

Academic Writing 1 for Accounting, Economics & Psychology

Session 5: Introduction

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Agenda

- 1 Importance
- 2 How to Write a Good Introduction
- 3 Common Mistakes

Importance

- You win or lose your readers with the introduction of your paper.
- Your title and your abstract should convince people to read your introduction. The introduction will determine whether they go on and what they take away from the paper.
- Editors rarely read more than the introduction before they decide to desk-reject or to allocate referees.
- Referees often know what their recommendation will be after the introduction.

What to Write

- Many introduction at well-published papers have very similar structures.
- One reason is that it's clear:
 - ▶ you tell the reader why the issue you studied is important,
 - ▶ you tell them what you did,
 - ▶ you tell them what you learned,
 - ▶ and you tell them how it builds on what we already knew.
 - ▶ You might tell them how it relates to policy or what the limitations of your work are.

The Introduction Formula (Keith Head) I

- ④ **Hook.** Attract the reader's interest by telling them that this paper relates to something interesting. What makes a topic interesting? Some combination of the following attributes makes *Y* something worth looking at.
 - ▶ *Y* matters: When *Y* rises or falls, people are hurt or helped.
 - ▶ *Y* is puzzling: it defies easy explanation.
 - ▶ *Y* is controversial: some argue one thing while other say another.
 - ▶ *Y* is big (like the service sector) or common (like traffic jams).

Things to avoid:

- ▶ Bait and switch: promising an interesting topic but delivering something else
- ▶ “all my friends are doing it”: presenting no other motivation for a topic than that other people have written papers on it

The Introduction Formula (Keith Head) II

- ② **Question.** Tell the reader what this paper actually does.
 - ▶ The reader should have an idea of a clean research question that will have a more or less satisfactory answer by the end of the paper. This may take two paragraphs.
 - ▶ At the end of the first (2nd paragraph of the paper) or possibly beginning of the second (3rd paragraph overall) you should have the “This paper addresses the question” sentence.

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- 3 **Antecedents.** Identify the prior work that is critical for understanding the contribution this paper will make.
 - ▶ The key mistake to avoid here are discussing papers that are not essential parts of the intellectual narrative leading up to your own paper.
 - ▶ Give credit where due but establish, in a non-insulting way, that the prior work is incomplete or otherwise deficient in some important way.

The Introduction Formula (Keith Head) III

- ④ **Value-Added.** Describe approximately 3 contributions this paper will make relative to the antecedents.
 - ▶ This paragraph might be the most important one for convincing referees not to reject your paper.
 - ▶ A big difference between it and the earlier “question” paragraph is that the contributions should make sense only in light of prior work whereas the basic research question of the paper should be understandable simply in terms of knowing the topic (from the hook paragraph). “Antecedents” and “Value-added” may be intertwined. They may also take up to 3 paragraphs.

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- ⑤ **Road-map.** Outline the organization of the paper. Avoid writing an outline so generic that it could apply to any paper. Instead customize the road map to the project and possibly mention pivotal “landmarks” (problems, solutions, results. . .) that will be seen along the way. Keep it short.

Structure of Introduction (Claudia Sahm) I

① Motivation (1 paragraph)

- ▶ **Never** start with literature or new technique.
- ▶ Be specific and motivate YOUR research question.

② Research question (1 paragraph)

- ▶ Lead with **your** question.
- ▶ Then set your question within most relevant literature.
- ▶ Nice: “My paper answers the question . . .”; popular and acceptable: “My paper [studies/quantifies/evaluates/etc]. . .”

Structure of Introduction (Claudia Sahm) II

- ③ Main contribution (2-3 paragraphs, one for each contribution)
 - ▶ Lead with **your** work, then how it extends the literature.
 - ▶ Your main insight
 - ▶ New model, new data, new method, etc.: Can be second or third contribution. Tools are important, not most important.
- ④ Method (1-2 paragraphs, one for each method)
 - ▶ Each paragraph begins with a sentence or two summarizing one of **your** methods.
 - ▶ Lead with your most important model, identification, or empirical method. Then follow with a few sentences that sets your method in literature.
- ⑤ Findings (2 to 3 paragraphs, one for each main finding)
 - ▶ Each paragraph begins with a sentence or two summarizing one of **your** findings.
 - ▶ Most important should be first (preferred) or last (sometimes most logical).
 - ▶ Follow with three or four sentences setting YOUR finding in literature.

Structure of Introduction (Claudia Sahm) III

- ⑥ Robustness Check (optional 1 paragraph)
 - ▶ Choose robustness check that best supports **your** most important finding.
- ⑦ Roadmap of paper (1 paragraph).
 - ▶ At most one sentence for each section of **your** paper.
 - ▶ Be specific to your paper, if possible.

My Alternative

- 1 Territory
- 2 Niche
- 3 Occupy Niche (“This paper. . .”)
- 4 (Policy conclusions)
- 5 Relevant literature (identify 2-3 relevant strands of literature)
- 6 Contribution relative to literature
- 7 (Sectioning)

Partner Work

- In teams of two:
- Look at the introduction of your and your partner's favorite paper.
- Try to identify if they follow one of the structures outlined above. Where do they deviate? Can you find out why?
- You have about 30 minutes in total (10-15 minutes per paper).
- One of you should briefly tell the whole group about your finding afterwards.

Common Mistakes by PhD Students

- Don't motivate a very broad topic, focus on your specific research question.
- Most of the introduction should be about your paper, not about the literature.
- You will have to re-write the introduction. Several times. Perhaps starting completely from scratch.
- Do not trash prior research or call out its limitations or mistakes. Tone matters. Tell us what your paper adds. They added too or you wouldn't cite them.
- Try not to use any jargon. Ideally, your parents should be able to understand most of the introduction.
- Make sure your tone is neutral and stick to the fact. (Especially relevant when writing about tax evasion!)

Further Reading

- Head, Keith. [The Introduction Formula](#)
- Sahm, Claudia writes on the Macromom blog about introductions [here](#).