

About This Introduction

Although each discipline has its own conventions for what articles, research reports, dissertations, and other types of scholarly writing should look like, academic writing shares some general characteristics across each field. One area of similarity is the introduction section. This handout provides strategies for revising introductions.

CARS (Creating a Research Space)

John Swales' *CARS model for introductions* is based on his study of articles across a range of disciplines. He identified the following moves as common among most articles:

Move 1: Establishing a territory

- Step 1 Claiming importance *and/or*
- Step 2 Making topic generalizations *and/or*
- Step 3 Reviewing items of previous research

Move 2: Establishing a niche

- Step 1a Counter-claiming *or*
- Step 1b Indicating a gap *or*
- Step 1c Question-raising *or*
- Step 1d Continuing a tradition

Move 3: Occupying the niche

- Step 1a Outlining purposes *or*
- Step 1b Announcing present research
- Step 2 Announcing principle findings
- Step 3 Indicating article structure

Writers can use these moves as a guide for revising their own writing, or for helping others.

Questions for Revision

Does the introduction to the piece of writing you are working with...

- 1) Establish the importance of the paper's topic within the discipline?

- 2) Mention commonly accepted ideas about the topic?
- 3) Discuss previous research related to the topic?
- 4) Challenge existing beliefs about the topic?
- 5) Demonstrate a gap in current research on this topic?
- 6) Ask questions about current knowledge in the field?
- 7) Name an area of research that needs to be extended?
- 8) Explain the purpose of the paper?
- 9) Name the focus of the research?
- 10) List the primary findings of the research?
- 11) Outline the sections of the paper?

Topic Outline

A topic outline is a fast and easy way to analyze whether an introduction is effectively organized. According to Pyrczak and Bruce, a topic outline can help show the flow of an introduction to ensure it moves from a general introduction of the problem or gap to a specific discussion of the current research (33). The topic outline can be combined with the CARS model to improve your introduction or to offer advice to a peer.

Topic Outline Exercise

- 1) With your own paper, or a peer's, read through the introduction section.
- 2) As you read, write down the main points in the introduction in outline form, using short phrases or sentences to describe what you see happening. The outline need not be complex.
- 3) After creating your outline, read through it to see if each of the moves in the CARS model is covered. Pay particular attention to whether the paper's author:
 - a) Mentions how the paper fits into previous research,
 - b) Lists the paper's main findings, and
 - c) Outlines the structure of the paper.

About Literature Reviews

The literature review, whether embedded in an introduction or standing as an independent section, is often one of the most difficult sections to compose in academic writing. A *literature review* requires the writer to perform extensive research on published work in one's field in order to explain how one's

own work fits into the larger conversation regarding a particular topic. This task requires the writer to spend time reading, managing, and conveying information; the complexity of literature reviews can make this section one of the most challenging parts of writing about one's research. This handout will provide some strategies for revising literature reviews.

Organizing Literature Reviews

Because literature reviews convey so much information in a condensed space, it is crucial to organize your review in a way that helps readers make sense of the studies you are reporting on. Two common approaches to literature reviews are *chronological*—ordering studies from oldest to most recent—and *topical*—grouping studies by subject or theme. Along with deliberately choosing an overarching structure that fits the writer's topic, the writer should assist readers by using headings, incorporating brief summaries throughout the review, and using language that explicitly names the scope of particular studies within the field of inquiry, the studies under review, and the domain of the writer's own research. When revising your own literature review, or a peer's, it may be helpful to ask yourself the some of the following questions:

Questions for Revision

- 1) Is the literature review organized chronologically or by topic? Is the writer clear about which approach is being used in the review?
- 2) Does the writer use headings or paragraph breaks to show distinctions in the groups of studies under consideration?
- 3) Does the writer explain why certain groups of studies (or individual studies) are being reviewed by drawing a clear connection to his or her topic?
- 4) Does the writer make clear which of the studies described are most important?
- 5) Does the writer cover all important areas of research related to his or her topic?
- 6) Does the writer use transitions and summaries to move from one study or set of studies to the next?
- 7) By the end of the literature review, is it clear why the current research is necessary?

Showing the Gaps

The primary purpose of the literature review is to demonstrate why the author's study is necessary. Depending on the writer's field, it may or may not be clear that research on a particular topic is necessary for advancing knowledge. As the writer composes the literature review, he or she must construct an argument of sorts to establish the necessity of his or her research. Therefore, one of the key tasks for writers is to establish where gaps in current research lie. The writer must show what has been overlooked, understudied, or misjudged by previous studies in order to create space for the new research within an area of academic or scientific inquiry.

Questions for Revision

- 1) Does the review mention flaws, gaps, or shortcomings of specific studies or groups of studies?
- 2) Does the author point out areas that have not yet been researched or have not yet been researched sufficiently?
- 3) Does the review demonstrate a change over time or recent developments that make the author's research relevant now?
- 4) Does the author discuss research methods used to study this topic and/or related topics?
- 5) Does the author clearly state why his or her research is necessary?

