinced that a theoretical framework was necessary to make my point, nor that theory would add any real value. Theory is not always needed. The numerous editorial pieces that I had read and analyzed to compose this essay never relied on any serious theorizing. Editors generously distributed authoritative guidance to potential authors without any conceptual grounding. Why should I provide a theory about writing when editors are under no such obligation?

Similarly, it is certainly a good thing to let authors 'bring their own experience' and write in a 'deeply personal' mode, as proposed by the European journal. But why does it have to be an obligation? Subjectivity is not always interesting. Is it reasonable, is it ethical to turn subjectivity into an injunction?

The essay is a genre that has a broad, well-known characterization, far beyond the field of management studies. Is it really fruitful to go beyond a general understanding, available in any dictionary, and impose a specific template? Is it in the interest of readers, of authors, of the general purpose of feeding academic debate? I do not believe so. Editors, who have the last say anyway, could just select the projects they find interesting. If projects are interesting because of their theoretical grounding or because of the author's personal involvement, then fine. But why rule out other kinds of essays because of a narrow template? Templates! Templates everywhere! Ironically, my essay on templates (for research articles) did not fit with templates (for essays).

So, why *M@n@gement*? Because I wish to be published and have a chance of being read and make a contribution; because my text has been rejected elsewhere, I admit; because *M@n@gement* has a broad philosophy on essays, which I appreciate; and for other personal reasons that I either cannot, or do not, wish to disclose.

Introduction

'Academics stink at writing': Steven Pinker, the renowned psychologist, does not mince his words (Pinker, 2014). Another respected social scientist, Michael Billig, goes even further: to succeed in the social sciences, one has to 'learn to write badly' (Billig, 2013). Sword (2012) has extensively studied the general conventions that govern scientific writing in a wide range of disciplines. Though she is less vehement than Pinker and Billig, her conclusions are not substantially different. She outlines some positive trends, but concedes that evolution is slow.

In the fields of management studies, we do no better. Articles in peer-reviewed journals have been heavily and repeatedly criticized for being boring, pompous, formulaic, or even nonsensical (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013; Dane, 2011; Tourish, 2020). They have been compared to the weird 'cubic poop' of wombats, certainly not a laudatory comparison (Liarte, 2020). This complaint is not limited to 'mainstream' quantitative research. Qualitative research has also become formulaic (Corley et al., 2021) and overly constrained by methodological templates (Gioia et al., 2022; Köhler et al., 2022). Even critical studies are under fire (Grey & Sinclair, 2006). Numerous invitations to 'write differently' have been put forward (Gilmore et al., 2019; Grey & Sinclair, 2006; Kostera, 2022).

Yet, guidance on scientific writing abounds, whether it targets a wide audience (Goodson, 2017; Silvia, 2015; Swales & Feak, 2012; Sword, 2012; Thomson & Kamler, 2012, to cite only a few) or it is directed toward management scholars (e.g., Cummings & Frost, 1995; Huff, 1999, as pioneers). In management studies, editors of top-tier journals have provided a huge amount of advice for authors, offering very detailed recommendations about how to write a paper (e.g., Barney, 2018; Patriotta, 2017; Pollock, 2022; Pollock & Bono, 2013; Ragins, 2012; Shepherd & Wiklund, 2020; Simsek & Li, 2022; see Lester [2020, p. 369] for a list of 51 publications on this topic between 1995 and 2020).

Editorial pieces on writing papers in top-tier journals are important because, though they are presented as mere advice, they have a normative power. Authors understand them as indicative of what is expected by evaluators. Evaluators read them as guidance for completing their own, difficult task. Despite a strong insistence on the specificity of their particular outlet, and though they repeatedly encourage creativity, novelty, meaning, and vividness, all these editorial pieces revolve around the same ideas. The above-mentioned critiques are barely acknowledged. Whether reading editorial pieces or published research articles, I observe that, despite some innovations that I will examine later, few changes have been made to the format of published articles over the years. The journal article appears to be a very strict, conservative genre (Hyland, 2008; Tardy, 2016).

Among the current conventions, this essay intends to explore an important but little-noted aspect of the article as a specific genre: its typical structure and the typical narrative that comes with it. Most of the controversy surrounding scientific writing combines considerations about the academic style with criticism of the substance of publications, that is, the kind of research that is proposed and its value, or lack thereof (e.g., Alvesson et al., 2017; Tourish, 2019). When critics extend their analyses to the causes of such poor writing, they tend to incriminate the contemporary, institutional context of academia and the heavy constraints imposed on academics: pressure to publish, commodification of research, academic capitalism, etc. While the extreme standardization of text structure has been noted (e.g., Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013, p. 250), it has not been analyzed in detail and its implications have not been discussed. The exhortation to tell 'compelling stories' (e.g., Ragins, 2012) as an accompaniment to the typical text structure has received even less attention. My aim is to characterize these two features, the structure and the story, outline their key roles, and question their implications. From this analysis, it will emerge that relaxing the current conventions surrounding structure and story could be a way to address many of the issues that plague scientific writing today, at very little cost.

Though the standardization of scientific writing has a broad reach, I will focus on the typical, empirically based research article that may be published in *M@n@gement* or other top-tier publication outlets. The reason for this is that the research article is the most prestigious, most valued form of scientific publication in today's academic world. It is the 'king of the academic jungle', the most hunted trophy, just like the sonnet used to be the noblest literary form in France in the 17th century. Though other types of publications (review article, theoretical pieces, essays, books) might be important, the typical scientific career requires the publication of empirically based research articles. And though other types of publications are also subject to conventions in many respects, the research article is the most codified. This is to be expected, as codification generally increases with the prestige of a writing genre (Tardy, 2016).

Obviously, writing conventions, and even more specifically the structural aspects of these conventions, are just one side of the hard work of assembling research articles. Topics, research questions, concepts and theories, methods for collecting and analyzing data, etc.: all these issues are of great importance. Still, I will deliberately avoid discussing them, because, too often, they obfuscate simpler, more obvious problems and constraints that are imposed on researchers. Among the latter are writing conventions. Even though writing conventions might be less crucial than, say, methodological issues, this does not make them insignificant. As I will later argue, the current writing conventions are more of a burden than a facilitating device for authors. And I can see no reason why this should be so. Therefore, it is worth discussing them.

Widening the lens, it is also patent that writing conventions are just one cog in the institutional wheel of today's academic world. I will analyze these conventions as a component of a wider system, which includes, notably, the way research is evaluated and the logics governing academic careers. However, I will take academic institutions as a context, not as my object. In academia in general, and in management studies in particular, there is no shortage of sharp criticism, vocal denunciations, and pressing calls for drastic change. I am sympathetic to some of this criticism, but, as a skeptic and a pessimist, I do not believe it has a significant impact, or will have in the short and medium term. Therefore, in this essay, I deliberately refrain from being radical and venturing beyond the focus of my concern. The propositions I will make are voluntarily under the constraint of not requiring structural changes to the academic system of publication and evaluation. I am interested in reforming the extant system on the issue of the article format. This would not remedy the other flaws of the system, but it would alleviate the burden and anxieties of many researchers as authors.

In the following section, I will describe the structural and narrative conventions that govern journal articles. I will then argue that current writing conventions governing the article's structure and the story it tells are far from being neutral and harmless. On the contrary, they have strong implications. Firstly, they are inappropriate, generating distorted accounts of research. Secondly, they are costly, involving a waste of time and energy that detracts from knowledge production. Thirdly, contrary to the commonly held assumption that these conventions are needed by readers, they are primarily useful to evaluators (editors and reviewers). Fourthly, these conventions hinder rather than stimulate novelty. Finally, I will outline a set of proposals to liberate the article from costly conventions. Certainly, editors, readers, and authors need a platform of understanding that they can converge towards. Rather than imposing a standard text structure supporting a standard story, I suggest checking for the presence and quality of six key ingredients:

- a question;
- an articulation with extant knowledge and theoretical framing options;
- data;
- methods for collecting and analyzing data;
- concepts, theories, ideas;
- an outcome of scientific worth.

