

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

HOW TO WRITE YOUR INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW FOR YOUR
DISSERTATION



HOW TO WRITE THE INTRODUCTION SECTION IN PSYCHOLOGY:

- OVERVIEW
- The APA Style manual states that when reporting an empirical investigation the purpose of the introduction is to "[develop] ... the problem under investigation and [state] ... the purpose of the investigation" (p.7 5th Edition).
- When thinking about the introduction, try applying 'The Justification Formula'.
- $\text{Justification} = \text{Gap} * \text{Importance} * \text{Method}$
- Put simply, research is justified by a gap in the literature, where it is important that the gap be filled, and the proposed method goes some way to closing that gap. This formula links to the aims of the introduction to:

THE JUSTIFICATION FORMULAR

- Introduce the research context;
- Identify a gap in existing knowledge;
- State why resolving the gap is important;
- Set out how the proposed study helps to close the gap.

THE GAP

- Disagreement in the literature is one way to identify a gap. Some common types of gaps include:
- Disagreement between a theory and empirical findings
- Disagreement between two theories, models, schools of thoughts, or authors
- Methodological flaws in existing empirical research
- The absence of research on a particular topic (e.g., the first to apply a useful method to a topic)
- Inadequate amount of empirical research on a topic
- Describing a gap often requires you to identify what the literature "believes". There are several reasons why this can be challenging. First, the articles that make up the literature may express different views. Second, articles may not directly comment on your issue.

THE GAP

- Several strategies for dealing with this challenge exist. First, the writing in recent articles represents important evidence of the position of the literature on a topic. If researchers have expressed differing views, these need to be characterised. When characterising a gap based on a beliefs of the literature, even if some researchers agree with your position, the presence of many researchers who don't, does create a form of gap.
- In other situations you may wish to define a gap based on an absence of research on a topic. The usual strategies of searching the literature can help to reassure you that such research does not exist. Checking reviews and the references of important recent articles in the area is a further check. Depending on the topic, it may be appropriate to state that "to the best of my knowledge, no research has looked at this".

IMPORTANCE

- Beyond showing that there is a gap in current knowledge, it is useful to show why filling the gap is important. Importance can be justified in many ways.
- First, it can be justified in terms of the societal benefits. For example, if you are identifying the first steps in developing a clinical intervention or an educational program for example, the eventual societal benefits are clear.
- If the research is more pure, other arguments may be used: the process or topic itself may form the basis of applied research. For example, better understanding of cognitive processes is relevant to a wide range human endeavours from education to human factors and more.
- **It is important to note that your research is the very first step – you are not going to change the world!!!**

IMPORTANCE

- The importance of a topic can be justified by showing how many people in the discipline are concerned with it. This raises the question of why the discipline is concerned with the topic. Thus, importance can be justified by direct statements about applied benefits or by more general benefits for knowledge.
- For example, recognising the importance of developing better measures of emotional intelligence is useful, but this only creates **potential** importance. For the investigation to actually be important, it also needs to adopt a plan which offers a reasonable opportunity of actually improving measurement of emotional intelligence. **This could be linked to your suggestions for further research in your discussion.**

IMPORTANCE

- Some specific strategies for justifying importance include:
- Show that influential authors in the discipline have felt the topic was important.
- Show that many authors in the discipline have studied the topic. This can be supplemented with a basic bibliometric count of the number of articles on the topic in recent years.
- Present **statistics** that show something about the scale of the problem: e.g., numbers of people affected or the amount of money spent each year on the issue.

METHOD/AIM

- The introduction needs to propose a **method/aim** for closing the gap. The proposed method should be appropriate for the gap. "Method" in the context of the introduction refers to your **aim**, which conveys the relevance of your proposed study. E.g:
- PROBLEM: no research on the topic = AIM: empirical research is required.
- PROBLEM: Existing research has methodological problems = AIM: Research is required to overcome these problems.
- PROBLEM: much research, but inconsistent finding = AIM: Clarification required.
- PROBLEM: poor or conflicting theories = AIM: empirical study to test competing theory.

-
- The APA Style Manual states that the introduction should:
 - (1) introduce the problem,
 - (2) develop the background, and
 - (3) state the purpose and rationale.
 - Kendall, Silk and Chu (2000) state similarly that an introduction is made up of three elements: (1) Opening, (2) Literature Review, and (3) Transition to Your Study. We will use this framework to organise points about each of these elements.

INTRODUCTION (OPENING)

- The introduction sets out: the research question; the importance of research question; the gap in current understanding; and the aims of the research.
- The opening paragraph in particular typically aims to generate interest, using non-technical language. Kendall, Silk and Chu (2000) mention six specific strategies for the opening paragraph: (1) rhetorical questions, (2) everyday experience, (3) analogy/metaphor, (4) striking statistic/fact, (5) historical fact, (6) lack of previous research.
- The introduction often includes citations to influential researchers and schools of thoughts. It also sometimes throws in competing empirical findings and theoretical perspectives.
- There is no specific length to your introduction, however a paragraph for each of your main concepts is a common strategy to use. While format varies, the introduction section typically moves from showing why the research is important, to situating the research in context, and then to setting an outline of what is to follow.

