


# Beating the 'so what?!' rejection: All about your contribution

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Authors underestimate the importance of articulating a well-considered contribution. As a result, most articles are rejected because they make an insufficient contribution to justify publication (Ågerfalk 2014; Gilson & Goldberg 2015; Ladik & Stewart 2008). While articles must have a sound design grounded in the existing literature and be well written as a starting point, these alone are insufficient grounds for publication. While what constitutes a sufficient contribution is somewhat subjective, publishing success is not a function of luck. Editors want to accept and publish research that makes a difference, furthering their target discipline and journal metrics (Ladik & Stewart 2008). Failing to articulate an article's contribution leads to questions of 'so what?!' and rejection. Consequently, convincing editors and reviewers how, why and to whom the article contributes greatly increases the chances that authors will be supported through revisions to get their article published. But, what is a contribution? Let us start by clarifying what a contribution is not.

A contribution is not providing vague or superficial statements that the article would be relevant to *academics, practitioners, policymakers and regulators*. Nor is it simply stating that *no article has done what the current article does and, therefore, it contributes by addressing the identified gap*. Similarly, it is not blindly replicating a study in a different context (Ladik & Stewart 2008). Most frustratingly, articles that merely add yet another example to a contested area without explaining why the disagreement exists do not provide a contribution. So, what is a contribution?

Broadly speaking, articles can contribute to one or more of three domains: (1) theoretical or conceptual, (2) methodological and (3) contextual or empirical (for more details, see Ågerfalk & Karlsson 2020; Ladik & Stewart 2008) with relevant new knowledge. An article may not contribute to all audiences. Accordingly, articulate clearly *which* audience(s) is (are) impacted by the research,<sup>1</sup> why it is important and relevant to them and how it will impact their thinking, understanding or actions. If nothing changes, it has not contributed.

Findings that are surprising, controversial or have a 'wow' factor are more interesting and may be perceived to provide a greater contribution (Ladik & Stewart 2008:160). However, what frustrates readers are unexpected findings that are *not* explored further. Make a point of investigating such findings to provide valuable insights that make a contribution by explaining, for example, how existing relationships are more complex than originally understood or what additional variables help to explain contradictory conclusions. To illustrate, it may be that jurisdiction, a country's legal system or the availability of technically skilled people explains controversy in the existing literature.

To create meaningful research contributions, authors should take the time to develop a research project that will span 5–10 years. Doing so provides numerous benefits. Firstly, it is easier to identify and articulate the contribution of large projects as well as that of its reverse-engineered smaller articles. Each article also sets the stage for each consecutive article and its contribution. Secondly, this approach promotes the author's expertise in a niche area that enhances their credibility, visibility, standing, promotion prospects and funding success. The strategy also streamlines the research process. Writing articles is made efficient as the introduction, contribution, literature review and method sections are easy to write with little additional reading and understanding required.

Finally, the strategy ensures alignment between research, supervision and teaching, promoting efficiency and efficacy. Relevant and well-developed research topics are already available for supervised students. It also supports the use of cohort supervision as students work on different aspects of the same large research project. Accordingly, students can help one another and can be supervised as a group, efficiently promoting quality research. High-quality teaching is also

1. Knowing to whom an article contributes allows its authors to select the right journal (target audience) as well.

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facilitated as subject and historical expertise are consistently enhanced while facilitating continuous course development and teaching relevance.

In conclusion, it is each author's responsibility to convincingly articulate each article's contribution on first submission. Doing so increases research publishing success. Thinking strategically about research and conducting smart planning promote impactful research, which can contribute to subjects, disciplines and society as a whole.

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