

Handout: Tips on writing the Introduction

Introduction

The introduction contains key background information that enables the reader to clearly place the current work in the context of what is already known. It highlights specifics about the problem and identifies the information that is not known or that may simply not be available (i.e. not yet published or not clear). It progressively zooms in to finally state the need for the study and spells out its objectives.

One way to zoom in is to start the first paragraph with a review of the background. Decide if you need a global perspective, or a regional perspective, or perhaps, just the national (country) perspective. Then zoom in on how the problem presented itself in that context. Continue to zoom in to establish the significance of the current work: Why was there a need to conduct the study? Then, having introduced the pertinent literature and demonstrated the need for the current study, clearly state the research objectives.

Some Tips on Writing the Introduction

- Move from general to specific: problem in real world/research literature ⇒ your research.
- Engage your reader: answer the questions, "What did you do?" "Why is it important?"
- Make clear the links between problem and solution, question asked and research design, prior research and your study.
- Be selective, not exhaustive, in choosing studies to cite and amount of detail to include. In general, the more relevant an article is to your study, the more space it deserves and the later in the Introduction it appears.
- Document all facts with references.

What to avoid when writing the Introduction

- Avoid stating that Disease X is important. Instead state WHY it is important and give updated statistics, i.e., burden of disease.
- Avoid stating that Disease X is a major public health problem. Instead, write: Disease X is the Xth leading cause of mortality in the world, or WHO estimated that in 2016, globally, there were XX cases of Disease X causing XX deaths.
- Don't justify the study on the basis that it was never done before.
- Don't limit the focus to the burden of disease. If the study includes risk factors, then include what is known and not known on risk factors globally, regionally and locally.

Refer to 'A Guide to Quantitative Scientific Writing' for common errors related to the Introduction section:

- A1 Insufficient knowledge of the literature
- A2 Not referencing statements
- A3 Weak citations
- A8 Characterizing an observation as 'the first'
- B12 An insufficiently focused Introduction
- B16 Presenting rationale in the last sentence of the Introduction