The grabber: making a first impression the Wilsonian way

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of what a good grabber is and how to construct one. This is done by drawing on the insights provided by Professor Timothy L. Wilson, for whom this paper is written as an “honorary piece.”

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on a small sample of papers from the 48 journals that have received contributions from Professor Wilson throughout the years. A total of 12 papers have been selected, using a mix of convenience and haphazard sampling. The grabber of each paper has then been analyzed based on its nature and style.

Findings – Based on the review and analysis, five different types of grabbers were identified; the quote, the anecdote, the provocative question, the surprise, and the metaphor, each type representing a unique way (and strategy) of creating initial interest.

Research limitations/implications – As this paper was intentionally based on a convenience sample, further investigation is needed to establish whether the presented categories have clear validity and/or whether there are additional categories/strategies for how to create good grabbers.

Originality/value – Creation of interest is an increasingly important part of everyday academic practice. As the grabber is a rarely addressed phenomenon in academic literature, the presented categories should be of both interest and practical use to academics in most fields.

Keywords Academic writing, Timothy L. Wilson, Creating interest, Introductions, The grabber, The hock

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

In the shampoo business, it is well known that “you never get a second chance to make a first impression[1].” In the science business, making such an impression is a matter of having a good “grabber.” The grabber, or hook, is the initial twist that, executed successfully, captures the reader’s attention and indicates why a paper is interesting, relevant, and/or important.

Allegedly, the word “grab” originates from the Middle Low German, or Middle Dutch, word “grappen” and has three interrelated meanings[2]. It either connotes:

1. the act of quickly taking and holding someone or something with your hand or arms;
2. taking or getting something in a quick and informal way; or
3. getting the attention or interest of someone (Merriam-Webster.com, 2013).

In the case of this paper, the third alternative is the most appropriate since it relates to the social construction and creation of interest. As it happens, the third interpretation also overlaps with the Wilsonian perspective (i.e. the views and arguments of Professor Timothy L. Wilson) and how Hallgren and Wilson (2010) describe the grabber in their book on challenges related to academic writing. In the book, which provides insight into the writing and publication process, they explain that the grabber is the part of the introduction that indicates why a paper is important by means of grabbing the reader’s attention (Hallgren and Wilson, 2010, p. 14). Most often, the grabber includes the initial
sentence or sentences. The explanation by Hallgren and Wilson (2010), however, stops
there and they give no further insight into what a grabber is or strategies for how
to construct one. Similarly, other literature on academic writing leaves the grabber
largely untouched, and when addressing creation of interest, the focus is on the entire
introduction or the whole paper. We find the lack of scrutiny perplexing, especially
considering the importance of making a first impression (see Pollock and Bono, 2013).
We all know how easy it is to be discouraged by a paper (or books for that matter) if we
find the introductory part outright boring. The aim of this paper is to contribute to
an understanding of how to create interest and delve into what constitutes a good,
or great, grabber. Ultimately our aim is to provide insights into different strategies for
how to construct one.

In order to do this, the paper is structured in three parts. The first part constitutes
a phenomenologically oriented overview of the ingredients of what makes something
interesting. This is combined with previous attempts to shed light on the grabber and
scholarly suggestions for how to craft introductions. In the second part, a review
and analysis of selected grabbers are reported on. The sampling of grabbers/papers is
based on the extensive list of journals that have received contributions from Professor
Timothy L. Wilson throughout the years – 48 in all (see the Appendix). The rationale
for this “biased” selection is that this paper is dedicated to Professor Wilson who, in the
fall of 2013, was awarded an honorary doctor degree for his academic contributions.
A total of 12 papers from the Wilsonian collection were selected. The analysis of the
grabbers focussed on how they were constructed and the consequences thereof. In
the third and final section, a discussion of the core features of a great grabber is
provided. We also suggest some strategies for how to make first impressions last.

