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Dorothy E. Leidner

University of Virginia, dorothy_leidner@baylor.edu

Monica Birth

The Association for Information Systems, monicabirth@gmail.com

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On Scholarly Composition: From Acceptable to Exceptional

Dorothy E. Leidner,¹ Monica Birth²

¹University of Virginia, USA, dorothy@virginia.edu

²The Association for Information Systems, USA, monicabirth@gmail.com

Abstract

Scholarly writing is a difficult skill to develop. This editorial presents our observations on how to move from acceptable to exceptional writing in academic manuscripts. We discuss three phases of writing—the predrafting, drafting, and postdrafting phases—and provide suggestions based on our experiences for improving the quality of academic manuscripts prior to their submission.

Keywords: Writing, Academic Papers, Composition, Drafting

1 Introduction

Rarely is it said, “she was born a great writer.” Writing is in fact not natural—one must learn how to write. It is not part of our DNA and is not a skill that is acquired without instruction and practice. As one of the notable abilities that distinguish humans from other animal species, writing—or more formerly, composition—is a highly specialized means of advanced communication. To illustrate, consider the following recollection from one of the authors:

When I was in high school, I found myself unhappy with the grades I was receiving on my English essays. My grades were consistently just shy of the desired “A.” The summer after my junior year I attended a summer program in Connecticut to experience a new part of the country. While there, I took courses in advanced math, English, and architectural design. The grading system was different from my high school, but the results were the same: on my English essays, I was always just shy of the highest mark. Looking dejectedly one day at my returned essay, I noticed that the girl

seated next to me had received a top mark, and I asked if I could read her essay. As I began reading, I immediately experienced an “aha” moment, in which it suddenly seemed so obvious why my own essays were never quite good enough. It wasn’t about the girl’s words, grammar, or syntax as much as it was about her ideas, structure, and flow. In her essay, I noticed a certain structure, a fluid transition from abstract to concrete ideas—I never felt lost in the essay but always seemed aware of where it had been and where it was heading. It was a seamless flow of ideas. It was as though the blinds had been opened and I was able to finally see what had been missing in my own essays. Apparently, my intuition was right—on all subsequent essays that summer and in my future English classes, my essays consistently garnered top marks. I’ve always looked back on that “aha” moment in the classroom as a turning point in my academic development. I experienced what can be described as a tacit-to-tacit knowledge transfer (Nonaka, 1994). Had I simply asked the girl how she consistently

achieved top grades on her essays, she likely could not have explained it. Yet in reading the essay, a light went on: It was not the content of the particular essay that was different from my own, it was the structure, the flow, the seamless weaving of the abstract with the concrete. Something clicked in my brain and, from that point on, I had a level of comfort with writing, as well as a deep appreciation for both what was written as well as how it was written, that I had previously conceived as unimaginable.

This opening story is one person's tale of how she learned to write. Although as a tacit-to-tacit knowledge transfer, it is difficult to replicate the experience explicitly in the written word, we nevertheless seek in this editorial to provide some helpful insights based on our combined experiences in authoring, editing, and copyediting manuscripts on how to prepare a paper for submission to the *Journal of the Association for Information Systems* (JAIS) and, more specifically, how to nudge a paper from acceptably written to exceptionally written. We contend that an exceptionally written paper will fare better in the review process and, if eventually published, will enjoy higher readership and citations, in part because readers are able to seamlessly read and understand the text. Our editorial is concerned with writing for scholarly journals. Our observations and recommendations may not apply to all writing circumstances, such as writing a report, an opinion essay, a response document, a letter, and so forth.

Our editorial divides the writing process into three stages: the predrafting stage, the drafting stage, and the postdrafting stage. Within each stage, we present our thoughts on areas to which writers need to be especially attuned and mistakes that we commonly see, which, if avoided, can significantly improve a paper's chance of receiving a favorable response from readers.