About Style

When we write, we spend much of our energy on developing our ideas, making sure that we include all necessary information and that our ideas flow together logically. While the content and structure of our papers are crucial for ensuring communication, we also need to spend time developing the style of our writing to increase clarity and understanding. Though each discipline will have its own specifications for its preferred style of writing, several principles of style are widely accepted in academic writing contexts in the U.S.

Subjects

In grammar, a *subject* of a sentence is described as the thing in the sentence doing the action. One key to a clear writing style is to make *open sentences with short concrete subjects* that make it easy for readers to understand who or what is responsible for the action in the sentence. Consider the difference in the following two sentences:

The obtaining of more consistent data was achieved by modifying the process.

More consistent data was obtained by modifying the process.

By rewriting the sentence to use a shorter, more concrete subject, we can shorten the length of our sentences and make our writing easier to understand. Shortening the subjects of our sentences also lets readers get to the verb faster, helping them to see the sentence's action more quickly.

Verbs

In general, it's helpful to *use strong, specific verbs*. Try to stay away from conjugations of the verb "to be" (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been), as well as the verbs "has," "have," and "had". Though it

often feels natural to use these verbs, they don't offer much concrete information about what's happening in a sentence. Consider the following two examples:

The difference in the two studies **is** their methods.

The two studies **employ** different methods.

Again, we can create shorter, more direct sentences by using a strong, concrete verb. Further, the use of a verb like "employ" gives readers more information about the differences between the two studies.

Wordiness

In general, wordiness means to use more words than necessary to convey a thought. Especially in scientific and business writing contexts, concision is considered to be important because it adds clarity while saving readers time. We can avoid wordiness by deleting excess words and condensing our language. Look at the two sets of examples below to see wordy phrases (and their revisions):

The results basically occurred because of the various different approaches that were implemented in an accurate manner.

The results occurred because of the different approaches that were accurately implemented.

The company's response to the problem was unusual in nature.

The company responded unusually to the problem.

Again, avoiding wordiness can shorten the length of writing, making it easier for readers to understand our points.

Questions for Revision

- 1) What do the subjects of the sentences in this paper look like? Are they able to be condensed in any way?
- 2) Is it possible to combine sentences in order to use fewer subjects?
- 3) Are there any places where a pronoun (he, she, it, they) could be used to shorten a subject?
- 4) Are there many forms of "to be" used in this paper (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been)? Are they used heavily or sparingly?
- 5) Are the verbs "has," "have," and "had" used heavily or sparingly?
- 6) Are the verbs located near to their subjects?

- 7) Are excess words or phrases used?
- 8) Are there any redundant words?
- 9) Are there any nominalizations (using verbs as a noun), e.g. "realization" for "realize" or "decision" for "decide"?

About Editing and Proofreading

After drafting and revising to make sure that we've communicated our ideas clearly and effectively, we can take time to make sure that our writing reflects that hard work that we've put into it. At the *editing* and *proofreading* stages of the writing process, we check our work to make sure that it's consistent, clear, and error-free. This handout covers a few basic strategies for editing and proofreading our work.

Analyzing Sentence Structure

Writing can sound repetitive, and even unclear, if we do not vary our sentence structure enough. Typically, you should try to avoid series of very short or very long sentences; instead, try to make your sentences vary in length.

Exercise for Revision

Taking your paper, or a peer's, highlight or underline every other sentence. After doing this for a paragraph, section, or page (whatever you have time for), look at the paper to get a visual sense of sentence length. If many of the sentences appear to be around the same length, try to shorten some or combine others to help vary the length.

Reading Aloud

Reading a piece of writing out loud is an excellent way to check for repetition, find typos, and get a general sense of the flow of your paper. Though reading out loud might feel uncomfortable, it is a strategy that can help you see your paper in a new light, thus helping you to improve it considerably.

Reading Aloud Exercise

Taking your paper, or a peer's, read out loud a paragraph, section, or page (whatever you have time for). When you find typos, errors, or parts that might need to be revised for other reasons, simply make a mark on the page (do not stop to correct it). After you have finished a segment of the paper, go back and make changes to the paper (or call the author's attention to the possible errors that you noted).

Another variation of this exercise is to read the paper backwards. You can read it backwards word by word or sentence by sentence to be able to focus on spelling issues and typos.

Keeping a Checklist

If you know that you tend to have specific issues with your writing, keeping an editing or proofreading checklist is a good way to ensure that you've addressed all these issues before submitting your work for class or publication. A sample checklist might look like this:

- Verb tense
- Comma consistency
- Capitalization

Checklist Exercise

As you read through your paper, or a peer's, look specifically for the issues on the checklist. If commas are known to be a problem, look specifically at all the commas in the paper, checking the usage of each. Or, if you are looking for capitalization issues, ask yourself as you go through each word or sentence: "Is everything that is capitalized in this sentence supposed to be capitalized? Are any words missing capitalization?" Continue like this for each issue individually.

Works Consulted

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