Crafting interesting introductions
Over the years, the number of scientific contributions that have addressed academic
writing and publishing has been immense. Reviewing some of the contributions,
it is clear that they cover different perspectives, different parts of the production
process, and specific sections of academic texts. Without aiming to provide a complete
overview, a few interesting publications cover critical assessments of the peer-review
process as such (see Bedeian, 2003, 2004; Eisenhart, 2002; Frey, 2003; Gorman, 2008;
Miner, 2003; Tsang and Trey, 2007), attempts to provide normative suggestions for
“how to” craft academic texts and manage the review process (Huff, 1999, 2009;
King, 1999; Clark et al., 2000; Leblebici, 1996; Summers, 2001; Stewart, 2008), the ones
that provide insights into the editorial point of view (Pollock and Bono, 2013; Grant
and Pollock, 2011; Ragins, 2012), and the papers that address how to write
problematisations and craft introductions (Locke and Golden-Biddle, 1997; Alvesson
and Sandberg, 2011; Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011).

A couple of years ago, in an editorial in Academy of Management Journal (AMJ),
Grant and Pollock (2011) addressed what at first glance appeared to be “the grabber.”
In the editorial, entitled “Setting the hook,” the editors investigated what AMJ readers
find interesting and worth reading. Using a typical grabber, they started the editorial
by writing:

We all know that articles are like dates: first impressions matter. Although it is typically the
shortest section of an article, the introduction (i.e. the opening few pages, before the literature
review) determines whether or not readers will continue reading. The introduction provides
the interpretive frame that shapes how reviewers read a manuscript during the review
process (Grant and Pollock, 2011, p. 873).
Despite what might be assumed from reading the title of the editorial, the main focus is on the complete introduction and, in essence, what makes a paper come across as interesting. The closest the authors come to shedding light on the question of what constitutes a good grabber (or hook) is that it could be achieved by using a “provocative quotation or vignette to engage the reader in the intriguing and practical nature of their topic” (Grant and Pollock, 2011, p. 873). The question of what is perceived to be engaging or interesting is not thoroughly discussed, but has previously, and more extensively, been covered by Davis (1971) in his seminal article, “That's interesting!” Reviewing prospering theories, Davis (1971) argues that they do not prosper merely because they are perceived as true but because they question certain assumptions of their audience and are therefore acknowledged as interesting (Davis, 1971). Uninteresting theories, on the other hand, are those that reconfirm certain assumptions of their audience. Interesting statements (theories or arguments) are consequently those that contradict and, to some extent, challenge the “taken-for-granted” assumptions of a specific audience without moving beyond, or outside, the reader’s interpretive frame of reference. If outside the “safe zone” that constitutes the audience’s frame of reference, a statement (theory or argument) is instead perceived as untrue, or even crazy. If someone were to claim that they have proof that aliens have visited the earth, it would be seen by most people as a crazy statement, but from the perspective of an individual who has experienced an inexplicable light phenomenon in the sky, it might come across as an interesting statement.

In the construction of interesting statements (theories or arguments), there are consequently two basic ingredients involved, the “taken-for-granted” assumptions of the audience and an element of surprise. A central argument of this paper, however, is that what is perceived as interesting as a whole is also dependent on the ability to attract attention to the parts. The reason is simple. Without the initial attention to the parts, there is no interest at all and it is consequently impossible to challenge the “taken-for-granted” assumptions of the audience about the whole. In other terms, without being able to create any attention (with the grabber), you have no readers.

Similar to Grant and Pollock’s (2011) small contribution to the question of what constitutes a good grabber, Pollock and Bono (2013) recently discussed the importance of storytelling in another editorial in the AMJ. The editors, who focussed on the narrative elements of storytelling, also stressed the importance of grabbing the reader’s attention. Their suggestion was to have a catchy title and/or an attractive cover. They summarized their main argument as follows:

When you browse through a bookstore, how do you pick which ones to buy? You may have a genre or author in mind, but if you’re like us, odds are that titles and cover art first grab your attention (Pollock and Bono, 2013, p. 631).