Authors should be free to combine the ingredients in whatever form they find relevant – under, of course, the evaluators' judgment. The primary objective of such a reform is to 'loosen the straightjacket' (Corley et al., 2021) and give authors more opportunities to craft their article in an honest, realistic, attractive way. More freedom should also enable authors to achieve a better expression of their ideas by reducing the gap between form and content, while maintaining scientific quality. Rather than romantically encouraging authors to break conventions, I suggest promoting reasonable writing conventions that will be easily adopted by authors, readers, and editors.

Conventions governing structure and story in scientific articles

The conventions outlined below were identified via two main sources. Like any scholar with some experience of reading, writing and reviewing articles, I have developed a familiarity with these conventions. This, however, is practical knowledge. The conventions had to be made explicit. I therefore collected and analyzed the editorial pieces published in top-tier journals in our field (and also in other disciplines in Business Studies, to make sure that there was no significant differences) over the period 2010–2022. I also analyzed a variety of articles and books devoted to the topic of publishing. In this essay, I will use only a selection of these texts: the most typical and interesting. In particular, I draw heavily on Patriotta (2017) because, in my view, this paper provides the most explicit and exhaustive description of the current writing conventions, and the clearest (though debatable) justification of their implementation by editors.

As we all know, scientific articles in business and management studies follow a typical structure that supports a typical story:

> From a semiotic point of view, all academic articles look alike. They tell the story of a theoretical puzzle in search of a solution. An article is driven by a theoretical question that generates a process of investigation, and leads to a solution. The answer to the original question is the article's contribution. The story follows a conventional structure, which is reflected in a standard sequence of sections: title, abstract, introduction, theoretical background, methods, findings or results, discussion, and conclusion. (Patriotta, 2017, p. 752)

The conventional structure is derived from the so-called introduction, methods, results and discussion (IMRAD) format that, over time, emerged as the typical structure for scientific articles (Gross et al., 2002). It should be noted that typical articles in business and management studies include an additional 'theoretical background' section. Later in this essay, I will show that this addition has strong implications and significantly alters the nature of the article in our fields compared to articles in the IMRAD format in exact sciences.

The typical story that an article should relate is developed by Patriotta (2017, p. 757) into a 'semiotic checklist' proposed as a guide for authors:

1. This is what I am focusing on.
2. This is why it is relevant.
3. This is what is known/not known (and why it needs attention).
4. This is my burning question.
5. This is how I aim to address the question (theoretically/empirically).
6. This is what I did.
7. This is what I found.
8. This is what it means.
9. This is what I add.
10. This is why you should care.

Editorial guidance places great emphasis on the storytelling nature of a good article, beyond the mere structural aspect of the storyline (e.g., Daft, 1995; Pollock & Bono, 2013; Pratt, 2009). Authors are urged to tell a 'compelling story' (Ragins, 2012) and even to 'be Scheherazade' (Pollock & Bono, 2013). Extensive guidance is provided on 'how to use storytelling in your academic writing' (Pollock, 2021). The compelling story, however, is not just any kind of story. It has to fit into the template of 'the story of a problem in search of a solution' and into the standard structure. In other words, to develop her fables, not only is Scheherazade subjected to the threat of the sword (i.e., rejection), but she also has to comply with a very restrictive set of rules.

For most editors when they address potential authors, it is on behalf of readers that this institutional control is exerted by reviewers and the editors themselves. The typical story and structure are presented as conventions that are primarily helpful to readers:

> To communicate a message, authors must assume that the set of expectations they rely on is shared by their prospective readers. In this regard, conventions provide a shared code through which a core message can be communicated and understood by its intended audience. (Patriotta, 2017, p. 754)

Similarly, readers would need a 'compelling' story to arouse and sustain their interest. Storytelling is thus a set of 'techniques for engaging readers' (Pollock, 2021).

Though somewhat arbitrary, these conventions, according to editors, have no deep implications in themselves and do not constrain innovation. Authors are strongly encouraged to develop their command of these conventions and to develop their creativity within their boundaries. Complainers are dismissed as 'whiners' (Pollock, 2021, p. 3).

When setting out my views, I often meet the objection that, despite the conventions, some unconventional papers make it through the reviewing process into publication in top-tier journals, and that some even garner a lot of attention and citations. Yet, upon examination, the examples that are offered to me still comply with the standard conventions of story and structure. Certainly, they are conceptually or methodologically innovative (or both). But they do not deviate from writing conventions. There are two possible views about this. On the one hand, one (e.g., Patriotta, 2017) may argue that this demonstrates that writing conventions are not an impediment to novelty. This view will be discussed further in the text. On the other hand, one (I, for instance) may object that such reasoning is a clear case of survivorship bias: without measuring the relative number of equally innovative articles that are rejected, the publication of innovative papers does not prove anything. Empirically carrying out such an investigation is beyond the scope of this essay (it would be very difficult, obviously). I am able, though, to provide indicative data. I examined 129 articles published by nine journals listed in the infamous *Financial Times* ranking (see appendix). My criterion for selecting the journals was their disciplinary proximity with *M@n@gement*. I selected the articles that were either among the most cited (usually in the last 3 years), or among the finalists in an award competition ('best article' yearly award or 'impact' award). Impact awards are interesting because they encompass all past articles of the journal. Among these 129 articles, only two were unconventionally structured empirical papers. One dated back to 1983, the other one to 1977.

Again, I do not deny that many of these papers (and others too) might be highly innovative in many other respects. However rough this estimate, it nevertheless clearly suggests that unconventionally structured articles in top-tier journals are either very exceptional or little cited or praised. Thinking about my own favorite articles, I came up with only one example: Weick's infamous piece on the Mann Gulch disaster (Weick, 1993).

To be fair, editors of top-tier journals have not completely ignored criticism and, in the last 10 years or so, have introduced some changes. More journals accept abductive, qualitative pieces. Published papers are sometimes augmented with additional, digitally accessible material. Many journals have launched a variety of novel forms, such as essays, debates, or controversies, mostly devoted to the expression and exploration of ideas and viewpoints. Perhaps the most significant change in the editorial landscape is the launch of the *Academy of Management Discoveries* (*AMD*) in 2015. It is true that many research articles in *AMD* escape, at least partially, the conventions that I will analyze and criticize below. In addition, *AMD* developed other formats aiming at knowledge dissemination (Discoveries-in-Brief and Discoveries-through-Prose) (Dane & Rockmann, 2021; Pollock, 2022). Still, *AMD* is not a mainstream journal. Focusing explicitly on a certain type of research ('phenomenon-driven'), it intends to revive an empiricist tradition that had withered away, to the advantage of theory-driven research. All these innovations are clearly positive and interesting. Still, the new forms do not compete with the standard research paper, which remains at the center of academic production. In short, some change has occurred, but it remains slow, marginal, or peripheral. Regarding the research article, the relevance of current writing conventions is never really discussed by editors or by all those who provide guidance to authors. They are taken for granted. No alternative is considered, not even to demonstrate that the extant ones are better than others.

