

# Introductions for Empirical Research Papers

an overview

For a general overview of empirical papers, [click on this UWC link](#). For an annotated example of an empirical introduction and literature review, [click here](#). The UWC's [literature review resources](#) may also be useful.

## What is the purpose of the introduction to an empirical research paper?

Like introductions to most types of academic writing, introductions to empirical research papers should grab readers' attention and give them a sense of what is to come. Introductions to empirical research articles also:

- *Justify the importance and relevance of the present study.* What is the practical significance of the research topic? What is at stake? Who is affected? What real-world problems or needs might the study address?
- *Position the present study within a broader scholarly conversation.* What is the scholarly significance of the research question? What gap in knowledge will it fill? What existing knowledge does it build on or challenge?
- *Establish a framework for evaluating the results of the study.* Which existing theories, methods, approaches, and project designs provided the foundation for the study's design decisions? Which might lend validity to the results or serve as a basis for comparison?

In essence, the introduction offers the story of how and why the research project came to be.

## Typical structure of an introduction to an empirical research paper:

Empirical research paper introductions are a type of literature review—and like all literature reviews, they follow a broad-to-narrow structure. They tend to be narrowly focused and relatively short (5-10 paragraphs), though there are variations among disciplines. Most employ the following organization:

- *Introduction to the topic* (1 paragraph). Begin by describing the broader problem or need to which the study is responding. Many introductions offer statistical evidence to demonstrate the scope or significance of the problem. Some point to current events, practices or guidelines within a field, or commonly held beliefs about a topic to demonstrate its relevance.
- *Relevant background and/or definitions* (1-2 paragraphs). When appropriate, provide historical, social, political, theoretical, or field-specific context and information about the research topic. For example, if there is limited research on the topic, it may make sense to explain why. It may also be useful to offer extended definitions of key terms or constructs.
- *Review of the literature* (2+ paragraphs). Describe the state of knowledge on the research topic, moving from what is known to what has yet to be discovered. You won't have time for a comprehensive review, so discuss key themes in the literature and focus on recent studies that have laid the foundation for the present study. Highlight specific findings and methods only when they are relevant to the present study's design decisions. Discuss limitations, shortcomings, and inconsistencies within and among previous studies only if the present study attempts to address them. End by highlighting the gap in knowledge that the present study will fill.
- *Overview of the present study* (1 paragraph). Introduce the present study's purpose, research question(s), and/or hypothesis, and briefly describing its methods.

## Tips and pitfalls to avoid:

- Unlike many forms of academic writing, introductions to empirical research papers do not lead with the paper's main ideas, purpose, or thesis. In fact, "the present study" typically isn't mentioned until the final paragraph of the introduction. All preceding paragraphs lay the groundwork for the research question.
- It is especially important for introductions to be accessible to an educated lay audience. Social psychologist Daryl Bem, in his [instructions](#) for writing journal articles, suggests that one way to do this is to use "examples to illustrate theoretical points or to introduce unfamiliar conceptual or technical terms. The more abstract the material, the more important such examples become."
- Make sure to review examples of introductions from sample papers or journal articles in your discipline.