2 The Predrafting Stage: Outlining the Paper

We take as a base assumption that authors have conducted high-quality research; indeed, exceptional writing can never compensate for flawed research (Kane, 2022). Once authors have undertaken considerable reading, conducted their research in accordance with the current methodological standards, and analyzed their results, there is still an enormous chasm between their research and their eventual manuscript, a chasm that will eventually be filled with words. To get from the stage of conducting research to the drafting stage, it is necessary to make use of extensive notes and outlines. This is the predrafting stage, which typically involves organizing one's thoughts into notes, tables, diagrams, and eventually,

outlines. Rarely can authors simply begin writing without predrafting. Even with opinion pieces on topics with which the author is exceptionally well informed, predrafting in the form of notes and outlines can help authors organize their thoughts and ideas.

For most research papers, authors will consult extensive literature as part of their research. Many papers today have well over 70 references. Among the challenges of scholarly composition is working the relevant literature into a coherent narrative. It is not sufficient to simply read the literature that will inform the introduction, literature background, and theory portions of a paper and then simply jump into drafting. Rather, one must first organize the literature into a series of notes, tables, or diagrams (see Baird, 2022; Leidner & Tona, 2022). These notes, tables and/or diagrams will form the basis of a topical outline. There are different ways to develop a topical outline. Some authors might create an outline based on their existing knowledge about a topic and aspired direction of argumentation prior to consulting the literature and then work backwards to find and read the literature that speaks to the themes in their outline. Others may take the opposite approach, first reading extensive amounts of literature, then coding the literature into themes, and finally synthesizing the themes into an outline. Yet other authors might do something in between, outlining themes as they read the literature and sometimes seeking literature to fill holes in their developing outline. We do not make claims that one particular approach to outlining is best. We do suggest that regardless of which approach an author chooses, the process of creating a topical outline is very helpful in organizing one's thoughts for subsequent drafting. In addition to the topical outline, we strongly encourage authors to develop a logical outline.

A logical outline traces the logic within any given section and within any given paragraph of any given section. It is the author's logic that emerges, not the logic embedded in the various readings that might have informed the author's work. A logical outline does two things—first, it incorporates the author's ideas into the existing literature that is informing the research, and second, it ensures that the paper is written as a coherent flow of ideas. Both are important for highlighting the novelty and contribution of a paper. For authors who are struggling with composing a logical outline, one helpful exercise is to take a section of a published paper that you believe reads very well, and reverse engineer it, trace the logic, e.g., the flow of the ideas, and create an outline of the section. If the paper is well-written, the logic will flow seamlessly without the reader even noticing. By reverse engineering the section, you can see how the ideas are flowing in the section. If you are having difficulty outlining an introduction, for example, it can be helpful to take an introduction that you find

particularly good from another paper and reverse engineer it. Likewise, if you are struggling to piece together the literature or theory section, you can do the same with these sections, preferably using a recently published paper in a top journal.

For each major section of their paper, we recommend that authors create a topical and a logical outline. The topical outline informs the section headings and subheadings, while the logical outline traces the connection between the various topics in the topical outline and informs the text within the various sections and subsections. Moving to the drafting stage based exclusively on the topical outline without crafting a logical outline runs the risk of drafting a paper that reads like a series of unconnected themes.

3 The Drafting Stage: Writing the Paper

Developing a topical and logical outline is a major challenge and finally having these outlines finished is often accompanied by a great sense of relief. However, while outlines make drafting the paper easier, it is nevertheless always a major undertaking to engage in the actual writing of the paper. Whereas the predrafting stage is devoted to decisions concerning content (what will be said), the drafting stage is largely concerned with conveyance (how it will be said).

There are different approaches to the actual writing process. Some individuals may prefer an instinctive approach in which they take the content—their outlines, notes, tables, and other items from the predrafting stage—and then begin writing as the thoughts come into their head, not stopping to think carefully at this point about the conveyance but instead focusing on getting the full content on paper. Authors preferring the instinctive approach typically focus on getting all the ideas generated during predrafting down on paper. Authors who prefer the instinctive approach should expect to spend significant time redrafting, preferably before they share the document with their co-authors, namely because it will be difficult for their co-authors to make sense of ideas that have been written but not fully fleshed out. Their co-authors may then find themselves having to deconstruct the meaning before redrafting the content, a difficult and arduous task that may inadvertently move the paper in a different direction than the original author intended.

