

Structural Analysis of Higher Education Institutions' Research Introductions

SALVADOR C. DELA PEÑA III
ORCID No. 0000-0002-1367-697X
salvadordelapena3@gmail.com
Liceo de Cagayan University
Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines

ABSTRACT

In writing a research article, the introduction seems to be the hardest part to write. In fact, many research articles are found to have insufficient introduction, lacking some important elements of a quality introduction. Hence, this study was conducted to assess through content analysis the quality of the introduction of published articles authored by researchers in Mindanao. Fifty samples were analyzed based on the widely accepted standards for writing the introduction. Descriptive statistics was used in the analysis of the data. Findings reveal that most of the introduction samples had missing elements of a quality introduction. The most missed out element was a statement establishing a gap to indicate academic importance, followed by a statement of the practical importance of the study and general statement of the problem of the study. As to the structure of the introduction, most of the samples followed the standard structure, proceeding from general to specific statements. The findings imply that many published research articles by researchers in Mindanao have introductions that do not meet the standards for writing quality introduction, hence the need to reorient researchers to the basics of writing a good introduction.

Keywords – Research writing, introduction, writing research introduction, elements of the introduction, content analysis, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Effective writing of a research article (RA) is essential for journal publication. Hence, any writer must pay serious attention to the writing of each section of a research article. One of the reasons identified by Summers (2001) for the rejection of a submitted paper for publication is that the author's writing style is disorganized, and the article is not structured properly. A research article may be well conceptualized and properly designed, but if it is not well written, not in conformity to the standard structuring for journal publication, such research article may either be rejected outright or published pending revisions, which a researcher may find tedious and time consuming. Thus, researchers who aspire to have their work published should familiarize themselves with the writing requirements of leading international journals.

While the research article format may vary from journal to journal, there are sections common to all. These sections are the title, abstract, introduction, methods, results, and discussion. Of these sections, the introduction is considered in this study for it is a part of the article that many researchers find the most difficult to write (Feldman, 2004), yet of particular importance for it is a part of the article that the reading audience may probably read first. It is the introduction that sells the article to the readers (Summers, 2001) and gives the readers a glimpse of what is to come (Perry et al., 2003); hence, the drafting of the introduction must be carefully done so as to interest the readers and engage them to read.

In the writing of the introduction, five main elements are identified by applied linguistics researchers (Cargill & O'Connor, 2013). As earlier stated, though there are variations of article structuring across different disciplines, these five stages are broad enough to be applicable in most contexts. Hence, this study anchors its analysis of the introduction samples on the five-element pattern (Cargill & O'Connor, 2013) as follows: (1) general statements about the field of research to provide the readers with a setting or context for the problem under investigation and to claim its importance; (2) more specific statements about the aspects of the problem already studied by other researchers, laying a foundation of already known information; (3) statements indicating the need for more investigation, creating a gap or research niche for the present study to fill; (4) statements giving the purpose or objectives of the present study; and (5) optional statements that give a positive value or practical significance of the present study. The succeeding discussions elaborate these five elements.

Element 1 of the introduction gives the broad theme or topic of the study, making the readers understand exactly what the study is all about. The writing of this stage can be achieved by briefly defining the core constructs of the study in non-technical terms and by providing examples that situate these constructs.

Element 2 of the introduction informs the readers of what has already been known or what has already been done about the topic under investigation. That is, a summary and synthesis of available literature is provided. Summers (2001) suggested that the literature should be limited to the most recent studies that are directly relevant to the present research.

Element 3 of the introduction presents the gap that the study seeks to fill or address. It can be the inconsistencies in the findings, controversies in the research design or method, or inadequacy of evidence that accentuate the gap. The gap is usually highlighted by using signal words (e.g. however, remains a major challenge, rarely, not well understood, and presently unclear). By explicitly stating the gap in literature, the writer leads the readers to the contribution of the present study to the body of knowledge.

Element 4 of the introduction presents the main problem of the present study. This stage should clearly indicate the following elements: (1) the research problem or question, (2) the specific research objectives, (3) the context, and (4) the units of analysis of the study (Kotze, 2007). Generally, the last two elements are already embedded in the first element.