In the following sections, I will focus on the (almost) untouched research article and address four points successively. I will argue that, (1) these writing conventions are largely inappropriate, and that this matters, because they prevent authors from giving an honest, faithful, and useful account of their research; (2) the conventions generate heavy costs, far beyond the learning costs of beginners, because compliance with inappropriate conventions generates significant extra work for authors for no scientific added value; (3) strict conventions are primarily useful to evaluators (editors and reviewers), not to readers; and (4) the conventions are indeed an impediment to innovation in scientific texts.

Writing conventions are not appropriate

The standard scientific story ('a problem in search of a solution' [Patriotta, 2017]) is not a plausible account of research as it is carried out. The consequence is that complying with the standard story introduces significant gaps between the research as it is carried and the research as it is recounted. It does not correctly convey most of the research in our disciplines, for several reasons. The first two are quite straightforward. The third one is more complex.

Firstly, science studies have established that 'a problem in search of a solution' is not usually an accurate description of the scientific process, which is much more iterative and messier and, conducted through bricolage and serendipity, and often driven by the solution rather than by the problem (Latour & Woolgar, 2013). In a 1963 talk, Peter Medawar (Nobel Prize in Medicine, in 1960) famously asked, 'Is the scientific paper a fraud?' (Medawar, 1963). He argued that the very structure of scientific articles misrepresented scientific thinking. This question is echoed by Alvesson and Gabriel:

> In order to profess rigorous 'data management' and analysis, researchers create a fictional story of their research activities that embellishes it and streamlines it to live up to ideals quite different from the messy and pragmatic standards that characterize most research, good and bad (Gabriel, 2013; Sutton, 1997). (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013, p. 249)

Real research bears no more resemblance to 'whodunit' detective stories than real police work. Despite Nair's suggestion (2021), researchers do not behave like Hercule Poirot – no more than they look like him. Of course, nobody wants a thorough, detailed account of everything that really happened during the research process. Not everything is important, some order has to be brought to the mess so that the reader is able to make sense of it, and scientific articles have to remain reasonably short. The key point here is not to relieve authors of their duty of readability, but to question the width of the gap between the conventional story and the real one. The conventional story is not just any story: it conveys a specific meaning, and this meaning is imposed on whatever content is fitted into this template.

Secondly, the reviewers' and editor's suggestions during the reviewing process entail very substantial modifications to the submitted text. In most cases, the final version of the manuscript has significantly drifted away from this original story. Research on the effects of the reviewing process clearly indicates that modifications to the manuscript go far beyond methodological issues or the textual expression of ideas: the very substance of the article – that is, the findings selected, the theorizing used, the contributions proposed – is significantly impacted (Strang & Dokshin, 2019). And though these improvements are deemed to be crucial to the quality of the article, no significant account of this process is incorporated into the published paper. This key part of the story is silenced.

Thirdly, the 'problem in search of a solution' formula masks the real nature of our articles. As noted earlier in the text, our papers differ from the standard IMRAD structure that governs the writing process in the exact sciences. Before examining this point, let us note that, though it may appear to be a simple, straightforward textual structure, IMRAD is by no means a 'natural' narrative format to account for research. It is the result of a progressive, historical process within scientific communities (Gross et al., 2002). Moreover, it is infused with underlying values:

> The traditional scientific research article, for example, largely reflects the scientific method and its positivist paradigm that values objectivity, empirical observation, and deductive logic. It is challenging to stray radically from this approach to inquiry while writing within a traditional introduction-methods-research-discussion (IMRD) article format, which is at least in part why the IMRD structure is not adopted in humanities disciplines, where different epistemologies are valued. (Tardy, 2016, pp. 51–52)

Most importantly, as Pontille (2007) demonstrated, IMRAD is in fact a sophisticated textual device performing a set of functions that transform the 'there and then', concrete work of real persons into general knowledge about the world. Because of these functions, the IMRAD format standardizes the evaluation procedures within a social group (Pontille, 2007).

Despite some notable exceptions (e.g., articles in the *AMD*), our articles generally follow an ITMRAD structure, with the 'T' standing here for 'theoretical background'. No more than IMRAD is the ITMRAD format a 'natural', straightforward way of accounting for research. It is a complex textual arrangement that developed from the IMRAD format because, in our fields, top-level research aims at producing theoretical knowledge by adding contributions to extant theory or by developing new theoretical propositions. Contrary to what is generally assumed, the purpose of this theoretical background section is not to establish 'what is known and what is not known (and why it needs attention)' (Patriotta, 2017). Though it might do just that with the empirical objects under scrutiny by examining how these objects have been studied using different approaches, the theoretical section serves primarily to establish a relevant theoretical basis for the research. This theoretical basis is not part of the outer world: it is a choice, made by the authors. Other choices are possible. While the author needs to be convincing about the relevance and fruitfulness of this choice, in some ways it remains a subjective choice. It is the choice not only of a theoretical framework, but also of a relevant community of researchers from which, most likely, the evaluators of the manuscript (associate editor and reviewers) will be picked by the editor – or at least some of them. If, as editors insist, writing for scholarly publication implies joining conversations (Healey et al., 2023; Huff, 1999; Patriotta, 2017), then the theoretical background section is the place where the authors say which conversation they wish to join.

The key role of the theoretical background section implies that the 'problem', far from being directly extracted from the empirical realm, is shaped by the authors according to their chosen theoretical framework. The 'solution' to the 'problem' is also (and symmetrically) theoretically framed. In theory-building papers, the 'solution' is the theoretical contribution of the paper, located (mostly) in the discussion section. This contribution is logically expressed in the theoretical framework that has been presented as the authors' choice in the theory section. It is in no way detached from the 'problem', in the way that an empirical finding (e.g., the chemical composition of a substance) would be detached from the problem (the mysterious nature of the substance). Theoretical problems and theoretical solutions, if expressed in the same theoretical framework, are mutually constituted. Building a story about 'a problem in search of a solution' is thus an artificial and unrealistic account of the research.

Writing conventions are costly

The implications of the unrealistic nature of the conventional structure and story are numerous.

Authors spend an enormous amount of energy building these distorted accounts to comply with the standard scientific story. Reviewers and editors spend an enormous amount of energy helping authors to build better fables. Ultimately, nobody really believes these stories, because the readers, who are themselves researchers and authors, are fully aware that things did not unfold as narrated in the paper. Still, they remain deprived of significant information about the true research process, which might be of great interest to them. Information is thus destroyed and energy is wasted.

The fictitious and 'compelling' story authors have to put together is a consequence of the quest for 'interestingness' (Davis, 1971), which, as Tsang (2022) demonstrates, is not only a flawed conception of good science, but also a driver of flawed research. It is ethically problematic that an activity that has knowledge and truth as its *raison d'être* systemically generates fables and lies. It induces a discrepancy between the values scientists are supposed to hold dear and the practices they have to adopt. This discrepancy can only reinforce the negative effects of the publication game that current institutional pressures have established (Aguinis et al., 2020; Bazin et al., 2018; Laguecir et al., 2022; Rouquet, 2017). If mastering inappropriate conventions and building up compelling but fictitious stories are key factors of success in the academic competition, then the value of scientific excellence is under threat and unethical behaviors are likely to grow in number (Butler et al., 2017; Tourish & Craig, 2020).

Confronted with a growing risk of possible fraud in manuscripts, editors press authors to comply with increasingly stringent transparency and auditability requirements (e.g., Nair, 2021). However, because these requirements are inspired by an unrealistic model of the research process, they encourage a fictitious transparency that does not serve, or perhaps even runs counter to, the purpose of fighting questionable research practices. Transparency requirements must be based on realistic assumptions. Otherwise, they are just an incentive to lie and end up producing vicious circles of more pressure and more lying. This favors opacity rather than transparency, covert deviance hidden behind overt compliance.