Huff (1999), who provides far-reaching suggestions and good exercises for academic writing, also highlights the importance of joining a conversation and clearly showing that you have something to add to that conversation. She also states that an introduction needs to provide direction and “strengthen their interest so that they [the readers] will read on” (Huff, 1999, p. 85). The argument of “joining a conversation” is also relevant (and closely related) to the logic of how to construct interesting arguments as described by Davis (1971). The basic reason is that various audiences often have different perspectives and therefore find different types of arguments (or topics) interesting (see Jacobsson and Söderholm, 2011).
Thus, it can be concluded that as an author, apart from knowing your field and having conducted a good study[3], you need to make sure that you are joining a conversation, do your best to be interesting based on the “taken-for-granted” assumptions of the audience, create an element of surprise, and attract initial attention by carefully crafting a “grabber.” We propose that an interesting grabber is the link between a catchy title and an interesting introduction. As illustrated, this is an area of inquiry that previous studies have rarely focussed on.

Methodology
As this paper is written as an “honorary piece” to Professor Timothy L. Wilson, we have based the empirical part on the extensive contributions he has made. One might ask, why focus on the grabber? The answer is simple. If you have ever co-authored a paper (or in any way collaborated) with Professor Wilson, you have gotten the question: “So, what is the grabber?”

The sampling of grabbers was based on the extensive list of journals that have received Wilsonian contributions throughout the years, a total of 48 journals in January 2013 (see the Appendix). Out of the 48 journals, we selected a total of 12 papers, using a mix of convenience and haphazard sampling to illustrate the variety and nature of good grabbers. The grabber of each paper was analyzed separately, based on its nature and style, as presented in Table I. As a second step in the analysis, we grouped the grabbers based on their nature.

Empirical examples and initial analysis of grabbers
In Table I, the 12 grabbers are presented together with the topic of the paper and a short statement about the nature of each grabber. It should be noted that the selected examples should not necessarily be seen as “state of the art” examples of successful grabbers but as illustrations of various strategies that can be used in the construction of one. Although “state of the art” examples are often used to provide normative suggestions, and despite our arguments about the importance of the grabber, we do not believe that “the grabber” is the aspect that makes or breaks a paper. Thus, selecting grabbers from well-referenced (state of the art) papers might not provide greater understanding of the grabber.

On the creation of a good grabber
In this paper, we wanted to investigate what constitutes a good grabber with the ultimate aim of providing pointers or strategies for how to construct one. Previous efforts that examined the ability to catch the reader’s attention have generally focussed on the entire introduction or paper. Here, we have instead focussed on the first one or two sentences of a paper, arguing that this is where the grabber is, or should be, located. Also, since we have not aimed at generalizability, but merely to provide an in-depth understanding, we have, following previous contributions and practice, chosen 12 papers – ours “happen” to have been published by Professor Timothy L. Wilson. In our investigation, we found five types of grabbers (see Table I), each representing a different approach/strategy based on special features.

