Discussion on writing

Based on *Writing Science, how to write papers that get cited and proposals that get funded*

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Making a story sticky

• Getting published is not the ultimate goal, getting cited is

• A sticky idea is
  – Simple
  – Unexpected
  – Concrete
  – Credible
  – Emotional
  – Stories
Simple idea

- Address the core of a problem in a clear and compact way
- Simple doesn't mean simplistic. Don't trivialize the issue, identify its essence
- It takes no talent to see the complex in the complex, the challenge is to cut through the clutter to see the simple
Unexpected

• Most papers are forgettable because they are incremental
• There is an enormous mass of knowledge on your topic, your work should identify the unknown within that mass
• The knowledge gaps may be small, but that doesn't mean they are unimportant
• Highlighting the unknown is difficult - we know a lot and we like to show off what we know
Concrete

- Science lives with a tension between concrete data and abstract idea
- The danger zone is in the middle – small scale abstractions that are neither concrete details nor high-level schemas
Credible

- Establish credibility of idea by grounding them in previous work
- Establish credibility of data by describing methods clearly
- Establish credibility of conclusions by showing that they grow from credible data
- Build a chain that extends from past work into future directions
Emotional

- To engage us in your work, you need to engage our curiosity. Do that by asking a novel question.
- If you don't ask an engaging question, you only appeal to our inner nerd and our love for accumulating trivia.
Stories

• To write a good paper, you need to think about internal structure and how to integrate story modules
Analyze existing papers. Do they implement SUCCES?
OCAR story structure

- Opening
- Challenge
- Action
- Resolution
Opening

• Who are the characters, where does it take place?
• What do you need to understand about the situation to follow the story?
• What is the larger problem you are addressing?
Challenge

- What do your characters need to accomplish?
- What specific question do you propose to answer?
Action

- What happens to address the challenge?
- In a paper: describe the work you did
- In a proposal: describe the work you hope to do
Resolution

• How have the characters and their world changed as the result of the action?
• What did you learn from your work?
OCAR story structure

• You should be able to get the key points of a paper from the Opening, Challenge and Resolution

• You'll know whether you need to go back and read it fully
ABCDE story structure

• **Action**: immediately engage the reader
• **Background**: fill the reader in on the characters and setting so they can understand the story
• **Development**: follow the action as the story develops
• **Climax**: bring all the threads together and address them
• **Ending**: same as resolution
OCAR vs. ABCDE

- **Opening and Challenge = Action and Background**
- ABCDE gets the reader into the story faster
- But less efficient than OCAR in moving the story forward – after the initial action, you have to back up and fill in the background
LD story structure

- **Lead**: core of the story, collapses opening, challenge and resolution
- **Development**: fills out and develop the story
Analyze existing papers.
Do they implement OCAR, ABCDE or LD?
Where are the OCAR elements?
The Opening

• Three goals:
  – Identify the problem that drives the research
  – Introduce the characters
  – Target the audience

• Whom do you want to read your work and how do you want them to think about it?
The first sentence

• Get readers moving and set the direction
• Establish expectations and generate momentum

• If you start in one direction and then switch, readers get mental whiplash
• Worse: if opening is unclear and doesn't go in any direction, readers will wait to figure out where to go
The first sentence

- Avoid explaining a schema that scholars in the field don't need explained.
- There is nothing wrong with explaining things for yourself in a first draft. When you revise, figure out where the real story starts and delete everything before that.
Targeting your audience

- Experts: open quickly, building off the discipline's core schemas

- Broad audience: two-step opening to introduce and then redefine the focus
  - Open with an issue that engages the audience, then modulate it to one you want to work with
  - Frame the issues broadly, then narrow in on the specific research you propose
How wide should the opening be?

- Set the opening to draw in as broad a readership as you can manage.
- Establish expectations that you can deliver on.
- If your opening is wider than the resolution, readers will feel cheated.
- If the resolution is wider than the opening, readers won't ever see that the story would interest them.
How wide should the opening be?

- If you oversell in the immediate opening, you can still filter down quickly.
- If you frame too narrowly, you lose readers immediately, and once lost, you can't get them back.
Analyze existing papers.
Did they identify the larger issue? the characters?
Did they target a narrow audience or a wider one?