

GETTING A STRONG START: BEST PRACTICES FOR WRITING AN INTRODUCTION

The Introduction to a research paper needs to convince the reader that your work is important and relevant, frame the questions being addressed, and provide context for the findings being presented. For an audience of researchers who constantly need to make decisions about how best to invest their time and which articles to read, an Introduction needs to “sell” your paper to the reader.

Most importantly, you need to present a clear research question and convince your reader that your work fills a gap in current knowledge - if the readers do not believe that your paper will improve their understanding of the field in a meaningful way, they are less likely to invest valuable time and effort in reading it carefully.

A well-written Introduction prepares a reader for the information that follows, engaging him or her in the research questions and providing enough information to understand and appreciate the methods, findings, and implications. In contrast, a poor Introduction fails to provide appropriate background and contextual information or does not adequately explain the research questions, ultimately leaving the reader unengaged and unlikely to fully appreciate the results or implications of the research.

PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE.

The structure and length of an Introduction are not set in stone and can vary across fields and publications, but this section ultimately serves a single purpose: to lead the reader through a narrative that ends with presentation of the research and the reasons for its importance.

The ideal structure of such a narrative is a “funnel” that

starts with broad conceptual information and gradually narrows in scope and specificity until the information presented is specific to the research questions being addressed. This structure allows you to use the Introduction to tell a story that progresses logically and guides a reader from broad and familiar concepts, through the paper’s scientific background and rationale, to research questions that are clearly understood and supported.

An Introduction should open by presenting the broad context of the area of study and providing a familiar framework on which the subsequent elaborations are built. In addition to providing context for the research being described, opening with familiar concepts also engages readers and primes them for the information that follows. The opening statements also provide an opportunity to convince readers of the importance and

KEEP IN MIND

Your Introduction should engage and demonstrate to the reader why he or she should continue to read your research.

relevance of the research, engaging their interest from the outset; e.g., for a theoretical paper, this might simply be furthering our scientific knowledge; for a clinical paper, the research might relate to a medical condition that affects a sizeable population; or, for a management paper, the research might help to relate human behavior to running a successful company.

PROVIDING BACKGROUND FOR YOUR READERS

It is during this process that you can pull together different strands of research and connect them to a common theme while narrowing the scope to the specific questions being addressed in the paper.

BACKGROUND.

After the scene is set with a broad introductory statement, you should present the relevant current knowledge. This discussion of current knowledge will compose the bulk of the Introduction and will provide the necessary background for the research being presented, as well as leading readers from the general context to the specific research questions.

The background information should be thorough and comprehensive, although different publications will have differing expectations concerning the scope of this portion of an Introduction. It is during this process that you can pull together different strands of research and connect them to a common theme while narrowing the scope to the specific questions being addressed in the paper.

Presenting every study with even the slightest relevance to

the research questions can be tempting, but straying too far from the central issues can confuse the reader and impede the momentum of the narrative. Readers who are familiar with the field will be looking for a comprehensive treatment of the current state of the field but without digression into marginally relevant topics.

A thorough discussion of the literature not only frames the research but also establishes the author's scientific credentials. Knowledgeable readers will often judge you and, by extension, your work by the knowledge of the field and the literature you present in your Introduction. In short, the thoroughness of an Introduction can make or break your credibility and leave readers either anticipating a relevant and credible study or skeptical about whether they will find anything of value in the paper.

PROVIDING APPROPRIATE CITATIONS.

In presenting the background for a study, it is important to thoroughly present and acknowledge the relevant existing literature. As the narrative progresses from the general to the specific, all relevant original findings should be cited (note, however, that review papers should generally not be cited unless they are specifically provided as a supplemental resource). In addition, failure to present appropriate citations of original findings could undermine the credibility of both you and your work

CONCLUDING STATEMENT.

Finally, an Introduction should conclude by describing how the research being presented contributes to furthering knowledge in the field. At this point, immediately before readers are asked to commit to reading the rest of the

article, it is important to give them reasons to care about the study and its findings. Ideally, the closing statements of your Introduction should refer to the opening by explaining how the findings are applicable to the current challenges and questions in the field, clearly and concisely conveying the relevance of the specific questions being addressed.

If you have thoroughly and carefully led readers from general concepts that they believe to be important to specific research questions that they believe to be relevant, then your narrative will leave them prepared for and receptive to the rest of the paper. After reading a well-written and thorough Introduction, the reader will believe in the purpose of your work, understand its context and background, and be eager to discover its results and implications.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Bendiksby received a Bachelors in Pharmacology in Scotland, a Neuroscience Cand. Scient. in Norway, and his PhD from Duke University studying visual perception and the cognitive processing of attention and reward in rhesus macaques.



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