The quote
The first type of grabber is the “the quote,” which should reflect the paper and speak to the audience and its interests. The quote could, if the author is reporting on a case study, be empirically based. One example of this is the initial quote used by Hallgren
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citation</th>
<th>Grabber</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Nature of grabber</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anell and Wilson</td>
<td>“In the discourse on modern management, the concept of flexibility is often mentioned as a desirable characteristic of both firms and employees, frequently in a normative sense. That is, firms should be flexible, or employees should be flexible”</td>
<td>A paper on the ability of individuals, organizations and society to handle flexibility</td>
<td>A stylistic element that captures central points of the manuscript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anell and Wilson</td>
<td>“In 1959 Charles Lindblom wrote a classic paper entitled The Science of Muddling Through. That title somewhat belied the content of the paper”</td>
<td>A paper on the existence and avoidance of Boondoggle projects</td>
<td>A stylistic element that captures central points of the manuscript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blomquist and Wilson</td>
<td>“The selection of the construction of the great pyramid in Egypt is frequently used as an example of the earliest of projects (cf. Nicholas, 2001, p. 1)”</td>
<td>A paper on project marketing</td>
<td>A historically anchored short narrative highlighting relevance and historical connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blomquist and Wilson</td>
<td>“The history of getting things done by projects and the study of project management itself is a long one. Smith (2004, p. 23), for instance, opined that the great pyramid of Egypt could not have been built without some form of formal project management – to the extent that a work breakdown structure most probably was used”</td>
<td>A paper on productivity that uses the WBS as a tool</td>
<td>A historically anchored short narrative linked to the paper under scrutiny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burström et al.</td>
<td>“In the market there are only services – what can we learn from that?” (Keynote by Grönroos, 2011)</td>
<td>A paper on the importance of understanding service management practices within project management</td>
<td>A quote that puts the paper in perspective and highlights its importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallgren and Wilson</td>
<td>“Project management – It’s all about change and deviations!” – the words of a project manager with 30 years of project experience.</td>
<td>A paper on deviations in projects</td>
<td>An empirical quote that highlights the importance of the topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallgren and Wilson</td>
<td>“A crisis is a terrible thing to waste”</td>
<td>A paper on opportunities for learning from crises in projects</td>
<td>A quote that highlights the importance of the topic</td>
</tr>
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<td>Jacobsson and Wilson</td>
<td>“The essential attraction of projects is they tend to get things done. In this regard, partnering is a way of getting things done in close collaboration among organizations”</td>
<td>A paper on project partnering and collaboration</td>
<td>A stylistic element that captures central points of the manuscript</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jacobsson et al. (2013)</td>
<td>“A theory of the temporary organization”, Lundin and Söderholm (1995) introduced four basic concepts, time, task, team, and transition to describe the internal, action orientation of these organizations”</td>
<td>A paper that critically reviews the seminal paper “A theory of the temporary organization”</td>
<td>A historically anchored short narrative linked to the paper under scrutiny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walfisz et al. (2006)</td>
<td>“About 10 years ago, an article appeared in this journal suggesting that ‘projects and project management are the wave of the future in global business’ (Pinto and Kharbanda, 1995, p. 41). That statement proved to be prophetic”</td>
<td>A paper on project management, creativity, and video game development</td>
<td>A historically anchored short narrative highlighting relevance and historical connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson (2011)</td>
<td>“It has been suggested that organizations, indeed societies as a whole, are becoming more and more projectified. In other words, the so-called permanent, routine-based organizations of yesterday are evolving into ones now engaged in a variety of projects”</td>
<td>A paper on the organizational implications of the ability of projects to get things done</td>
<td>An empirical quote that highlights the importance of the topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zackariasson et al. (2006)</td>
<td>“One of the most dynamic and creative industries today is the video game industry”</td>
<td>A paper on phronesis and creativity in video game development</td>
<td>A claim that (in 2006) came across as interesting to the audience</td>
</tr>
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and Wilson (2007) in their paper on how to deal with deviations in projects, “Project management – It’s all about change and deviations!” These were the words of a project manager with 30 years of experience and purposely selected from the case study reported on in the paper. If the paper is not based on a case study, it is still possible to use “the quote” as a grabber, but based on an existing and familiar quotation. The grabber of this essay used parts of a (hopefully) well-known TV commercial. Two other examples are Burström et al. (2014), who used a quotation from a keynote address by Professor Grönroos, who asked what can be learned by acknowledging service as central to contemporary market transactions, and Hällgren and Wilson (2011), who used a quote attributed to the founders of Google, “A crisis is a terrible thing to waste,” in order to illustrate the importance of the topic of the paper.

