

8 Tips to Help You Write a Linguistics Paper

1. **Who is your audience?** Consider the paper from the reader's or marker's perspective. It may be clear to you, but will it be clear to the reader? Ask yourself, have you demonstrated that you've understood the key concepts? Or will the reader/marker have to guess whether you've understood and fill in the blanks?
2. **Choose relevant examples/facts.** Why are you including the examples/facts that you choose? Do they best exemplify the point you are trying to make, or are you just including them because they're in a convenient source and you don't want to take the time to look up better examples in other sources? Put time into selecting your examples/pieces of evidence and making sure they are good illustrations of your points.
3. **Explain your examples.** Explain why you've included each example/fact, and what its relevance is. Don't just assume the reader or marker will be able to figure out why you included a particular example/fact in a particular place in your paper. Even if you think it's obvious, it's still your job to spell it out.
4. **Avoid filler words and unsubstantiated claims.** Avoid filler words that don't really mean anything! Also avoid unsubstantiated claims (e.g. "It is claimed that..."; "It is widely known..."; "Many researchers have shown...") If you're going to use phrases like this you need to provide citations. Ask yourself, '*Who* has claimed...?' and '*Which* researchers have shown?'
5. **Don't hide behind vagueness!** If you're not sure about something, don't try to hide your lack of surety with vague phrases and statements. The marker will notice this and will have to assume that you don't understand what you're talking about!
6. **Paraphrase, summarize, or quote?** Maintain a good balance between direct quotations, paraphrases, summaries, and your own words. Your paper should neither contain all block quotes, nor all paraphrases. If you need to have a citation after every single sentence, then you're not really adding anything of your own, or synthesizing anything in your own way.
7. **Conclusions and introductions should not put the reader to sleep!** Even though many students have been taught (i.e. in high school) the "funnel" model of introductions and conclusions, whereby you "start broad" and narrow to your topic (for the introduction) or "broaden out" in your conclusion. This often leads students to waste the intro and conclusion by filling them with vague generalizations that aren't really connected to their paper. See the next page for examples of good and poor intros and conclusions.
8. **Don't write at the last minute!** Leave at least a few days to revise and go through multiple drafts of your paper. Even the best writers don't write a paper perfectly the first time. Drafting, revising, and editing are crucial steps of the writing process. This revision process can crucially mean the difference between an A or B, or a B or C, etc.

Introductory and Concluding paragraphs:

(An introduction to an essay about the origins of language)

Very poor introduction:

As someone who loves language, it is of greatest importance to human beings. From the birth of time, before the complex modern life took over, it has helped humans communicate, create complex thoughts, build societies, and expresses my thoughts. So, we can rightly ask, “How did language originate?” Why? Throughout the history of our resplendent civilization, many philosophers asked why language originated. Everybody knows this question has preoccupied our best scientific minds for decades. Natural sound source theory—also called ‘bow-wow’ theory—says that language comes from animals sounds like bird calls and lion’s roar or barks of dog, even though there are lots of onomatopoeias but this doesn’t account for abstract words of course. Or it might be from human beings making noise when they are hurt. I will discuss more examples throughout the essay.

- ☞ Many of the statements here are unsubstantiated overgeneralizations, redundant or repetitive statements, or irrelevant statements.
- ☞ Writer has gone into details about the theory, and even counterexamples to it. These should not be placed in the introduction.
- ☞ Transitions between some statements are jarring, illogical, or nonexistent.
- ☞ Grammatical errors (e.g. faulty parallelism, dangling modifiers, etc.) make for awkward reading and obscure meaning in some places.

Somewhat poor introduction:

Language is of the utmost importance to human beings everywhere on the planet. From the beginning of time, it has helped us to communicate, create complex thoughts, build societies and make scientific developments. This has led us to ask the question, “How did language originate?” Throughout the history of civilization, many philosophers and scientists of language have proposed a plethora of theories to account for the origins of language. In particular, in this essay I will talk about one of these theories, the “natural sound source” theory.

- ☞ Clearly tries to employ the “funnel model”, but the result is full of uninteresting overgeneralizations and unsubstantiated claims.
- ☞ No sense is given of what to expect from the rest of the essay: the theory is mentioned but not introduced, nor is the writer’s “take” on the theory provided.

Good introduction:

While most of us, by the time we are adults, have acquired a startling proficiency in one or more languages, we have perhaps never stopped to consider where this remarkable skill came from. One particular theory, called the “natural sound source” theory, maintains that language arose from so-called ‘natural’ sounds like the cries of

animals or human grunts of labour or pain. While this may seem intuitively plausible, there are in fact many counterarguments to the theory. Below, I will briefly lay out the main claims of the theory, then argue that significant counterexamples exist to the theory. I will conclude by arguing that the natural sound source theory of the origin of language is implausible.

- ☞ Provides a very brief “set-up” for the main point of the essay, which comes in the second sentence. It is clear from the beginning what the essay will be about.
- ☞ Clearly states the main point of the essay and what will be argued in the rest of the essay, including what conclusion the writer will argue for.
- ☞ Provides a “road-map” for the rest of the essay in an appropriate academic tone.
- ☞ The few examples that are given (e.g. “cries of animals...”) are brief and illustrative, but more specific details are saved for later in the essay.

Concluding Paragraphs

Many of the tips above that can help you write a good introduction also apply to concluding paragraphs.

- Try to avoid repetition and redundant statements. This is particularly difficult since you do also want to try to summarize what you have said in the rest of the essay. Instead of *repeating* what you have already said, think about how you can distill your most important points and present them succinctly (and in different language than you used in the body of the paper).
- The concluding paragraph should not read like a grocery list. Don’t just list the points you already stated in the body of your paper. Synthesize them into one main, “take-away” message.
- In the same way you avoid unsubstantiated and overgeneralized statements in the introduction, avoid these in the conclusion as well. Avoid statements like, “Language therefore has broad implications in society,” etc. An appropriate level of “broadening” for the concluding paragraph of a linguistics paper might be to mention unresolved issues or empirical problems, suggestions for future steps in this line of research, or particular implications of your proposal that are beyond the scope of your paper.