Ultimately, it is quite possible that editors themselves (along with their reviewers) get tricked by their own insistence on the 'compelling story':

> A key task in empirical papers is ruling out alternate explanations for the phenomena under investigation. It is easy for this step to be neglected. Authors are encouraged to increase the storytelling nature of their articles (e.g., Haley & Boje, 2014; Pollock & Bono, 2013) and this includes developing a straightforward, accessible story line (Ragins, 2012). It can be tricky to introduce the possibility of alternative explanations without deviating from the plot of the narrative. However, it is necessary to do so for a paper to be considered trustworthy. (Cuervo-Cazurra et al., 2016, p. 882)

Far from being harmless, writing conventions are costly. Authors – researchers – are the first to be impacted, whether morally because of the twisted game they have to play, or more directly because of the amount of energy that they have to expend in order to comply with the conventions. All in all, not only researchers but also the whole academic system is impacted, with lower productivity, higher levels of fraud, and a lower level of scientific quality.

Writing conventions do not foster novelty

Editors stress the neutral (Patriotta, 2017) or positive (Pollock, 2021) role of conventions in fostering novelty. This might seem a strong argument, because, if we admit it, the nature of the conventions does not really matter. In fact, there are good reasons to think that strict and unrealistic conventions actually have a negative effect.

Creativity is often said to stem from constraints. The arts and literature provide easy analogies that are used to legitimize this idea (e.g., Patriotta, 2017, p. 755; Pollock, 2021, p. 3). It might be true to some point, but such an effect is context-dependent (Damadzic et al., 2022). Not all constraints foster innovation. Perhaps some artists might find it stimulating to follow constraints that they have chosen, but external, strict constraints are unlikely to produce novelty. Most of the time, standard forms encourage poor, standard thinking. The artistic and literary fields also offer many examples of forms that have ended up in sterile reproduction, conformity, and platitude (ironically, this is one of the meanings of the word 'academic'). Even though these fields have a much wider variety of genres and forms than the article genre, they are repeatedly subjected to revolutionary attempts at breaking the conventional order (e.g., Delacour & Leca, 2011; Sgourev, 2013). In the arts and literature, the reign of conventions probably ended at the beginning of the 20th century (Heinich, 2014). A quite different system has ruled since these days: contemporary artists and art lovers tend to encourage attempts to break the rules. They admire and reward the successful ones. The analogy between scientific writing and the arts and literature is dubious or, at best, out of date. If the analogy should inspire us, it is because they are an invitation to welcome truly innovative forms – not just because they are innovative, but because they perform their task better.

Patriotta's argument about conventions and novelty has another side, though (Patriotta, 2017). Building on literature theory and Umberto Eco's concept of text openness, Patriotta contends that '[a]lthough conventions standardize a message to some extent, each individual reader will appropriate the message or contribution in a unique way' (Patriotta, 2017, p. 755). Novelty would thus stem from the readers, in an uncontrolled manner, through the variety of personal interpretations generated by the text. This is a weak argument. Because semiotic openness is a general feature of any kind of text, it does not make a point in favor of the current conventions of the scientific article. Moreover, in a quite contradictory way, Patriotta also argues that the purpose of conventions guiding text-building strategies is to make readers 'read the text as it wants to be read' (Patriotta, 2017, p. 755). Let us admit that any set of conventions aims at controlling the readers' reading of the text; and, simultaneously, let us admit that any set of conventions fails to do this, to some point, because of semiotic openness. What would be interesting to discuss, then, is whether, or to what extent, the current writing conventions do better or not, relatively to other conventions. Do the current conventions limit (vs. favor) creative interpretations, as compared to other conventions? This question is ignored.

Editors' reasoning about conventions and novelty is, at best, inconclusive. In any case, it does not demonstrate that different conventions would not do better in this respect. It is typically a conservative stand.

Writing conventions are not for readers

Editors do care about their readers. This impacts the way they implement the conventions when monitoring the reviewing process and making their decisions. As mentioned above, publishing articles that are interesting and pleasant to read seems to be the focus of attention. Beside the injunction to authors to be Scheherazades (Pollock & Bono, 2013), additional features are considered:

> Help your authors present their research with just as much rigor, but in more accessible ways. Perhaps a better abstract, an interactive summary, videos, and images throughout, placing less important information in appendices – there are many ways to increase engagement. (Rockmann, 2023, p. 100)

In other words, the problem is framed in terms of boringness *vs* interestingness, and solutions are sought either *within* or *in addition to* the current conventions. The conventions themselves are not to be discussed. It is taken for granted that the readers need them.

Editors' claim that conventions are for the benefit of readers is unsubstantiated. There is nothing to indicate that readers demand strict standards, nor that they would reject different conventions, different types of stories, or a wider array of article forms and writing styles. It should be noted that readers have no voice in the publishing process. Publishers rarely consult them, even through polls or market research, and editors even less so. As readers are mostly a captive audience, especially for top-tier journals, their behavior as consumers (buying, downloading, etc.) hardly reveals their preferences. No scholar ever stopped reading and citing an A journal because of the poor way papers are written. And no scholar ever started citing a low-impact outlet because the texts are well written. As far as the writing is concerned, the 'true preferences' of readers are mostly unknown.

Editors often mention readability as one of their preoccupations. This is certainly a legitimate concern. And there is no doubt that readability can be improved by some conventions. At the most basic level, almost all written products (books, newspapers, journals, etc.), whether printed or on screen, are displayed within conventional rules (e.g., typography, spatial disposition). At a higher level of text content, readability has two sides: semiotic readability (how accurately the reader understands the text) and economic readability (how much effort the reader must make to read the text) (Douglas, 2015). Regarding semiotic readability, it should be noted that readers of academic journals are highly educated people, often experts in the subjects that they read. Asserting that they need strict textual conventions to make sense of the text sounds like an insult to their cognitive abilities. And again, the need for conventions does not clarify which conventions should be implemented. In terms of readability, the typical scientific story of 'a problem in search of a solution' has no clear advantage over other types of stories, except that it conforms to an idealized stereotype of scientific behavior. Conforming to idealized stereotypes is not something that scientists generally see as desirable.

Economic readability is a stronger argument in favor of conventions. Minimizing the effort required to read implies that the text 'flows' well, that it does not take too long to read, and that it is easily memorized (Douglas, 2015). A standard structure certainly helps. However, very simple requirements (e.g., maximum length, use of figures and tables, summaries, clear display of explicit titles) probably contribute equally. An experienced reader would have no trouble finding, say, the methods section even if it is not located after the theoretical background section and before the findings section. Again, while some conventions are certainly needed to help readers, there is no convincing argument that the current conventions are necessary or even that they perform this readability function better than others.

If conventions are not primarily for the help of readers, why do editors so strongly advocate in their favor? Building on an intuition from Alvesson and Gabriel, I suggest that these conventions serve mostly to assuage the epistemic anxieties of editors and reviewers:

> [Editors and reviewers'] work is made easier and more predictable as they assess different journal submissions against formulaic criteria. Formulaism relieves all parties of some uncertainty and anxiety by establishing a game, a difficult one perhaps, but at least one where the rules are relatively clear. (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013, p. 260)

Epistemic anxieties are quite honestly acknowledged regarding reviewers:

> Reviewers are also strongly motivated to look for problems and not be too optimistic. A reviewer that goes 'all-in' telling the AE that a manuscript is great with no major flaws risks his/her reputation a bit when another reviewer and the AE identify a long list of issues and concerns – it's a bit embarrassing to be in that situation (I know from personal experience). (Bliese, 2020, p. 376)

If this is a realistic account of the reviewers' viewpoint, then the reputational risk is even greater for the editors. Because of that, editors and reviewers are very much in need of standards to carry out their difficult task. Despite all their knowledge, experience, and dedication, they often have only a limited grasp of all the theoretical, methodological, or empirical aspects of the manuscripts they read. Writing conventions provide additional standards, beyond the content of the research, allowing them to form a judgment on the quality of the manuscript. They offer an easy way to weed out manuscripts, with legitimate justifications.