The anecdote
The second type of grabber identified is the “the anecdote,” which is based on a historically anchored short narrative. The anecdote can, similar to “the quote,” be taken from an empirical case or be related to a historical account. A first example is a narrative referencing a historically accurate prediction, “About 10 years ago, an article appeared in this journal suggesting that ‘projects and project management are the wave of the future in global business’ (Pinto and Kharbanda, 1995, p. 41). That statement proved to be prophetic” (Walfisz et al., 2006). This anecdote illustrates the relevance of the paper and how it connects to its historical roots. Also an attempt to connect to historical roots is the anecdote used by Jacobsson et al. (2013), “In their often quoted article on ‘A theory of the temporary organization’, Lundin and Söderholm (1995) introduced four basic concepts, time, task, team, and transition to describe the internal, action orientation of these organizations.” The purpose of the historical connection in this case relates to the fact that the paper by Jacobsson et al. (2013) was a critical review of the seminal paper by Lundin and Söderholm (1995).

The provocative question
“The provocative question” is the third type of grabber we have identified. This type of grabber incorporates either an intriguing or a provocative question that, when executed successfully, contradicts the “taken-for-granted” assumptions of the audience. One example is Burström et al. (2014), who used a question posed in a keynote address at the 2011 Nordic Academy of Management conference (NFF). In the address, Professor Grönroos said “In the market there are only services – what can we learn from that?” To an audience that sees physical goods and production as central to its business, claiming that there are only services out there might come across as provocative. Similar to the example of Burström et al. (2014), the question should preferably be closely related to the research question or the title of the paper. Following the arguments posed by both Davis (1971) and Huff (1999), it is important in the case of “the provocative question” to understand the taken-for-granted assumptions of the audience.

The surprise
The fourth type of grabber that we have identified is “the surprise.” The central idea of this type of grabber is that it is some kind of statement that should come across as interesting, surprising, or unknown to the audience. This type of grabber is consequently both easier to use and more useful if the author has a paper that is based on a “new” phenomenon or surprising idea. An example of such writing practices is the
statement by Zackariasson et al. (2006) that “One of the most dynamic and creative industries today is the video game industry.” The sentence awakens questions of wanting to learn more, since readers might ask themselves, “Why is that?” Also here the taken-for-granted assumptions of the audience interact, since not all readers will find the same type of statements surprising.

**The metaphor**
The fifth and final type of grabber is the “the metaphor.” As a grabber, “the metaphor” incorporates stylistic elements that capture central points of a paper. The metaphor could consequently be somewhat similar to “the quote” but based solely on the author’s ability to use stylistic elements in contrast to using the words of someone else. One example of this strategy (or type) is provided by Jacobsson and Wilson (2014) in their paper on project partnering and collaboration. The grabber reads, “The essential attraction of projects is they tend to get things done. In this regard, partnering is a way of getting things done in close collaboration among organizations.” To be more specific, the stylistic element used by Jacobsson and Wilson (2014) is not a metaphor per se, but builds on repetition and contextualization. Other types of stylistic elements, such as paradoxes, could also be used. A paradox is a contradiction in which two claims should not simultaneously work or fit together. A paradox is thus potentially intriguing for the audience since it addresses a mystery. Used as a grabber, paradoxes could be set up in an “on the one hand, but on the other” argument, consequently integrating the contradiction in a single sentence.

**Conclusions: how first impressions last**
In the introduction to this essay, we set out to investigate the essence of the grabber and to provide some pointers or strategies for how to construct one. From reviewing the literature related to academic writings, and the construction of introductions, we can conclude that the closest anyone has come to shedding light on the question of what actually constitutes a good grabber (or hook) is Grant and Pollock (2011, p. 873) who stated in an editorial that it could be a “provocative quotation or vignette to engage the reader in the intriguing and practical nature of their topic.” Also illustrating their understanding of this issue, they used the metaphor, “We all know that articles are like dates: first impressions matter,” when addressing how to make first impressions – basically using “the metaphor” as a grabber when capturing the essence of the paper in 11 words. In the introduction to this essay, we took a similar approach when using an old and, for the readers of this paper, hopefully well-known vignette from an 1980s Head & Shoulders commercial. In both cases, some kind of metaphor that speaks to the audience and captures central points of the paper is used.