Element 5 of the introduction is optional. In this stage, the writer may include statements that indicate the practical importance of the study aside from its academic importance, which is already established in the Stage 3. Practical importance is accentuated by referring to management problem (Kotze, 2007) that the study hopes to address – that is, how the findings of the study relate significantly to practice in a particular discipline.

Excluding the last stage since it is optional, the identified elements indicate the writing structure of the introduction, that of a funnel. The top part of a funnel has a broad opening while its bottom part has a very narrow opening. Likewise, the writing of the introduction proceeds from broad statements (Stage 1) to very specific statements (Stage 4). As prescribed by Cargill and O'Connor (2013), "authors should seek to move their readers smoothly from broad or general statements towards one sub-area of the field, and then to the authors' own particular topic."

The preceding discussions form the conceptual basis of this study and the framework upon which the analyses proceeded. Specifically, this study analyzed

the content and structure of the introductions of published research articles authored by faculty researchers of higher education institutions in Mindanao. The significance of this study primarily lies in its intention to advance quality writing of a research article for journal publication.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study used the mixed methods of research (quantitative and qualitative). The quantitative part involved the frequency of occurrence of the elements of introduction, while the qualitative part involved the analysis of the introduction samples.

Analyzed were introduction samples extracted from articles published in two multi-disciplinary refereed journals external to the authors' respective schools. The selection of articles was delimited to social sciences articles authored by faculty researchers in Mindanao published within the past three years. A total of 50 articles in social sciences authored by faculty researchers from Mindanao were published. The introduction section of each of the 50 articles was extracted for analysis.

The analysis of the introduction samples was limited to the content. Used as criteria for the analysis were the elements generally found in the introduction section of journal articles across disciplines. These elements are discussed earlier in the introduction section of this paper. The samples were also analyzed for its structure or flow. As advanced by experts in research writing cited in the introduction of this paper, the introduction should flow from general to specific. The writing style of the authors was not considered in the analysis of the introduction.

The analysis of introduction samples involved the following steps: 1) identifying parts of each analyzed introduction according to their contextual functions, 2) tabulating the identified parts according to the five-stage pattern, 3) determining the flow of the identified parts, and 4) juxtaposing the analyzed introduction's pattern and the anchored five-stage pattern of this study. The analysis of the data was based on descriptive statistics such as frequency count and percentage.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first element an introduction should have is a general statement about the topic under investigation. This element is best accentuated by telling the

readers about the existing phenomenon in a broad perspective. Among the fifty introduction samples, 96% (48) or almost all samples had statements that give the readers a general view of the topic under investigation. Further analysis of the samples indicates that this element was achieved by explaining in brief the core constructs of the study and by giving existing facts (statistics and conditions) about the topic under investigation. On the other hand, only 4% (2) had no general statements concerning the topic. These samples directly introduced the topic specifically.

The second element is specific statements accentuated by a review of literature, telling the readers of what has been done and known about the topic under investigation. This element directly links the past studies to the present study. The literature, however, is summarized and synthesized. Findings of this study reveal that 92% (46) or almost all introduction samples had a review of literature to point out concepts and findings of previous studies that had a bearing on the topic under investigation. However, there were articles which introduction did not have a review of literature at all, accounting to 8% (4) of the samples.

Table 1. Statistics on the occurrence of the elements of introduction among the samples

Elements	Frequency of Samples			
	With		Without	
	N=50	%	N=50	%
General Statements	48	96	2	4
Literature Review	46	92	4	8
Gap	16	32	34	68
Problem	33	66	17	34
Practical Importance	30	60	20	40

Table 2. Number of citations in the introduction samples

No. of Citations	Frequency	Percentage
1-5	33	66
6-10	7	14
11 above	5	10
0	5	10

Further analysis of the samples indicates that most of the articles had concepts surveyed the most while related studies surveyed the least. Also revealed in the analysis was the very limited number of literatures cited. Majority of the samples

had only between 1-5 citations (68%, 34). Only very few had 6-10 (14%, 7) and above 10 (10%, 5) citations. Four (8%) of the samples had none.