Other individuals may prefer a more cerebral approach in which they take the content from the predrafting stage and then meticulously follow their logical and topical outlines, carefully crafting each sentence as they go, often returning to adjust the outlines as they go, and consciously considering the conveyance even as they write. Authors using the cerebral approach might sometimes insert direct quotes from papers they

reference with a note to themselves to later reword so that they can continue with their own original writing in between the quotes, polishing the logic before rewording portions of the content that are direct quotes. The focus of authors who tend to be cerebral writers is to get the logic established as they draft and to draft in as polished a form as possible. These authors are likely to spend a great deal of time thinking about wording as they write, often struggling for several minutes with single sentences until they are satisfied that they elegantly convey the meaning to which they aspire.

So-called “writer’s block” is often experienced at the drafting stage: the author has prepared all the components but the actual words and sentences seem elusive. One helpful activity that can be used to put the mind into elegant prose-writing mode is to read some classic literature. Even if you are not naturally inclined to read classic literature during your spare time, consider reading a chapter of a classic novel prior to sitting down to begin composition in order to fill your mind with exceptional prose. This creates an opportunity for tacit-to-tacit knowledge transfer: by filling the mind with exceptional prose, you will often find that the composition of exceptional prose comes more readily. Alternatively, vocabulary books typically come with example sentences and reading several pages of example sentences in a vocabulary book can have a similar effect of nudging the brain toward sophisticated writing patterns without one even realizing it. One of the authors keeps a 30-year-old Barron’s vocabulary book on the shelf and periodically reads a few pages if she is experiencing writer’s block. She often finds that by reading the sentences in the vocabulary book, her mind thinks differently when she sits down to write. Another way of overcoming writer’s block is simply to write: It can be useful to set a timer for 15-30 minutes and simply write as much as you can about the topic of your paper—or even another topic if that seems impossible—without paying attention to the quality of your writing or the organization of the ideas. Often, the easiest way to overcome writer’s block is to simply start writing.

In reality, the drafting stage is also a redrafting stage in that rarely will the first draft of any section stand as is. Even prior to sharing a draft with co-authors, it is likely that an author has iterated several times through the draft, rewriting as necessary to achieve exceptional writing. What one is striving to achieve with exceptional writing is elegant prose that communicates scholarly understanding and reflects a deep grasp of the material. Such writing is different from engaging in an informal discussion with a colleague or putting words to bullet points for a presentation, both of which might be done with little prior consideration of precisely how to word things. It is also different from the writing appropriate for a textbook or newspaper

article. Authors of scholarly manuscripts should embrace the opportunity to think extensively about the conveyance of their ideas in order to choose words that enable them to express the depth and richness of thought that have informed the scholarship.

Some characteristics of exceptional writing in our observation over years of reading and editing papers is that exceptionally written papers share these characteristics: (1) precision, clarity, and diversity of words; (2) variety of syntax (e.g., sentence structures); (3) seamless flow of ideas within and across sentences; and (4) effective transitions across paragraphs. A fifth and final characteristic, impeccable grammar, will be covered in the section discussing the postdrafting stage below.

3.1 Precision and Clarity

Beginning with precision and clarity, your paper should have no extra words. Make sure that everything you say has a distinct purpose for your argument and that your arguments are expressed as succinctly as possible. It is also important to use direct language. Some authors will dance around their intended meaning, couching their point in superfluous language. For example, rather than writing “we aim to develop a theory of...,” simply write “we develop a theory of...” Likewise, clauses such as “please note that” are rarely necessary; simply make your point. Moving on to the diversity of words, it is important for authors to step back and reflect carefully on their word choices. Obviously, certain words will invariably be repeated in any paper—e.g., basic articles, the names of constructs and theories, methodological terms, etc.—but descriptive words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs not naming a particular construct, theory, or method term), prepositions, and conjunctions should be varied to prevent the feeling of repetition and boredom. At the same time, it is important to avoid defining a particular word for use in a specific manner and then using other words to mean the same thing. If the word is a central word to the study—a construct, for example—then it is necessary to be precise in defining it and consistent in using it.