LITERATURE REVIEW

- The literature review typically involves a selective historical presentation of the relevant literature. It generally transitions from general to specific issues. It links the historical context to the current research. It summarises what is known and not known and what is agreed and not agreed.
- **Article selection:**
- When the literature is huge, it is a challenge to decide which studies to include. Seminal authors and studies often provide a good starting point. The first study to post a question, develop a methodology, develop a theory, or present empirical data on a question can be a good starting point for the literature review.

LITERATURE REVIEW

- **Detailed discussion of a past study:**
- Some literature reviews discuss a small number of previous studies in depth. This is a useful strategy when the past studies represent current practice or knowledge on a topic. The identification of flaws or gaps in these studies can function as a launching pad for your study.
- A common sequence for detailed discussion is as follows:
- Justify detailed discussion of specific study: Show that the study is influential and relevant to your study.
- Describe Specific Study: Set out aim, method, results, and conclusions in sufficient detail to introduce your critique.
- Critique: Present critique, potentially in separate paragraphs,
- Draw implications: Summarise what the preceding discussion means for the present research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

- **Critical Analysis**
- A literature review should represent a critical reading. In particular when justifying a gap in the literature, a critical perspective may be required to highlight inadequacies of previous research. This should be focused so that it leads naturally to a justification for your study. As always it is important to be respectful of past authors when critiquing the literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

- **Critical Evaluation:**
- Good literature reviews base claims on empirical research. Research is critically evaluated and issues such as the following are discussed: level of analysis; confounding variables; correlation or causation; mediation and moderation; generalisability; limitations of sample size; issues of measurement; implications of design (correlational, experimental); effect size and practical significance; quantitative and qualitative methods; and so on. This examination of the theoretical literature is then integrated into the conclusions reached.

LITERATURE REVIEW

- **Linking Paragraphs**

- If the literature review is long, linking paragraphs or sentences are often included. These are typically presented at the end of sections and serve to show where the line of argument is going and what will come next. Headings and the conventions of empirical reports can help to reduce the need for such linking paragraphs. Linking paragraphs typically involve one or more of the following elements: (a) a summary of the preceding section; (b) a link between the preceding section and the aims of the study; and (c) a link to the next section.

LITERATURE REVIEW - TIPS

- Good literature reviews provide an overview of the literature relevant to the topic. For most topics in psychology, there are hundred, or even thousands, of articles on the topic. Words are limited. Good literature reviews manage this issue.
- Good literature reviews weight conclusions by the quality of the evidence for alternative arguments.
- Poorer literature reviews present one theory after the next without integration.
- They often include text like: “despite all the research, it can not be said whether job satisfaction is caused more by situational or dispositional factors. The End...”
- Concluding statements, such as “more research is needed” is typical of poorer literature reviews. They also often tend to jump to conclusions too soon, often declaring a particular idea (e.g., a strong culture leads to high performance) as definitively established when debate existed. Slightly better literature reviews say things like: “This model has not been particularly supported (Smith, 2006)”.

LITERATURE REVIEW - TIPS

- A good literature review provides evidence for why a theory has not been supported. A good literature review is aware of the relationship between empirical observations and theoretical claims.
- Good literature reviews identify issues in the literature. Issues arise when two proposed ideas conflict. For example, does X cause Y or does Y cause X?
- Is expertise learnt or innate? Is this theory useful for practitioners or not? Is job satisfaction influenced more by dispositional or situational factors?
- Good literature reviews accurately and concisely summarise the major competing positions on an issue. They do not rush to conclusion, yet they do strive to reach a conclusion based on the evidence. If more research is needed, the achievements of existing research are acknowledged and concrete recommendations are made. This might be recommendation for greater use of a particular methodology or particular contexts which is then linked to the current aims and rationale.

LITERATURE REVIEW

- **The Current Study/Aim and Rationale**
- This section functions as a transition from the Introduction to the Method. Some common headings for this section include: "The Current Investigation" and "The Present Study". The section is typically fairly brief with one to four paragraphs being common. It typically summarises the study design, links the design with the **aims**, and states and **justifies** the expected outcomes and **rationale**.

AND FINALLY...IN APPROX. 4,000 WORDS:

Introduce key topics, definitions, statistics etc. Set the scene

Identifying the problem

Introduce the specific empirical research pertinent to your study from a historical stance

Explaining the problem

Bring the reader up to date with the specific studies of direct relevance to your study

End with your justification for your aims and rationale

Addressing the problem