

Introductions

It is but a short step from structured abstracts to structured texts. In the following chapters we shall see how each part of the structure of a scientific article (the introduction, method, results, discussion and conclusion) can indeed be subdivided into finer structures.

Swales and Feak (2004) describe what they characterise as ‘moves’ in the various sections of academic articles. Basically, a ‘move’ is a stage in the argument that all writers go through. The ‘moves’ for the introduction are typically as follows (p. 244):

- *Move 1:* The authors establish a research territory:
 - (a) by showing that the general research area is important, central, interesting, problematic or relevant in some way (optional);
 - (b) by introducing and reviewing items of previous research in the area (obligatory).
- *Move 2:* They then establish a ‘niche’ by indicating a weakness in the account so far:
 - (a) by indicating a gap in the previous research, raising a question about it or extending previous knowledge in some way (obligatory).
- *Move 3:* They then occupy the niche by saying they are going to put this right:
 - (a) by outlining the purposes or stating the nature of the present research (obligatory);
 - (b) by listing research questions or hypotheses to be tested (optional);
 - (c) by announcing the principal findings (optional).

Swales and Feak argue that most introductions to academic articles follow this basic structure. Lewin *et al.* (2001) offer a similar, but more detailed, analysis that readers might also find useful.

AN EXAMPLE

While writing this section of *Academic Writing and Publishing*, I coincidentally received a copy of a paper by Slatcher and Pennebaker (2006). This paper was about the effects of one of the partners of a dating couple writing either neutral or strongly emotional letters to the other one about their relationship. The paper concluded that the participants who wrote the emotional letters were significantly more likely to be dating their romantic partners three months later than were the writers of the neutral letters. Be that as it may, I was intrigued to observe that the introduction to this paper followed almost exactly the generic structure described by Swales and Feak.

Slatcher and Pennebaker's introduction contains five paragraphs. Here are some examples of how the moves appear:

Move 1: Establishing a research territory

The paper starts (paragraphs 1 and 2) with describing the background and setting the scene. Key phrases are: 'Researchers are now . . .', 'Preliminary findings suggest . . .', 'There are a number of ways in which one could measure the effects of expressive writing . . .'.

Move 2: Establishing a niche

The paper continues (in paragraphs 3 and 4) with the following key phrases: 'Although previous studies have addressed . . . none have . . .', 'One potential mediator is . . .', 'There are various ways to measure . . .', 'The use of emotional words may be particularly relevant . . .', 'One way is to analyse the texts used in instant messaging . . .'.

Move 3: Occupying the niche

The introduction concludes (in paragraph 5) with the following key phrases: 'In the present study we sought to investigate the social effects of expressive writing . . .', 'Three predictions were tested. First . . .'.

Slatcher and Pennebaker thus follow Swales and Feak's analysis almost line by line. It is also worth noting, in passing, that the literature review in this paper is quite short, and there are only nine references. Day and Gastel (2006) comment that, 'Introductions should supply sufficient information to allow the reader to understand and evaluate the results of the present study without (them) needing to refer to previous publications on the topic' (pp. 57–8).

Of course many papers are written with more detailed substructures. Three types of structure typical in introductions are:

- 1 The one listed above – where the authors establish their niche by indicating limitations or omissions in the previous research.
- 2 One where two (or more) different areas of research are reviewed – and the authors establish their niche by bringing them together.
- 3 One where some previous research has provided support for a particular finding or theory, and some has not – and the authors establish their niche by seeking to resolve and explain this.

Further, there are disciplinary variations: Haggan (1998), for example, examined the introductions for twenty-six articles in the sciences, twenty-six in linguistics and twenty-six in the arts. She found that the introductions in the science papers were less likely to contain a plan for the paper than were the introductions in linguistics, and that they lay midway in their use of impersonal language between introductions in the arts (the least personal) and introductions in linguistics (the most personal). Introductions in the sciences were more personal, however, when there was more than one author.

Such disciplinary formulaic introductions enhance the clarity of a paper and ensure that the readers' expectations about the format and the purpose of an introduction are maintained. Such devices keep the reader reading.

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- Lewin, B., Fine, J. & Young, L. (2001). *Expository discourse: A genre-based approach to social science research texts*. London: Continuum.
- Slatcher, R. B. & Pennebaker, J. W. (2006). How do I love thee? Let me count the words. *Psychological Science*, 17(8), 660–4.
- Swales, J. M. & Feak, C. B. (2004). *Academic writing for graduate students* (2nd edn). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

FURTHER READING

- Kendall, P. C., Silk, J. S. & Chu, B. C. (2000). Introducing your research report: Writing the introduction. In R. J. Sternberg (Ed.), *Guide to publishing in psychology journals* (pp. 41–57). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