3.2 Variety of Syntax

The precision, clarity, and diversity of words go a long way toward keeping a reader’s attention. But it is equally important to vary the syntax of one’s writing. Papers that use the same sentence structure over and over quickly become boring to read, even if the content itself would otherwise be interesting. Often, authors will get into a pattern of using certain phrases and syntax, such as beginning sentences with the word “while,” “although,” or “however” and using the same syntax repeatedly in a single paragraph. Some authors also have a tendency to repeatedly use words such as “which” or “as” to elongate a sentence, which is fine

on occasion but becomes repetitious when used multiple times on a single page. Having a variety of sentence structures—beginning some sentences with nouns, some with verbs, and some with prepositions, for example—helps elevate the writing and lays the foundation for a seamless flow of ideas within and across sentences. Likewise, varying the sentence length is important. While too many long sentences can make the writing feel cumbersome, too many short sentences can make the writing feel choppy and disconnected. An appropriate variety of both long and short sentences allows for an easy, natural, writing flow and helps to maintain the reader’s interest.

3.3 The Seamless Flow of Ideas

Even with appropriate words and syntax, writers must pay careful attention to ensure the seamless flow of ideas within and across sentences. One of the biggest errors we see in the flow of ideas in papers is that of non sequiturs. We often see papers in which a sentence might be formed in the form of an A-clause and a B-clause; the two clauses may both be well-written but are, in fact, unrelated, with the B-clause not actually building on the A-clause. This results in a non sequitur, where the premise from the first half of a sentence does not match the deduction in the second half, or an entire sentence does not logically flow from the previous sentence (see examples in Table 1).

Non sequiturs disrupt the reading process because the mind, knowingly or sometimes not knowingly, stumbles over the disconnection. In any sentence that uses a transitional word to lead a clause—e.g., but, because, since, while, although, yet—it is important to make sure that the two clauses are logically connected.

3.4 Transitions

The above logic also holds true from sentence to sentence. Transitional words such as “however,” “therefore,” “nevertheless,” “similarly,” etc., are often used to connect sentences. One must be attentive to the potential of non sequiturs to arise not only within sentences but also across sentences. Take the following two sentences: “End user commitment to security only develops when the potential risks of security breaches are recognized. Therefore, potential breaches can take many forms, both work- and non-work-related.” Although it begins with a “therefore,” the second sentence is not logically connected to the first: potential breaches can take many forms regardless of whether the potential risks of security breaches are recognized. Similarly, it is important to ensure that one paragraph transitions into the next. It is not enough to simply use a transitional word to connect paragraphs, the logic in the final sentence of one paragraph must be carefully connected with the logic of the first sentence of the following paragraph.

Table 1. Examples of Sentences with Non Sequiturs

Example sentence	The A-clause	The B-clause	The non sequitur
New employees often seek ways to gain information about their new role in the organization, but it is critical for organizations to be sensitive to the needs of their new employees	New employees often seek ways to gain information about their new role in the organization,	but it is critical for organizations to be sensitive to the needs of their new employees.	The B-clause does not logically follow from the A-clause: organizations need to be sensitive to the needs of their new employees regardless of whether new employees seek ways to gain information about their new role
Since organizations can benefit from increasing employees' sense of belonging, understanding the impact of citizenship behaviors and tactics allows organizations to implement strategies that will enable employee citizen behaviors to thrive	Since organizations can benefit from increasing employees' sense of belonging,	understanding the impact of citizenship behaviors and tactics allows organizations to implement strategies that will enable employee citizen behaviors to thrive.	The two clauses might independently be accurate but there is no connection between them.
While some managers feel that organizational online communities may lead to unfettered socializing, line managers do not want employees distracted by collaboration efforts tangential to meeting performance objectives.	While some managers feel that organizational online communities may lead to unbridled socialization,	line managers do not want employees distracted by collaboration efforts tangential to meeting performance objectives.	The B-clause does not contrast with the A-clause, even though a contrast is implied by the use of the word "while." If anything, the B-clause is similar to the A-clause. "While" can also be used in a temporal sense, as in: "While I was driving to work, it started to rain."

