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Writing the Intro to Your Economics Research Paper

If you do academic research, whether in economics or other fields, you need to give an honest answer to a basic question: "Do you want readers for your research?" If the answer is "no," then read no further. If the answer is "yes," then you should probably be thinking and working considerably more than the introduction to your paper. Barney Kilgore, a famous editor of the Wall Street Journal back in the 1950s and 1960s, posted a motto in his office: "The easiest thing in the world for a reader to do is to stop reading." If the intro doesn't make readers want to proceed, they will often take the easy course and turn to something else.

Several writers of economics blogs have emphasized this theme recently.

At the Center for Global Development blog, [David Evans wrote "How to Write the Introduction of Your Development Economics Paper"](#) (February 10, 2020). Evans writes:

You win or lose your readers with the introduction of your economics paper. Your title and your abstract should convince people to read your introduction. Research shows that economics papers with more readable introductions get cited more. The introduction is your opportunity to lay out your research question, your empirical strategy, your findings, and why it matters. Succinctly. ...

Invest in your introduction. One reason that so many introductions in top journals have a similar pattern is that it's clear: you tell the reader why the issue you studied is important, you tell them what you did, you tell them what you learned, and you tell them how it builds on what we already knew. You might tell them how it relates to policy or what the limitations of your work are. Interested readers can dive into the details of the paper, but good introductions give casual readers a clear sense of what they'll get out of your paper. Your introduction is your kingdom. Rule it well.

Evans looks at 15 recent economic development papers published in prominent journals and discusses the ways in which their introductions have



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a common pattern:

1. Motivate with a puzzle or a problem (1-2 paragraphs)
2. Clearly state your research question (1 paragraph)
3. Empirical approach (1 paragraph)
4. Detailed results (3-4 paragraphs)
5. Value-added relative to related literature (1-3 paragraphs)
6. Optional paragraphs: robustness checks, policy relevance, limitations
7. Roadmap (1 paragraph)

Evans also points to a couple of other recent discussions of introductions in economic research. For example, [Keith Head presents his own view of "The Introduction Formula,"](#) which starts like this:

1. **Hook:** Attract the reader's interest by telling them that this paper relates to something interesting. What makes a topic interesting? Some combination of the following attributes makes Y something worth looking at.

- Y matters: When Y rises or falls, people are hurt or helped.
- Y is puzzling: it defies easy explanation.
- Y is controversial: some argue one thing while other say another.
- Y is big (like the service sector) or common (like traffic jams).

Things to avoid:

- *The bait and switch:* promising an interesting topic but delivering something else, in particular, something boring.
- *"all my friends are doing it"* : presenting no other motivation for a topic than that other people have written papers on it.

2) **Question:** Tell the reader what this paper actually does. Think of this as the point in a trial where having detailed the crime, you now identify a perpetrator and promise to provide a persuasive case. The reader should have an idea of a clean research question that will have a more or less satisfactory answer by the end of the paper. Examples follow below. The question may take two paragraphs. At the end of the first (2nd paragraph of the paper) or possibly beginning of the second (3rd paragraph overall) you should have the "This paper addresses the question" sentence.

[Claudia Sahm at the Macromom blog](#) spent last fall reading job market papers, and gives vent to her reactions in "We need to talk MORE ..." (September 19, 2019).

This post is for job market candidates. You need to spend more time editing your abstract and introduction. It will be worth more

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than your fourth robustness check. Promise. ... Sadly, it is clear that economics departments and dissertation committees are NOT teaching their doctoral students how to communicate their research. ... EVERY job market paper I read lacked a well-structured, well-written introduction and abstract. Many of these papers are from top schools and from native English speakers.

Sahm offers an intro structure as well, closely related to the others. She begins this way:

Structure of Introduction (in order):

THIS IS A VERY IMPORTANT PART OF YOUR PAPER

1) Motivation (1 paragraph)

- Must be about the economics.
- NEVER start with literature or new technique (unless econometrics).
- Be specific and motivate YOUR research question.

2) Research question (1 paragraph)

- Lead with YOUR question.
- THEN set YOUR question within most relevant literature.
- My favorite is an actual question: "My paper answers the question ..."
- Popular and acceptable: "My paper [studies/quantifies/evaluates/etc] ..."

3) Main contribution (2-3 paragraphs, one for each contribution)

- YOUR main contribution
- MUST be about new economic knowledge.
- Lead with YOUR work, then how it extends the literature.
- New model, new data, new method, etc.:
- Can be second or third contribution.
- Tools are important, not most important.
- Each paragraph begins with a sentence stating one of YOUR contributions.
- THEN follow with three or four sentences setting YOUR contribution in literature.
- Most important should be first (preferred) or last (sometimes most logical).
- YOUR contributions are very important. Make them clear, compelling, and correct.

These posts caught my eye in part because they are a theme I have also tried to emphasize when talking about writing. A substantial part of my value-added as Managing Editor of the Journal of Economic Perspectives is sharpen up the introductions for papers. Most of the time, all the ingredients for a strong introduction are already there. But it's not unusual for an excellent

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lead-in or "hook" to be buried several pages into the paper, or even at the start of the conclusion, rather than right up front. It's not unusual to have intros that are either so long that only the author's parents will persevere to the end, or so short that the reader might just as well flip to a random page in the middle of the essay and start there.

Here's a quote from an essay of my own, "[From the Desk of the Managing Editor](#)," written on the occasion of the 100th issue of the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* back in Spring 2012. I wrote:

Invest more time in the stepping-stones of exposition: introductions, opening paragraphs of sections, and conclusions. Introductions of papers are worth four times as much effort as they usually receive. The opening paragraph of each main section of a paper is worth three times as much effort as it usually receives. Conclusions are worth twice as much effort as they usually receive. This recommendation emphatically does not call for long introductions with a blow-by-blow overview each subsection of the paper to come. It doesn't mean repeating the same topic sentences over and over again, in introduction and section headings and conclusion. It means making a genuine effort to attract the attention of the reader and let the reader know what is at stake up front, to signpost the argument as it develops, and to tell the reader the state of the argument at the end.

Posted by [Timothy Taylor](#) at 10:01 AM



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