Contrary to the commonly held criticism of evaluators, which is that they might be sloppy, my point is that reliance on writing conventions (story and structure) to assess quality stems from the evaluators' conscientiousness. Conventions help them cope with the high degree of epistemic uncertainty that is characteristic of our disciplines (and probably of the social sciences in general). I will attempt to illustrate this connection by means of a personal anecdote.

Along with a co-author, I submitted a manuscript to a top-tier journal. The research was a qualitative inquiry. It seemed to fit well with this journal, which encouraged abductive research. The proposed contribution consisted mainly in an extension of an established theory by introducing a new concept, more specifically, by identifying a new type of a multifaceted concept that is central to this theory. In this sense, the contribution was relatively novel, but in no way was it an unusual approach to the development of this theory. As is common in qualitative research, we had introduced the concept as the outcome of the data analysis, in the findings section. In the discussion section, we drew connections with the general theory that we had outlined in the theoretical background section. In the reviewing process, a request quickly emerged: to introduce our proposed concept in the theoretical background section, so that 'it would appear more clearly grounded in the literature'. My co-author and I discussed this idea and decided not to follow the suggestion. We explained our reasons in the letter of response. Firstly, introducing the concept as a finding, emerging from the empirical work, was much closer to the research process we had followed than presenting it as a product of prior theoretical thinking. Secondly, doing so seemed aligned with the methodological stance that we had adopted (and explained in the methods section). Thirdly, we argued that the key point was, after all, the clarity, novelty and overall value of the proposed concept. In our eyes, the theoretical grounding was correct, and whether it was achieved in the theoretical background section or in the discussion section was a point of minor importance.

I do not doubt that the evaluators were trying to help us because they were sincerely worried that our concept lacked credibility – and it is their job and responsibility to make a judgment about this. My point is not that the request for more theoretical grounding was unfounded. What is problematic is that the evaluators had a specific story in mind. The expressed need for a better theoretical grounding points to a fear that the concept might appear as conjecture rather than concept. Shifting it closer to the theoretical framework would make it look like it was logically drawn from the extant literature. The authors were asked to alter the structure of their story, at the cost of being in contradiction with their approach and with the abduction-friendly stance of the journal, in order to comply with the standard story. The 'problem' (stated, as usual, at the end of the theoretical background section) had to be clearly specified, to the point of prefiguring the 'solution' that would emerge from the findings. In other words, reinforcing the conventional story appeared to be the right – and only – way to give greater credibility to our concept.

Though this essay focuses on standard research papers, it is interesting to observe that templates are multiplying for other kinds of publications: review papers, theory papers, and even essays are more and more structured by conventions. In its project to foster the publication of data-based, inductive articles, the *AMD* has relaxed some of the usual writing constraints. Yet authors are not left without guidance: from 2015 to 2023, I counted no fewer than 18 editorial pieces aiming at defining what articles in *AMD* should look like. Certainly, the templates may have much more variation between journals. But this only strengthens my point: even if there is no dominant template for a genre, editors edict and implement writing conventions.

If conventions and templates are so pervasive, it is firstly because they are pragmatic tools that editors (and reviewers) use for completing their task. They facilitate the task of sorting the 'good' (or at least 'acceptable') texts from the 'bad' texts by providing an easily applicable set of criteria. It is not so much about enabling editors to detect the best submissions than about eliminating the mass of submissions that are unlikely to make it to publication. Remember that 'desk rejects' have reached huge proportions. Editors face an ever-increasing flow of submissions, to which they have to give a quick response. Given this heavy workload and the pressure coming with it, they have to work fast.

As discussed earlier, conventions and templates, being legitimate among the community, grant editors epistemological and psychological safety. They allow editors to make judgments without having to work out detailed justifications. Contestation is not to be feared because, if it happens, justifications will be easy to find. The existence of templates and conventions transfers the 'burden of proof' to the authors. Not complying with the conventions is a sign of sloppiness, lack of competence, or lack of professionalism; hence a suspicion of a lack of scientific quality. Any deviation from the conventions has to be explicitly and strongly justified by the authors. Demonstrating that it does not threaten scientific quality is not enough. All things being equal, conventions must be respected. Authors have to demonstrate that the deviation is positively justified, that it adds to the paper's quality. Is it realistic, for the average author, to hope to convince an editor in the narrow space of the usual 'letter to the editor'?

Templates and conventions perform key functions in the publishing process. They also play important social roles which explains why they develop, spread, and establish dominance. The hierarchy of genres in a given scientific community is closely linked to a hierarchy of power. Research articles in top-tier journals are regarded as the highest form of knowledge, and authors publishing these articles are granted the highest status in the community. Implementing the conventions that define the highest genre places editors at the nexus of the status and power struggles in the academic world:

> Both knowledge production and distribution rules are based on values shared by a community (e.g., scientific method and scholarly article publication based on scientific objectivity). The higher the perceived validity of knowledge, the greater the genre authority and, vice versa, the more authoritative the genre is, the more valid the knowledge will seem to the community. The interplay of these elements has important power considerations since it can influence the value ascribed to actors associated with specific types of knowledge and genre, particularly in the case of knowledge elite occupations. (Baylon & Barros, 2023, p. 1494)

In short, defining and implementing templates and conventions simultaneously carries epistemic (knowledge) and social (power) implications. Within the current publication game that is fueled by the research evaluation system, templates and conventions are one of the tools for establishing and perpetuating social dominance. That templates also develop for genres that used to be considered as inferior to the research article signals that power stakes are spreading and now extend to other types of published material (essays, review papers, theory papers). If such articles are to be counted as scientific outcomes adding to the authors' status, then they have to be legitimate knowledge. If such genres are to count as legitimate knowledge, then they have to be governed and regulated by templates. By defining and implementing these new templates, editors (and, through them, the key actors in the community) maintain both the epistemic legitimacy of the knowledge that is produced and the social power structure inside the scientific community.

One could think that defining these templates and conventions is a transparent way of setting the 'rules of the game'. If everybody has equal access to the rules, then fairness is guaranteed and regulation of the social stakes is assured through fair competition. And it is true that, at first sight, writing conventions are simple and transparent. Editors never fail to stress the straightforward nature of these conventions (e.g., Patriotta, 2017). There is a striking contrast, however, between the seemingly obvious and 'common sense' nature of the conventions and the pain it takes to master them. The huge amount of guidance that is distilled to authors (through editorial pieces, books on scientific writing, writing workshops, etc.) materializes this gap and signals that the 'simple' nature of the conventions is in fact deceptive. Conventions are just the visible side of an 'esoteric' knowledge that is at the heart of social power:

> The political effects of the co-constitution of genre and knowledge are particularly critical to these groups because their power is centered on 'esoteric' knowledge (May et al., 2002), defined as 'separated off from ordinary experience and its pragmatic frames of reference' (Beck, 2013, p. 72). Esoteric knowledge, typically found in knowledge-intensive occupations (Reed, 1996), is 'intangible, situated, [and] unstandardized' (Cross & Swart, 2021, p. 1702). (Baylon & Barros, 2023, p. 1494)

It follows that, regarding templates and conventions, the key part of the process is implementation, more than definition. Esoteric knowledge grants the actors who implement it a wide latitude of action, while protecting them from contestations. At a local level (e.g., a given submission in a given journal), contestations are easily countered. At a higher level (the publishing game), complainants would need to engage in costly collective action and enter into hazardous epistemic debate. As complainants are most likely newcomers and lower status actors, their hopes of succeeding can only be very low.