Thus far, we have not distinguished between the various sections of a paper but have instead discussed writing more generally as applied to any section of a paper. For advice on what to include in each major section of a paper, we refer readers to the excellent editorial by Jerry Kane (2002); for advice on how to approach writing different sections, we refer readers to the insightful approach of Baird (2022), who suggests drafting in a middle-out fashion whereby one first writes the literature review and method sections and then works out to the discussion and introduction sections. As with the predrafting stage, it is often very helpful to carefully study each section of a recent elite paper whose overall writing and structure exude the highest standards of scholarship. This can help authors better identify the weaknesses in their own composition. Identifying and correcting weaknesses in an initial draft takes center stage in the following and final of our three stages: the postdrafting stage.

4 The Postdrafting Stage: Editing the Paper

The postdrafting stage is a revision process characterized by exactitude and meticulousness. In Baird's (2022 p. 1204) editorial on writing well, he

states: "Revise, revise, revise (even after the rest of the paper is drafted or completed)." We wholeheartedly agree. In their haste to get papers into the review pipeline, authors often proceed from drafting to submission with little time devoted to the postdrafting stage. When revising their paper in this stage, authors should consider both the macrolevel and microlevel of their paper and utilize not only rational but also intuitive ways of thinking to improve the paper. At the macrolevel, authors should think about the "story" their paper is telling: Does the "plot" make sense? Have they written an enticing introduction to their story that makes their readers want to read on to see what happens? Are there enough guideposts and transitions along the way to help readers navigate through the story? Will readers understand why the "characters" of the story are interesting? Are there still hanging threads that need to be resolved? Is the ending of the story satisfying?

Speaking of hanging threads, the words "text" and "textile" derive from the same Latin root—*texere* "to weave" (Ayto, 1990, p. 526). To engage your intuitive skills in revising the paper, it can be helpful to think of your paper as a "textile," as a woven fabric, paying attention to the warp and weft of the text. While reading, it is helpful to look for irregularities in the

fabric of the text—such as places in the text where the “weave” feels a little loose or a little tight, or places where you perceive “seams” or “holes” in the text. Even if you don’t know why these places in the text feel “off,” you can mark these intuitively perceived flaws and come back to them later to see if you can unravel these parts of the text a bit to rationally figure out what the problem is.

At the microlevel, authors should be striving to achieve impeccable grammar, the final characteristic of exceptionally written papers. Although this is our last section, it is certainly a “last but not least” situation. We have occasionally heard authors suggest that grammatical accuracy is not “that” important, or that the grammar just needs to be “good enough.” While we disagree with these opinions, one should reasonably ask: Why does grammar matter? At best, grammatical errors are a problem because readers notice them, and every time a reader notices an error, it’s like a stumbling block that draws attention away from the point being made. Going further, grammatical errors can also obstruct comprehension and make it difficult for readers to decipher, on a basic level, what is being said. At worst, if a paper is full of grammatical errors, readers may wonder whether the scientific accuracy of the paper can really be trusted. A carefully written paper that is as error-free as possible on a linguistic level will set readers’ expectations that the paper in front of them is worth reading and that the authors probably took just as much care with the scientific elements of the paper as they did with the writing.

Another point of potential confusion is: How do you know if something is grammatically correct? This is a question that to some authors may seem almost mystical in its inscrutability. Nevertheless, it is anything but. There are rules governing all elements of language, which one can learn about by simply consulting the excellent grammar books, references, and tools we recommend in the Appendix. Beyond the basics, however, there are subtleties determined by the particular “style” a journal or publisher uses. For example, JAIS house style hews very close to APA Style (with few exceptions). Thus, we strongly recommend that all our authors consult Chapters 4 and 6 in the APA publication manual (American Psychological Association, 2020) to learn about exciting topics such as how to use commas, hyphenation, capitalization, etc., correctly for JAIS purposes. Likewise, English is often tolerant of many different spellings of words. However, for JAIS papers, the correct spelling is generally the spelling found in the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (conveniently available online at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>).

We do recognize that grammar is confusing and mastery is difficult. While we encourage all authors to regularly refresh their understanding of English

grammar, we thought it would perhaps be useful here to review a few vexing grammar errors that come up again and again in the papers we read. As a caveat, almost all grammar rules have exceptions; however, the following guidelines are appropriate for most situations. Also, the following paragraphs are not intended as a review of all important grammar topics; rather, we chose these topics simply based on the frequency with which we correct errors related to these topics in the papers we read.

