

## ORGANIZING YOUR RESEARCH PAPER: THE INTRODUCTION

### **Definition**

The introduction leads the reader from a general subject area to a particular field of research. It establishes the context and significance of the research being conducted by summarizing current understanding and background information about the topic, stating the purpose of the work in the form of the research problem supported by a hypothesis or a set of questions, briefly explaining the methodological approach used to examine the research problem, highlighting the potential outcomes your study can reveal, and outlining the remaining structure of the paper.

### **IMPORTANCE OF A GOOD INTRODUCTION**

**Think of the introduction as a mental road map that must answer for the reader these four questions:**

- What was I studying?
- Why was this topic important to investigate?
- What did we know about this topic before I did this study?
- How will this study advance new knowledge or new ways of understanding?

According to Reyes, there are three overarching goals of a good introduction: 1) ensure that you summarize prior studies about the topic in a manner that lays a foundation for understanding the research problem; 2) explain how your study specifically addresses gaps in the literature, insufficient consideration of the topic, or other deficiency in the literature; and, 3) note the broader theoretical, empirical, and/or policy contributions and implications of your research.

**A well-written introduction is important because, quite simply, you never get a second chance to make a good first impression.** The opening paragraphs of your paper will provide your readers with their initial impressions about the logic of your argument, your writing style, the overall quality of your research, and, ultimately, the validity of your findings and conclusions. A vague, disorganized, or error-filled introduction will create a negative impression, whereas, a concise, engaging, and well-written introduction will lead your readers to think highly of your analytical skills, your writing style, and your research approach.

## **STRUCTURE AND WRITING STYLE**

### **I. Structure and Approach**

**The introduction is the broad beginning of the paper that answers three important questions for the reader:**

1. What is this?
2. Why should I read it?
3. What do you want me to think about / consider doing / react to?

Think of the structure of the introduction as an inverted triangle of information. Organize the information so as to present the more general aspects of the topic early in the introduction, then narrow your analysis to more specific topical information that provides context, finally arriving at your research problem and the rationale for studying it and, whenever possible, a description of the potential outcomes your study can reveal.

**These are general phases associated with writing an introduction:**

1. Establish an area to research by:
  - Highlighting the importance of the topic, and/or

- Making general statements about the topic, and/or
- Presenting an overview on current research on the subject.

2. Identify a research niche by:

- Opposing an existing assumption, and/or
- Revealing a gap in existing research, and/or
- Formulating a research question or problem, and/or
- Continuing a disciplinary tradition.

3. Place your research within the research niche by:

- Stating the intent of your study,
- Outlining the key characteristics of your study,
- Describing important results, and
- Giving a brief overview of the structure of the paper.

**NOTE:** Even though the introduction is the first main section of a research paper, it is often useful to finish the introduction late in the writing process because the structure of the paper, the reporting and analysis of results, and the conclusion will have been completed. Reviewing and, if necessary, rewriting the introduction ensures that it correctly matches the overall structure of your final paper.

## **II. Delimitations of the Study**

**Delimitations refer to those characteristics that limit the scope and define the conceptual boundaries of your research.** This is determined by the conscious exclusionary and inclusionary decisions you

make about how to investigate the research problem. In other words, not only should you tell the reader what it is you are studying and why, but you must also acknowledge why you rejected alternative approaches that could have been used to examine the topic.

Obviously, the first limiting step was the choice of research problem itself. However, implicit are other, related problems that could have been chosen but were rejected. These should be noted in the conclusion of your introduction. For example, a delimiting statement could read, "Although many factors can be understood to impact the likelihood young people will vote, this study will focus only on socioeconomic factors related to the need to work full-time while in school." The point is not to document every possible delimiting factor, but to highlight why obvious issues related to the research problem were not addressed.

**Examples of delimitating choices would be:**

- The key aims and objectives of your study,
- The research questions that you address,
- The variables of interest [i.e., the various factors and features of the phenomenon being studied],
- The method(s) of investigation,
- The time period your study covers, and
- Any relevant alternative theoretical frameworks that could have been adopted.

Review each of these decisions. Not only do you clearly establish what you intend to accomplish in your research, but you should also include a declaration of what the study does not intend to cover. In the latter case, your exclusionary decisions should be based upon criteria understood as, "not interesting"; "not directly relevant"; "too problematic because..."; "not feasible," and the like. Make this reasoning explicit!

**NOTE:** Delimitations refer to the initial choices made about the broader, overall design of your study and should not be confused with documenting the limitations of your study discovered after the research has been completed.

**ANOTHER NOTE:** Do not view delimitating statements as admitting to an inherent failing or shortcoming in your research. They are an accepted element of academic writing intended to keep the reader focused on the research problem by explicitly defining the conceptual boundaries and scope of your study. It addresses any critical questions in the reader's mind of, "Why the hell didn't the author examine this?"

### III. The Narrative Flow

**Issues to keep in mind that will help the narrative flow in your introduction:**

- **Your introduction should clearly identify the subject area of interest.** A simple strategy to follow is to use key words from your title in the first few sentences of the introduction. This will help focus the introduction on the topic at the appropriate level and ensures that you get to the subject matter quickly without losing focus, or discussing information that is too general.
- **Establish context by providing a brief and balanced review of the pertinent published literature that is available on the subject.** The key is to summarize for the reader what is known about the specific research problem before you did your analysis. This part of your introduction should not represent a comprehensive literature review. It consists of a general review of the important, foundational research literature [with citations] that lays a foundation for understanding key elements of the research problem. See the drop-down menu under this tab for "[Background Information](#)" regarding types of contexts.
- **Clearly state the hypothesis that you investigated.** When you are first learning to write in this format it is okay, and actually

preferable, to use a past statement like, "The purpose of this study was to..." or "We investigated three possible mechanisms to explain the...."

- **Why did you choose this kind of research study or design?** Provide a clear statement of the rationale for your approach to the problem studied. This will usually follow your statement of purpose in the last paragraph of the introduction.

#### **IV. Engaging the Reader**

**The overarching goal of your introduction is to make your readers want to read your paper.** The introduction should grab your reader's attention. Strategies for doing this can be to:

1. Open with a compelling story,
2. Include a strong quotation or a vivid, perhaps unexpected anecdote,
3. Pose a provocative or thought-provoking question,
4. Describe a puzzling scenario or incongruity, or
5. Cite a stirring example or case study that illustrates why the research problem is important.

**NOTE:** Choose only one strategy for engaging your readers; avoid giving an impression that your paper is more flash than substance.

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