This section may sound a little harsh on editors. It should be made clear that the description and characterization of their role are devoid of any kind of incrimination. Editors' behaviors and discourses should be understood in the context of their role in the contemporary publishing system. Even though they might seem to be at center stage, editors themselves are individually relatively powerless to change or relax the conventions. Relaxing the conventions could be interpreted and denounced by rival editors or academic groups as degrading scientific quality. Their position is in no way a comfortable one. I have been an editor myself and, experiencing the heavy institutional constraints and the heavy workload that come with the position, I did not do things differently.

Where do we go from here? Simplified conventions

Most invitations to 'write differently' pay little attention to the structural aspects of articles (Gilmore et al., 2019; Grey & Sinclair, 2006; Kostera, 2022; Tourish, 2020). Alvesson and Gabriel (2013) invite authors to engage in 'polymorphism', defined as 'a diversity and plurality of structures, styles and, more generally, research approaches' (p. 253). The structural aspects of the nonformulaic article remain underspecified, however:

> The polymorphic research ideal prompts authors to consider alternative, innovative ways of organizing their texts. They may, for instance, introduce surprising findings in the front of their papers, deploy a personal style of writing, or even discuss the methodologies after their findings or not at all. (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013, p. 253)

Similarly, Corley et al., recommend that editors should 'encourage non-traditional paper structures' (Corley et al., 2021, pp. 170–171) (however, only for qualitative, inductive research).

My purpose here is to suggest a reform that is compatible with any kind of research approach and philosophy (or, at least, with most of them). I invite editors to reconsider the extant writing conventions to get rid of unnecessary and unrealistic requirements regarding structure and story. This does not mean exonerating authors from any sort of requirement. In my eyes, deconstructing the current conventions is only possible if novel conventions are specified, because, in the context of peer-reviewed publication, conventions are necessary to provide criteria for evaluators' judgments.

I suggest focusing on the key ingredients of an article instead of its structure. Scientific quality is a matter of substance of the research and of strength and coherence of the relationships between the ingredients. My proposition is to replace the conventional scientific story and the rigid ITMRAD structure with a list of the basic constituents of the research, and to allow authors to freely combine the ingredients into a narrative structure that best serves their purpose, the interests of the reader and the general advancement of science. More precisely, authors should design their paper alongside the structure that best serves a set of objectives:

- provide a reasonably transparent and faithful account of their research process;
- provide a coherent, convincing contribution to knowledge;
- provide the reader with a readable text.

What are these key ingredients? Let us reconsider the ITMRAD structure, not in terms of text sections, but rather in terms of substantial content. The introduction can be left out of our reasoning: it has little specific content; besides, whatever the organization of the paper, an introduction will be needed. From the other sections, six types of ingredients can be extracted:

- a question, or more generally a purpose that is knowledge-related (today found in the theoretical background section);
- an articulation with extant knowledge and theoretical framing options (also found in the theoretical background section);
- data (today found in the methods and in the results section);
- methods for collecting and analyzing data (methods section);
- concepts, theories, ideas (today found in the theoretical background and discussion sections);
- an outcome that has some scientific worth (today found in the discussion section).

If we consider the standard research article, it is difficult to imagine that a paper lacking one of these ingredients could be published in *M@n@gement* or *Academy of Management Journal*.

I propose to liberate the article from the conventional narrative structure of 'a problem in search of a solution' and allow any kind of ordering or structuring of the basic ingredients. Authors should be free to build their account according to any structure they deem appropriate.

Of course, liberating authors from the conventional structure and story does not mean that authors should not care about structuring their paper or that editors should suspend their judgment on this aspect of the paper. In this respect, it is important to note that the ingredients listed earlier in the text are not necessarily text sections. Depending on the author's choice, they might be split or combined. For example, methods and data may be grouped together into several modules addressing sub-questions or progressing towards a deeper understanding of the issue at stake. Conceptualization might also be part of these modules, producing cumulative outcomes that would eventually be summarized in a concluding section. Whatever the structure, the articulation between sections should be given attention. Again, the liberated article is not a rambling or messy text. On the contrary, authors should be taking great care with the readability of their paper.

Here a caveat is needed. Earlier in this paper I argued that the conventional structure and story forced authors to build contrived accounts of their research process. My proposed conventions are specifically designed to restore enough freedom for authors to recount their research in a more realistic manner. However, my purpose is not to establish another template of fastidiously detailed research reports. Authors should be free to present their research as they see fit. Evaluators and readers should have access to a reasonably faithful account of the research process, but this should not necessarily be a structural feature of the text.

Figure 1 summarizes the proposed evolution. The current writing conventions are simplified by:

- shifting from a rigid structure of predetermined sections ordered into a fixed narrative to a list of ingredients that can be freely combined into an appropriate structure;
- replacing the mandatory 'a problem in search of solution' story with more realistic or adequate storylines.

Let me provide a few examples of unconventional structures that could be developed within this frame (see Figure 2). They are only examples, because it would be contradictory to propose a set of templates when I am convinced that management research is plagued by a proliferation of templates and by the imitation of canonical papers.

The talking pig

In an often-cited paper, Siggelkow (2007) remarks that if you stumble on extraordinary data, like a talking pig, it makes little sense to spend much energy justifying the data-collection methods. What the text structure should do, then, is make the most of the data. Why not put them at the front of the paper? Methods are a secondary issue that could as easily be contained in an appendix at the end of the article. Once key outcomes are established (e.g., the pig's linguistic and communication abilities), the main contribution of the research could well be a question, or a series of questions, because a talking pig would lead us to reconsider many of our assumptions about animals, humans, language, etc.

The burning question

If an issue is obviously critical, essential, or far-reaching, there is little need to justify the research question with a lengthy literature review. The 'extant knowledge and framing' ingredient