4.1 Tense

The blockbuster category of grammar errors that shows up in a solid majority of papers is *verb tense errors*. Many authors are guilty of overusing the present tense and trying to explain their entire experimental procedure using the present tense only. Using the present tense does not make something feel fresh and exciting; rather, it simply confuses the reader. If something was done exclusively in the past, it should be expressed using the past tense. So, for example: “we interviewed subjects, analyzed the data, evaluated the findings, tested our hypotheses”—these things should all be expressed in the past tense because these actions were all performed in the past. Reporting things like statistics and results can be done in either the past or the present tense since they are “eternal” (i.e., they exist in neither the past, present, nor future); however, for simplicity, APA Style recommends reporting all results using the past tense (American Psychological Association, 2020, p. 118).

Likewise, for literature review sections, the past tense should generally be used. For example, many authors write sentences like: “Lopez et al. (1997) find that verb tense is used incorrectly 99% of the time.” It should be “Lopez et al. (1997) found...” because the sentence describes a past action of these authors. However, there are cases in which either the past or present tense may be acceptable. For example, if the paper is the subject of a sentence, either the present or past tense may be an acceptable option because papers are also “eternal”—e.g., “The paper discusses the correct use of tense.” However, here again, for simplicity, APA Style recommends using the past tense for “literature review (or whenever discussing other researchers’ work)” (American Psychological Association, 2020, p. 118).

Past tense should only be used to describe actions that happened at a discrete time (or time period) in the past. To describe actions that happened multiple times in the past, one should use the *present perfect* tense (i.e., have + verb infinitive). So, for example, when discussing a research stream involving many studies published at different times in the literature review section, the present perfect tense should be used: “Many studies have shown that grammar is important.” Likewise, when discussing a development that started in the past and is continuing into the present, the present perfect

tense should also be used: e.g., “The use of correct grammar has been in constant decline since the release of the first iPhone.”

Finally, the most mystical of all verb tenses: the *past perfect* tense (i.e., had + verb infinitive). The past perfect tense is generally overused; the only time the past perfect tense is called for when one is discussing two events that both happened in the past but at different times in the past. In such cases, one should use the past perfect tense to mark the event that happened chronologically first. For example, “they tried to use correct grammar, but since they had never learned the rules, it was difficult.” In this sentence, “never learned the rules” happened first, so it is marked with the past perfect tense. Another example: “They invited her to dinner, but she had already eaten.”

4.2 Articles

Another frequent error that shows up in many papers concerns the use of articles. While singular nouns are generally preceded by either “a/an” or “the,” when talking about an entire noun class, the plural form of the noun should be used rather than using an article at all. For example, rather than “a longitudinal study looks at effects over time,” one should write “longitudinal studies look at effects over time.” In this case, the reference is to the entire category of longitudinal studies rather than to any individual study within that category. It is, however, appropriate to use “the” before a plural noun is when discussing a group within a noun class that has already been defined. So, for example, compare: (1) “computer users have varying degrees of self-efficacy,” and (2) “even the most experienced computer users in our study had varying degrees of self-efficacy.” Sentence (1) refers to computer users in general, whereas (2) refers to a specific group of computer users that has already been referred to or defined in the paper. “The” should also be used before a plural noun when the noun is followed by “of” (e.g., “the Twitter accounts of celebrities were not used”).

4.3 Possessive nouns

On the topic of plural nouns, to make plural nouns possessive, English has two options: using *of* and using *s'*. Many authors overuse the latter option. While it is generally the best option for single-word nouns, when using *complex nouns*, it is typically preferable to construct the possessive using “of.” So, for example, “the *users'* frustration was obvious” is more concise and therefore preferable to “the frustration *of the users...*” because this sentence involves a single-word noun. However, when using a complex noun involving several words, the situation is reversed: “the frustration *of the information system users* was obvious” is easier for readers to understand and thus preferable to “*the information system users'* frustration...”

