How to write an Introduction

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Some readers of research articles may skip the introduction – but referees and editors always read it, and because they decide whether to publish the work, it's essential to get the introduction right. Few readers, beyond linguistics, may know of John Swales, who recently derived a pattern for introductions, that describes what people actually do in published articles (not what they *should* do).

Now, I've always figured that the key to success is success itself, and because these articles were successful (i.e. published), it's good to know what Swales found: a clear, "three move introduction". Academics being what we are, there are lots of small variations in his model, but here is a simplified version:

Move One: Establish the field. As we live and make sense of the world, we develop basic schemas about how events and objects and ideas are related. When we see anything new, we make sense of it by linking it to (and fitting it within) a pattern we know. Linguists have experiments with such text (which must be specially created, so resistant are we of context-free writing). Most people, hearing or reading such a paragraph for the first time, cannot remember the sequence of steps or the flow of information, and most people think that the paragraph itself is incoherent. However, if we know that a certain paragraph concerns doing the laundry, and then *re-read* it, we find the text quite coherent. The coherence comes, not from the text, but from our prior knowledge about how laundry is done. All reading works this way, because all understanding *requires* prior knowledge. Move One, then, is *tell them it's about laundry*. The closer you are to *their* laundry the better.

This may seem obvious, but it isn't. The difference between the writer's laundry and the readers' is particularly problematic for research scientists. We may spend months or years working on a particular project and be accustomed to discussing it only with people who are there beside us. We move into larger venues, and the background information just isn't readily available in our audience. Instead, research papers need to start from something the readers already know.

Move Two: Now place the problem in context. Experienced researchers are always telling younger people that the main thing is to define the problem. This is where a lot of articles go wrong. Defining a problem (or, if you like your glass half full, an opportunity) hinges on the word 'but' or one of its variations (*however, yet, although, nevertheless, on the other hand,* etc.)

These words must be used sparingly in an introduction, because they really act as pointers. For example, consider Karin, a poor unfortunate jobseeker. If the memo summing up her interview says

> *Karin has graduated from a fine university and has excellent recommendations; however, she has no work experience*

we know that she needs to keep looking for work. However, if the memo says

> *Karin has no work experience, but graduated from a fine university and has excellent recommendations*

her search might be over – not because her story changed, but because the needs of the interviewer did. The first situation held up her lack of experience as a problem. The last admits that she lacks experience, but focuses on her degree and references.

Some people think that the phrase that comes last is the key, but it isn't. Its position in relation to the contrastive term (*but, however, although*) is. The general pattern is:

A-but-B (*as both the examples given above are*);

Although A, B *(Although Karin has no work experience, she graduated from a fine university and has excellent recommendations)*
B, and although A, even more B *(Karin graduated from a fine university, and although she has no work experience, has excellent recommendations)*
The '**A**' term is always background information – information the writer expects readers to be taken as given – no debate. The '**B**' term is always the focus of what will follow, the problem that needs to be resolved. Because it is position rather than content that tells readers what the problem is, reversing the '**A**' and '**B**' terms (as in the A-but-B examples) changes the focus (and the problem). Of course, if the '**A**' term is so obvious that it goes without saying, don't say it:

A	BUT	B
~~*The project needs to be efficient.*~~	~~*However,*~~	*The project is inefficient.*
~~*The results should be representative*~~	~~*But*~~	*The results are not representative.*

In published papers, the length of the A term and the B term will vary depending on how much the audience already knows about the problem. If the readers are *all* 'insiders', the writer can just state the A-but-B situation and then move on. The entire problem statement could be a single sentence.
If anyone in the audience is unfamiliar with the problem or unlikely to see it from the writer's perspective, the writer may have to give *details* about A, or B, or both, and the problem statement could stretch over several paragraphs, or even (in a book) over a chapter or two.
We know this pattern subconsciously, and it works in many languages. The trick is to look for and understand the pattern and to take control (by finding both the right **A** term and the right **B** term, and then use A-but-B forms sparingly, so that readers see the same gap that you do. Avoid using it more than twice per introduction).
Most people find it hard to get the B term precisely right at first. Of course, it becomes even harder if you aren't looking for it in the first place!
Move Three: Give a generalization and then a detail about the paper and its contribution. Move three is the most variable Move. For example, in a speculative abstract, before the results are in, it pays to be a little vague, and some introductions leave the third Move out entirely. I use the two-part third Move, (except in speculative abstracts) because it defines the paper's contribution.
When planning the third Move, remember that in complex research papers, dramatic tension does not work. If you like drama, think of the old 1960s detective series 'Colombo'. The crime is *always* shown in the first few minutes. People watch to see *how* Colombo solves the case, not to discover 'who did it'. In a complex paper, a 'Colombo' approach to the third move helps readers see the point of the detail to follow. Move two identifies an issue, and Move three explains what the writer has done about it.
In short, the Moves are:
Move 1: The focus is on what 'is'
Make sure they know you're talking about the laundry! Identify your area, so that the readers' existing knowledge can be used.
Move 2: The focus is on researchers and the work done by others
Make a gap. This is generally a two step move (see below). A handy way to think about it is that in 2a the writer defines a piece of current practice, and in 2b digs a hole in it:
Move 2a: Summarise what is already known, or what has already been done. This makes a place – in the ongoing conversation on your subject – for what you want to say. (Note that while the entire literature review frequently appear as 'move 2a' in experimental articles in physical and biological sciences, this is not always the case, In the social sciences in

particular, this move often raises only a few key sources and a detailed review of the relevant literature appears in the section *after* the introduction.
Move 2b: Show a gap (usually a 'B' term) in what is known, and (if it is not obvious) explain why the gap should be filled. This ensures that readers know what to expect. I
Move 3: The focus is on this particular paper
Now, fill in the hole. It is impossible to dig a clearly defined hole (2b) and fill in (3) at the same time. The 'bottom line' of your findings might be in your Move Three, and something brief about your method might be here, as well.
Move 3a: shift attention to this paper, perhaps by giving its purpose.
Move 3b: say something about why, how (or with what) the gap has been filled.
The same basic pattern appears in review papers, empirical papers, qualitative papers, and so on, although there are individual variations.
Knowing how to build using the three moves is one element of talent in writing. It is also one of the quickest ways to gain insight into the readership (and the editorial bias) of the journal in which you want to publish. Start to study the ways in which this pattern appears in the journal. Is there a *lot* of explanation (broad or multidisciplinary audience) or do the Moves *almost* go without saying (narrow readership in a single sub-area within a discipline). Which 'gaps' do the editors think are important to fill? Once you can begin to answer these questions, you will have a better idea of which part of your work will be most needed by your chosen audience.
Now, take the more readable of the articles on your desk, and mark in the margins where they divide into the Moves. Start with a published paper (not your own); if you cannot find the divisions (but you probably will) scan the offending introduction and send it to me. I'll have a look. Then move on to your supervisor or a colleague (do not send this to me). Then look at your own draft papers, in a new light.