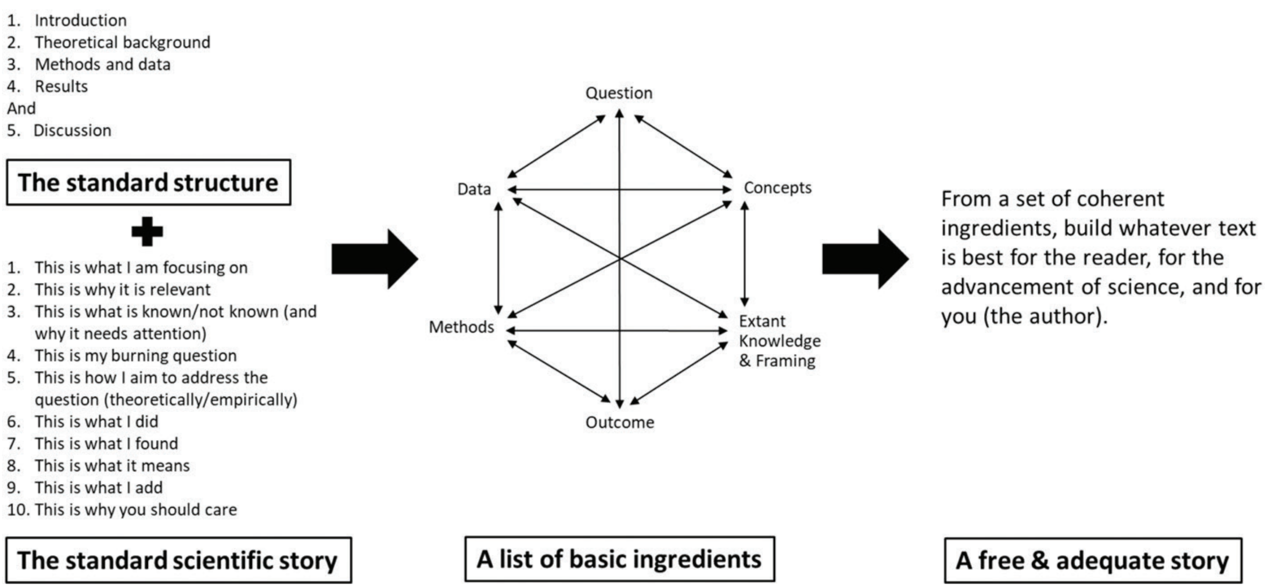

Figure 1. Towards simplified writing conventions.
Source: Own elaboration

The Talking Pig	*The Burning Question*	*The Abduction*	*The Exploratory Quest*	*The Plot Thickens*
1. Data	1. Question	1. Extant Knowledge & Framing	1. Extant Knowledge & Framing	1. Question
2. Extant Knowledge & Framing	2. Extant Knowledge & Framing	2. Question	2. Data 1	2. Extant Knowledge & Framing
3. Concepts	3. Methods	3. Methods	3. Question	3. Methods
4. Outcome	4. Data	4. Data ⇔ concepts	4. Methods	4. Concepts 1
5. Question	5. Concepts	5. Outcome	5. Data 2	5. Data 1
6. Methods (appendix)	6. Outcome		6. Concepts	6. Outcome 1
			7. Outcome	7. Concepts 2
				8. Data 2
				9. Outcome 2
				10. Outcome 1/2

Figure 2. Some examples of alternative structures.
Source: Own elaboration

can be subordinated to the question, as a means to address it. As burning questions are likely to be under-conceptualized (otherwise the question would not be so hot), concepts to address the question could be the main contribution of the research, rather than a starting point.

The abduction

Abductive approaches typically develop the concepts closely linked with the data. The ITMRAD structure makes it difficult to recount this conceptual emergence. The often-used articulation of 'first order' and 'second order' analyses partially solves this problem, but at the cost of tedious repetitions. Allowing authors to simultaneously account for data analysis and conceptual emergence would simplify the writing of abductive articles.

The exploratory quest

It is common practice, prior to an ambitious research project, to carry out preliminary or exploratory research aiming at refining the research question and perhaps also the relevant methods. Authors often have difficulties fitting the account of this exploratory phase into the conventional frame. In the proposed structure, they would have the opportunity to account for the preliminary research (in so far as this is relevant, of course).

The plot thickens

When the researched question is a multidimensional or multi-level issue, the author may use several data sets and several conceptual frames to explore the researched object. The paper could use a series of successive steps (concepts–data, or methods–concepts–data) that may complement one another (accounting for various aspects of the object) or progressively deepen the analysis of the object. From the comparisons between the outcomes of each step stem the contributions of the article.

These five examples are only a short sample of the possible structures. They should be taken as sources of inspiration, not as predetermined structures. In fact, rather than stuffing a predetermined structure with the research material, authors should mold their material into a structured account, one that gives their ideas the best possible showcase. Evaluators would still have their say in this structure. However, they would have to judge it on the basis of its relevance, not on the basis of its conformity to a standard, conventional story.

A wider perspective: liberating voices

Most calls to escape the iron cage of academic writing insist on style. The priority seems to be to get away from our 'wooden writing' (Dane, 2011), reject our 'hygienic texts' (Pullen & Rhodes, 2008), and escape the 'four golden rules for academic writing these days':

> Firstly, never use a short and familiar word where a long and unfamiliar one will do. [. . .] Secondly, never use one word when you can stretch to four. [. . .] Thirdly, bamboozle people with jargon, big words and plenty of well-known names. [. . .] Fourthly, fresh metaphors, humor and irony wake people up, and are therefore your enemy. (Tourish, 2019, p. 150)

Escaping boredom is not the sole, and not even the primary purpose of developing better writing. For Billig (2013) and Pinker (2015), bad writing makes bad science, because good science needs simple words and clear expression. They advocate for a classical, simple, direct style of writing. For others, good writing contributes actively to making a better science, since, as Van Maanen (1995) famously put it, 'style is theory'. Far from being an ornament aiming at making the scientific text more readable or more seductive, the writing is an inherent part of the thinking. Bad writing 'restricts the range of our inquiries and speculations' (Van Maanen, 1995, p. 139). Style is a scientific input: 'Rhetoric is always with us. [. . .] Theory is a matter of words, not worlds; of maps, not territories; of representations, not realities' (Van Maanen, 1995, p. 134).

Unsurprisingly, critical scholars add social and political stakes to this issue. They see established conventions as laden with political assumptions that should be deconstructed (Caicedo, 2011). Among other amendments, more room should be given to the expression of affects (Moriceau, 2018) and more voice to the subjects in comparison to the researchers (Rhodes & Brown, 2005).

Some authors are singled out as references in terms of good, free, innovative writing. Van Maanen (1995) & Czarniawska (2005) selected Karl E. Weick as an exemplary writer. Analyzing Belk's writing (in cultural consumer theory), Brown and Schau (2007) claim that authors should develop a 'voice':

> Voice is what happens when stylistic elements – the nuts and bolts of basic writing technique that are acquired through constant practice – cohere into an intonation unlike any other and mannerisms give way to authorial authenticity. (Brown & Schau, 2007, p. 355)

Whoever has read Weick or Belk may be a little frightened by the challenge. Can we expect all researchers, and more specifically young researchers, to master such a complex, sophisticated writing style? Or, even more difficult, to develop their own voice of such a high quality? Not all researchers have excellent writing skills. 'Style is theory', yes, but the idea has limitations. Who would support that 'theory is style'? Or: 'no style, no theory'? Again, we should be wary of imposing on authors an obligation of originality and audacity in their writing. Besides, however interesting these reflections about style, it should not be forgotten that most writing conventions are in the evaluators' mind as much as in the authors'. Evaluators are our primary target if we aim at changing conventions.

I am quite sympathetic to the aspiration to improve our style, develop more personal voices, and more generally free our writing from 'cognitive entrenchment' (Dane, 2011). Yet I believe that liberating the article from the conventional structure and story is the first step in this direction. Liberating authors from the most rigid conventions would be, in itself, a step towards better texts, if only because the writing would be easier, with less contorted, artificial passages. The talented ones, or the interested ones, could happily go further and develop their own voice.

Implications of the simplified conventions

These proposals to simplify writing conventions have different implications for the key actors of academic publishing, that is, editors (and reviewers), authors, and readers. On a broader scale, we also need to consider the consequences for the academic community of business and management studies as the producers of scientific knowledge, and for society at large as the recipient of this scientific knowledge.

Editors and reviewers

The key implication for the editorial process is that editors and reviewers should not reject a manuscript because it does not comply with a conventional template. Any structure and narrative line that serves the above-mentioned objectives reasonably well should be approved by editors and reviewers (according to their own judgment, of course). Editors and reviewers should enact the following set of rules:

1. be suspicious of the standard scientific fable;
2. focus the reviewing process on the basic requirements: quality of ingredients, overall coherence, and readability;
3. allow authors to adopt the structure and narrative that will best serve their purpose;
4. validate any relevant, readable structure that satisfies the requirements;
5. ensure that the introduction and conclusion provide guidance to readers.

