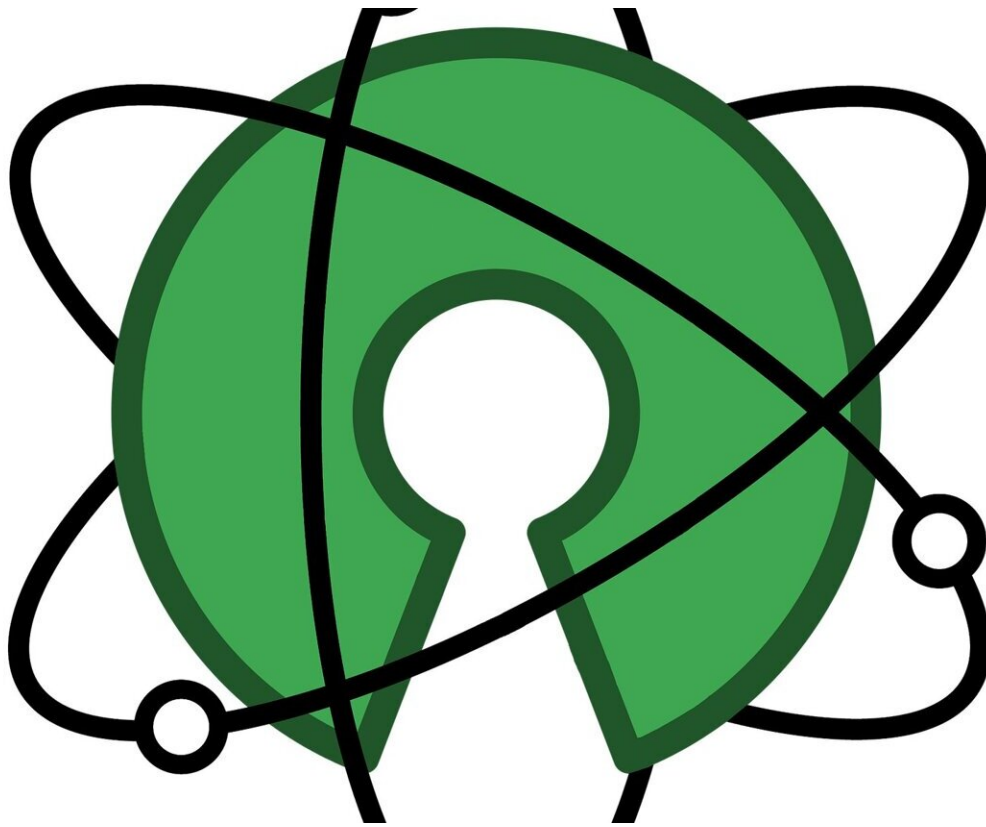


# Three ways to improve scholarly writing to get more citations

May 1 2021, by Matt Weingarden

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Researchers from University of Arizona and University of Utah published a new paper in the *Journal of Marketing* that examines why most scholarly research is misinterpreted by the public or never escapes

the ivory tower and suggests that such research gets lost in abstract, technical, and passive prose.

The study, forthcoming in the *Journal of Marketing*, is titled "Marketing Ideas: How to Write Research Articles that Readers Understand and Cite" and is authored by Nooshin L. Warren, Matthew Farmer, Tiany Gu, and Caleb Warren.

From developing vaccines to nudging people to eat less, scholars conduct research that could change the world, but most of their ideas either are misinterpreted by the public or never escape the ivory tower.

Why does most academic research fail to make an impact? The reason is that many ideas in [scholarly research](#) get lost in an attic of abstract, technical, and passive prose. Instead of describing "spilled coffee" and "one-star Yelp reviews," scholars discuss "expectation-disconfirmation" and "post-purchase behavior." Instead of writing "policies that let firms do what they want have increased the gap between the rich and the poor," scholars write sentences like, "The rationalization of free-market capitalism has been resultant in the exacerbation of inequality." Instead of stating, "We studied how liberal and conservative consumers respond when brands post polarizing messages on [social media](#)," they write, "The interactive effects of ideological orientation and corporate sociopolitical activism on owned media engagement were studied."

Why is writing like this unclear? Because it is too abstract, technical, and passive. Scholars need abstraction to describe theory. Thus, they write about "sociopolitical activism" rather than Starbucks posting a "Black Lives Matter" meme on Facebook. They are familiar with technical terms, such as "ideological orientation," and they rely on them rather than using more colloquial terms such as "liberal or conservative." Scholars also want to sound objective, which lulls them into the passive voice (e.g., the effects... were studied) rather than active writing (e.g.,

"we studied the effects..."). Scholars need to use some abstract, technical, and passive writing. The problem is that they tend to overuse these practices without realizing it.

When writing is abstract, technical, and passive, readers struggle to understand it. In one of the researchers' experiments, they asked 255 marketing professors to read the first page of research papers published in the *Journal of Marketing* (JM), *Journal of Marketing Research* (JMR), and *Journal of Consumer Research* (JCR). The professors understood less of the papers that used more abstract, technical, and passive writing compared to those that relied on concrete, non-technical, and active writing.

As Warren explains, "When readers do not understand an article, they are unlikely to read it, much less absorb it and be influenced by its ideas. We saw this when we analyzed the text of 1640 articles published in JM, JMR, and JCR between 2000 and 2010. We discovered that articles that relied more on abstract, technical, and passive writing accumulated fewer citations on both Google Scholar and the Web of Science." An otherwise average JM article that scored one standard deviation lower (clearer) on our measures of abstract, technical, and passive writing accumulated approximately 157 more Google Scholar citations as of May 2020 than a JM [article](#) with average writing.

Why do scholars write unclearly? There is an unlikely culprit: knowledge. Conducting good research requires authors to know a lot about their work. It takes years to create research that meaningfully advances scientific knowledge. Consequently, academic articles are written by authors who are intimately familiar with their topics, methods, and results. Authors, however, often forget or simply do not realize that potential readers (e.g., Ph.D. students, scholars in other sub-disciplines, practicing professionals, etc.) are less familiar with the intricacies of the research, a phenomenon called the curse of knowledge.

The research team explores whether the curse of knowledge might be enabling unclear writing by asking Ph.D. students to write about two research projects. The students wrote about one project on which they were the lead researcher and another project led by one of their colleagues. The students reported that they were more familiar with their own research than their colleague's research. They also thought that they wrote more clearly about their own research, but they were mistaken. In fact, the students used more abstraction, technical language, and passive voice when they wrote about their own research than when they wrote about their colleague's research.

"To make a greater impact, scholars need to overcome the curse of knowledge so they can package their ideas with concrete, technical, and active writing. Clear writing gives ideas the wings needed to escape the attics, towers, and increasingly narrow halls of their academic niches so that they can reduce infection, curb obesity, or otherwise make the world a better place," says Farmer.

**More information:** Nooshin L. Warren et al, EXPRESS: Marketing Ideas: How to Write Research Articles that Readers Understand and Cite, *Journal of Marketing* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/00222429211003560](https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429211003560)

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