The third element is the identification of the gap that motivates the conduct of the study. This gap explicitly informs the readers of the academic importance of the study or its contribution to the body of knowledge. The gap, as discussed in the introduction, can be accentuated by pointing out inconsistencies, or controversies in the academic literature or by referring to the lack of literature that warrants the conduct of the study. As revealed in this study, however, majority of the samples (68%, 34) failed to point out any gap in the existing literatures. Only 32% (16) of the samples had the gap made explicit. As earlier found, majority of the samples had very limited number of surveyed literatures, more so for studies, which clearly explains the failure of many researchers to identify any existing gap.

The fourth element is the introduction of the research problem of a researcher. While some journals have the statement of the problem as a separate section, the problem has to be introduced generally earlier on, that is, in the introduction section of the article. All the samples were taken from journals which have the statement of the problem as a separate section. Nonetheless, majority of the samples (66%, 33) had briefly introduced what the study intended to do. The rest of the samples (34%, 17) did not have a sentence or so that would inform the readers of the objective at the outset.

The fifth element, which is optional, is a statement of the practical importance of the study as opposed to the academic importance of the study, which is the third element. Among the samples of introduction, 60% (30) had stated the study's practical importance, while 40% (20) had not. While optional, this element helps to establish the need to conduct the study.

Considering the presence of all elements in the individual samples of introduction, this study reveals that only 6 out of 50 or 12% of the total samples had all the elements while most of the introduction samples (88%, 8) had missing elements. Of the five elements, the most missed out was the third element (gap, 68%), followed by the fifth element (statement of importance, 40%) and the fourth element (statement of the problem, 34%). These findings indicate that most of the published articles written by faculty researchers in Mindanao lack substance considering the absence of the important elements of introduction. It can then be inferred that there remains a good number of researchers who lack knowledge on the basics of writing quality introduction. Moreover, the publication of these articles with introduction having insufficient substance implies the journals' lack of clear guidelines as to the writing of the different

sections of the article, particularly the introduction section. To guide researchers in the writing of their articles, journals should specifically state in their editorial policy the elements that must be covered in the writing of the different sections of the article, especially that of the introduction.

Table 3. Statistics on the structure of introduction samples

Structure	Frequency	Percentage
G-S	38	76
G-S-G	5	10
G-S-G-S	5	10
S	1	2
G	1	2

Legend: G = General S = Specific

Also analyzed in this study was the structure or flow of the introduction, which standard structure is that of a shape of a funnel – proceeding from general to specific. As found out in this study, most of the samples (76%, 38) proceeded from general (G) to specific (S) while only very few shifted from G to S and then back to G (10%, 10) or from G to S to G and then to S (10%, 10). One each, however, had only general statements (G) and specific statements (S).

In all cases, the introduction should be written in such a manner that the readers are prepared to the main problem of the study. Readers should not be plunged into the problem immediately. Instead, they should first be made to understand of the core constructs of the study and what motivates the study. As Bem (2003) suggested, a writer should not directly introduce the problem to the unprepared reader, but instead should take time to lead the reader to the formal statement of the problem step by step, that is, proceeding from general to specific statements.

CONCLUSION

Findings of this study indicate that most of the published articles had introductions with missing elements of a quality introduction - the gap being missed the most - and with very limited review of literature of only between 1 to 5 citations and others having none at all. Based on the prescribed elements for a quality introduction of a research article for publication, the sampled articles lacked the substance required of a quality introduction. To write a substantial

introduction, any researcher should make certain that all the basic elements of a quality introduction are embedded in his or her introduction writing. Therefore, it is recommended that in any research writing seminar, the writing of introductions should not be overemphasized nor underemphasized considering its importance in giving the readers an enticing glimpse of what a paper holds for them. Any writer, for that matter, should be taught how to write an introduction that effectively “sells.” It is also recommended that research journals include in its editorial policy/note to the contributor section a guideline the specifically outlines the different elements that should be found in a particular section of an article, particularly that of the introduction. Such guideline will ensure the writing of a quality introduction of a research article.

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