4.4 Capitalization

Capitalization errors are another extremely common type of error we see in papers, with most authors overusing capitalization. JAIS generally follows APA capitalization conventions. As such, job titles and positions are not capitalized. Authors sometimes feel that their position should be capitalized in their biographies. However, APA conventions are such that job titles—even president of the United States and chief information officer—are not capitalized. Exceptions include: named professorships, honorary titles, and job titles that precede a name (e.g., “We listened to a speech by President Biden”). Likewise, the names of academic subjects and fields of study are not capitalized; thus, information systems, computer science, and engineering are not capitalized in normal use. Similarly, theories, concepts, laws, models, variables, statistical procedures, etc., are generally not capitalized (although the titles of tests/measures/scales are capitalized). Even when introducing acronyms, such terms are not capitalized. So, for example, when introducing the acronym for the *technology acceptance model* (TAM), the name of the model itself is not capitalized. Finally, table/figure captions use “title-case,” or “headline-style” capitalization, meaning that all major words are capitalized. However, the column headings and entries within the table itself are in “sentence-case” capitalization, meaning that only the first word and proper nouns of each table entry are capitalized.

4.5 Gender

We follow the major US style guides, including APA, in recommending that authors avoid using terms such as “he or she,” “he/she,” “(s)he,” etc., to refer to an individual whose gender is unknown. Such terms may be considered biased because they imply that gender is binary. Since these terms are quickly disappearing from publication, using them also risks making a paper look outdated. Ideally, authors would find a way to avoid pronouns altogether in such cases by pluralizing nouns when possible, using passive constructions, reconstructing the sentence, etc. However, if using any other option is awkward or impossible, authors should simply use the singular “they/their” any time they feel the need to resort to using “he or she,” “his or her” or similar terms (e.g., “In this case, the user wanted to control who could respond to their tweet.”) Trying to solve this issue by using feminine pronouns exclusively or by alternating between masculine and feminine pronouns often reproduces the same bias it seeks to eliminate.

In general, woman/man should be used as nouns, and female/male should be used as adjectives. It is often considered condescending to refer to people as “females” or “males.” However, that does not mean that “female” and “male” are not perfectly good

adjectives, such as in “female respondents reported having witnessed cyberbullying significantly more than male respondents.” One occasionally sees “woman” used as an adjective (e.g., the woman senator from Wyoming) although one virtually never sees “man” used as an adjective (e.g., “the man senator from West Virginia”). Neither is grammatically correct. Moreover, bringing attention to gender should only be done when it is necessary to make a relevant point; otherwise, such usage risks highlighting the particular gender as unusual in the given context (such as in the sentence, “the woman senator from Wyoming”) and thus reproduces the very bias it seeks to counter.

4.6 Miscellanea

Which vs. that: Although in UK English and certain other styles, “which” and “that” are often interchangeable, JAIS style (in line with APA Style) differentiates between them. “Which” (preceded by comma) should be used to set off *nonrestrictive clauses*, meaning that one could take the clause out of the sentence and it would still make sense, such as in the sentence, “The study, which was performed on-site, revealed interesting results.” In contrast “that” should be used (no comma) to set off *restrictive clauses*, or clauses that cannot be removed such as in the sentence, “The study that was performed on-site revealed interesting results.”

Set prepositions after nouns: Some nouns are always used with a certain preposition—for example, “insight *into*,” “impact *on*,” “lack *of*.” For many, this is one of the most difficult details of the English language to master. There are online lists and books one can consult, but a quick and easy way to determine what preposition to use after a certain noun is to simply “google” the noun-preposition combinations that you are considering to determine which preposition is most frequently used in your context.

Nonhyphenated prefixes: All major US style guides now recommend removing hyphens between prefixes and their root words in most cases (e.g., nonuse, cybersecurity, macrolevel, rather than non-use, cyber-security, macro-level). While this may still look odd to many authors, hyphenating prefixes threatens to make your paper look quaint or old-fashioned. JAIS Style is somewhat more liberal than APA Style in this regard (for example, we adopt the AP Style convention of hyphenating co- in constructs that designate a professional position such as co-author, co-worker, etc.; we use hyphens between double-letter terms such as “post-test”; and we allow hyphens when the unhyphenated term would be very awkward or difficult to understand, or to preserve consistency among similar terms). A concise list of such prefixes and use exceptions can be found in the APA Publication Manual (American Psychological Association, 2020, p. 164).