From Davis (1971), we could also learn that creation of interest stems from the ability to contradict or challenge the “taken-for-granted” assumptions of a specific audience. This is, however, not easily done in one sentence or section, but rather throughout the whole introduction of the paper, and sometimes even throughout the whole paper. Still, from the insights provided by Davis (1971) and the arguments used by Huff (1999), the importance of joining a conversation is obvious. Even if a lasting interest is not created merely through the initial vignette, the grabber is important as the spark that hopefully ignites the audience’s interest. Even if the readers of this essay are not familiar with the old TV commercial used as the basis for our grabber, we combined it with a stylistic element to make it more effective.
From previous literature, we can conclude that the grabber needs to connect first and foremost to the central topic of the paper. It also needs to highlight the (or a) central aspect(s) of importance for the paper. Based on the analysis of the haphazard sampling of the Wilsonian collection, we have furthermore identified five different types (and by that strategies) that could be used in the construction of a good grabber. These are:

“The quote” which consists of some sort of quotation that speaks to the audience (the quotation could be empirically based if the basis for the paper is a case study, or based on a previously well-known quotation if the paper is not a case study).

“The anecdote” which is based on a selected narrative (which preferably, but not necessarily, is empirically based).

“The provocative question” which should be intriguing and preferably contradict “taken-for-granted” assumptions of the audience (the question could/should be closely connected to the research question, or the title, of the paper).

“The surprise” which is a claim that comes across as interesting, surprising, or unknown to the audience (this is an especially useful strategy if the author has a paper that is based on a “new phenomenon”).

“The metaphor” which represents a stylistic element that captures central points of the paper (the metaphor is somewhat similar to “the quotation,” as it should speak to the audience but should solely be based on the author’s ability to use various stylistic elements).

As shown in some of the empirical examples provided, it is also possible to combine various types into hybrids, for example “the quote” and “the metaphor” or “the metaphor” and “the anecdote,” to create attention. Still, the goal is to engage the reader in the intriguing or practical nature of the topic. With a proliferation of the number of articles published, the issue of engagement is becoming increasingly important and an integral part of everyday academic practice. As the grabber is a rarely addressed phenomenon in the academic literature, the presented categories/strategies should be of both interest and practical use to academics in most fields.

Last but not least, we would like to urge the reader to join a conversation, do their best to be interesting in relation to the “taken-for-granted” assumptions of the audience, construct an initial twist, and formulate a grabber in order to create the attention that is needed. Hopefully, we have illustrated how “first impressions last” the Wilsonian way.

Notes
1. This manner of speech was extensively and successfully used in a 1980s Head & Shoulders TV commercial.
2. The word also relates to the Swedish “grabba” and Sanskrit “grbhñáti (he seizes)” (Merriam-Webster.com, 2013).
3. Note that questions regarding methodological rigor, scientific relevance, and theoretical familiarity are beyond the scope, or rather an unstated starting point, of this paper.

References


Further reading


Appendix. Journals in which Timothy L. Wilson have published (January 2013)

102 Total w. Multiples
1. AMS Quarterly (2)
2. Advances in Competition
3. Advances in X-Ray Analysis
4. Anvesha
5. Business Horizons
About the authors
Associate Professor Mattias Jacobsson, PhD, is the Head of the Management Section and an Associate Professor in Management, at the Umeå School of Business and Economics, Umeå University, Sweden. His main research interest is in projects and temporary organizations. In 2012, he was awarded the pedagogical prize from the Business School, and the same year he was also an Outstanding Paper Award Winner at the Literati Network Awards for Excellence. In 2012-2013, Jacobsson was a Guest Researcher at the RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, and at the 2014 Literati Network Awards for Excellence he was a Highly Commended Paper
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