Consistent with my argument that strict conventions make editors' work easier and more comfortable, I have to admit that these simplified conventions will probably complicate their task. They may expect greater uncertainty about their ability to make quick judgments about manuscripts, meaning more time to come to a decision at the early stage of the process. They may also fear more discrepancies between reviewers' recommendations, implying more effort to balance judgments, reach a decision and write a decision letter. In short, their workload is likely to be heavier to some extent.

What they will gain is perhaps a greater interest in their task, with more variety and possibly more novelty. More importantly, if we conceive of editors not only as gatekeepers weeding out bad papers but also as contributors adding substance and quality to the submitted works (through guidance and suggestions), then more freedom for authors translates into more freedom for editors and a higher added value in the publishing process. Editors will not lose their institutional control over the process, only one of its bases. They will not lose all their knowledge and expertise, only the part related to the art of applying inappropriate rules. Structuring a paper into a coherent story is a skill that editors possess beyond today's rigid conventions. They will be able to redeploy, or extend, this skill to the larger space that the new conventions will offer. Their experience will be of even greater value to authors.

To a lesser degree, the same is true for reviewers.

Authors

Authors might, initially, be disoriented because of the lesser clarity of the rules of the publishing game. However, similarly to editors, they will easily adapt and expand their skills to the crafting of different stories. All authors will quickly benefit from the simplified conventions in terms of productivity, thanks to less energy expended in solving artificial problems of conformity. They will find an extended space for outlining their empirical material, and for grounding and expressing their ideas. This will particularly favor novel ideas and creative research approaches, because there will be more freedom for them to outline their specific features. Authors will be less tempted to twist the account of their research to fit with unrealistic standards and will thus be more inclined to comply with ethical rules and transparency requirements. Overall, they will regain a better sense of authenticity because of the reduced distance between research as it is conducted and research as it is recounted. With more space for honesty and creativity, the pleasure of writing will be increased for those who enjoy writing and the pain will be alleviated for those who do not.

Readers

Accessibility for readers is said to be the reason behind today's strict conventions. As demonstrated earlier in the text, there is hardly a single argument to support this claim. Recurring complaints about the opacity and tediousness of academic productions clearly indicate that journal articles are far from easy and entertaining to read. Little can be lost in this respect. More variety, innovation, and alignment between form and substance can only improve the reader's interest and pleasure.

The academic community

Beyond the benefits for each category of actors (editors, authors, and readers), the academic community as a whole will enjoy positive repercussions. More relevant and realistic conventions will be translated into more relevant and realistic demands for transparency. Curbing the plague of questionable research behaviors will be easier because realistic conventions will erase the practice of embellishing and dressing up papers that today stands between the story and the true research process. This is not to say that the simplified conventions will be a direct obstacle to questionable research behaviors. They will, however, provide a context that will make them more conspicuous and, hopefully, less attractive.

Implementing simplified writing conventions is not a huge task. It does not require any structural upheaval or heavy investment. It can be done within the current review and publishing system and requires only minor changes to editorial practices. It will not change the 'An A is an A' publication game (Aguinis et al., 2020), though it is likely to alleviate some of the negative consequences listed by these authors, like the 'prevalence of questionable research practices' (p. 144), as discussed earlier in the text, or the 'growing trend of doing and publishing research primarily for other researchers, not for other stakeholders – including the broader practice community' (p. 144), as discussed further in the text.

Science and society

How scientific publications contribute to science and society is often framed as a 'rigor versus relevance' trade-off (Carton &

Mouricou, 2017). Liberating the article from the standard conventions by no means implies making a choice between rigor and relevance. In my opinion, the proposed reform can benefit both.

It is true that scientific rigor is frequently mentioned as a consequence of rigorous standards, including writing standards. I argue that, though scientific rigor definitely requires good writing (e.g., accuracy and consistency of vocabulary, clear and thorough reasoning), good writing is not to be equated with compliance with any conventional format. My simplified conventions are not shorn of rigorous standards. The list of basic ingredients and the requirements to build an appropriate text structure are standards that encourage rigor and enable evaluators to make judgments on the quality of the research. I would even contend that the rigorous nature of an article can be more accurately assessed when the text is deprived of these superficial features of a conventional structure and the seduction of a compelling-though-conventional story, too good to be true.

Relevance may well benefit from the proposed reform. If, as suggested earlier in the text, the proposed conventions favor novelty, then they also foster relevance, because novelty is likely to reduce the entrenchment of scientific conversations and encourage the exploration of new research territories rather than exploiting the extant ones. Hopefully, more freedom of writing should result in articles that may be read by non-specialists, or, at least, in accessible texts being more easily drawn from articles published in academic journals, leading to a wider diffusion of the knowledge produced, beyond academic circles.

All in all, the new conventions would probably have, at best, a positive effect on rigor or relevance or both, and, at worst, a neutral one on both. Positive effects can be expected on the productivity and well-being of researchers, which is indirectly beneficial to society.

Conclusion

Research published in peer-reviewed journals has generated much debate within the academic community. Among the many issues discussed, the conventions that govern the structural aspects of scientific texts have received very little attention. This is surprising, given that these conventions impose very strict constraints on authors and readers, and induce unintended negative effects. Questioning the relevance of these conventions and discussing alternative proposals is all the more interesting in that in the complex institutional context of the academic world, defining writing conventions remains directly under the control of the scientific community and has only very limited financial implications. Reforming these conventions could be seen as a first, easy step in response to the issues and controversies under debate. This article proposes to adopt a set of simplified writing conventions enabling greater freedom, less cost, and more relevance. These conventions should focus on the ingredients of the article rather than on their alignment with a typical structure and a typical story. Implementing these simplified conventions would be beneficial to all the actors and stakeholders of scientific publication.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Most cited or awarded articles in nine FT journals

Journal	Number of articles/criteria	Number of empirical articles	Unconventionally structured empirical articles
Academy of Management Journal	4 most cited ever	1	None
Academy of Management Journal	9 most cited 2022	9	None
Academy of Management Journal	11 most cited 2021	11	None
Academy of Management Journal	10 most cited 2020	10	None
Academy of Management Journal	2023 Awards Best article winner + finalists	3	None
Academy of Management Journal	2023 Awards Impact Winner + finalists	3	None
Academy of Management Journal	2022 Awards Best article winner + finalists	3	None
Academy of Management Journal	2022 Awards Impact Winner + finalists	3	None
Academy of Management Journal	2021 Awards Best article winner + finalists	3	None
Academy of Management Journal	2021 Awards Impact Winner + finalists	3	None
Administrative Science Quarterly	10 most cited last 3 years	10	None
Human Relations	10 most cited last 3 years	3	None
Organization Studies	10 most cited last 3 years	4	None
Journal of Management	10 most cited last 3 years	2	None
Journal of Management Studies	10 most cited last 3 years	2	None
Strategic Management Journal	10 most cited last 3 years. All articles ranked	3	None
Organization Science	10 most cited. All years, all articles	2	None
Journal of International Business Studies	10 most cited articles	5	Johanson, J. & Vahlne, J.-E. (1977). The internationalization process of the firm – A model of knowledge development and increasing foreign market commitments. *Journal of International Business Studies, 8*, 23–32. doi: 10.1057/palgrave.jibs.8490676 6,135 citations Hofstede, G. (1983). The cultural relativity of organizational practices and theories. *Journal of International Business Studies, 14*, 75–89. doi: 10.1057/palgrave.jibs.8490867 1,715 citations

Source: Own elaboration.