5 Conclusion

Benjamin Franklin once said, “either write something worth reading or do something worth writing.” Scholars must do both: they must engage in worthwhile, interesting, well-designed, and well-executed research and they must write about their research in a way that others find worth reading. Writing well is a craft that requires time, effort, skill, and practice. We hope the observations in this editorial will help interested authors elevate their writing from acceptable to exceptional and, in so doing, assist authors in navigating the process of drafting, revising, and polishing papers toward publication in elite scholarly journals.

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Appendix

Websites

Quick and Dirty Tips: Grammar Girl by Mignon Fogarty

<https://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl>

This is a highly reliable source that offers entertaining explanations of the most minute and vexing grammar issues. The author generally posts a new “episode” (also available as a podcast) weekly, resulting in an extremely impressive library of grammar topics she has covered. The author has also written a number of books on grammar. In particular, we recommend, *Grammar Girl’s Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing (Quick & Dirty Tips)* (St. Martin’s Griffin, 2008).

Grammarly

www.grammarly.com

Grammarly is an extremely useful tool for all writers. The free version finds basic spelling and grammar errors and is much more effective for this purpose than the similar MS Word tool. The premium version offers far more extensive suggestions for improving writing. As a caveat, the suggestions are often incorrect in both the free and premium versions, so one still must use human judgment to weed out these faulty suggestions. However, it is an invaluable resource for identifying those picky errors that remain even after you have read through your paper many times.

Fussy Professor Starbuck’s Cookbook of HandyDandy Prescriptions for Ambitious Academic Authors

<https://pages.stern.nyu.edu/~wstarbuc/Writing/Fussy.htm>

Fussy Professor Starbuck’s guide provides many writing tips for authors as well as many examples of writing errors. The guide covers board areas such as the general structure of papers as well as specific grammar and syntax issues to pay particular attention to during copyediting.

Books

Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (7th ed., American Psychological Association, 2020).

All authors should have a copy of this text to refer to. In addition, Chapters 4 and 6 succinctly review many basic grammar issues not covered here, such as the correct use of punctuation (i.e., when to use commas, semicolons, periods, etc.), passive vs. active style, clauses, conjunctions, subject/verb agreement, etc. In addition, the APA Style website (<https://apastyle.apa.org/>) is particularly useful for quickly reviewing examples of different types of references.

The Chicago Manual of Style (17th ed., University of Chicago Press Editorial Staff, 2017). Although JAIS uses APA style, Chicago Style is quite similar in most regards. This massive volume has detailed discussions on a wide range of grammar topics that may not be included in the much more succinct APA Style manual. This resource is also available online at <https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html>

The Elements of Style, by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White (4th ed., Pearson, 1999). This slim volume was first published in 1918. While this edition has been somewhat updated, a few things are out of date, no longer relevant, etc. However, the sheer efficiency of this book continues to make it worth a look.

About the Authors

Dorothy E. Leidner is the Leslie H. Goldberg Jefferson Scholars Foundation Distinguished Professor of AI Ethics at the University of Virginia. She is a LEO and a Fellow of the Association of Information Systems. Dorothy received her PhD in information systems from the University of Texas at Austin and holds an honorary doctorate from Lund University. She is a professional research fellow with Deakin University in Australia and a visiting professor with the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Her current research focuses on the ethics of personal data digitalization.

Monica Birth earned her PhD in German from Johns Hopkins University in 2005 and is a full-time freelance academic copy editor. She currently works with the *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, *MIS Quarterly*, *MIS Quarterly Executive*, and *Goethe Yearbook*, and worked for many years with the *German Studies Review*. She particularly enjoys working with authors to improve their manuscripts and has helped hundreds of authors prepare their books and articles for publication. Prior to discovering her passion for copyediting, she taught German and literature courses at Johns Hopkins University, the University of Utah, Loyola College of Maryland, and Goucher College.

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