

Session 5: Tips for writing the discussion

The Discussion

- should place the results into context of the broader literature, with respect to:
 - how they are consistent with them, *and*
 - how they differ from them
- should reference papers:
 - from competitors
 - that come to conclusions different from yours, and
 - that were published in the course of carrying out the work.
- should answer the major question raised in the introduction
- should acknowledge the limitations of the study/any open questions WITHOUT overemphasizing them
- should highlight the significance/impact of the work (not merely rehash other sections), i.e. indicate where it is expected to lead the field
- should end on the positives!
- the editor will look here for arguments in support of the novelty and significance of the findings
- Speculation within the discussion:
 - a chance to say what you think vs what you know
 - should always be clearly distinguished from established facts (don't muddle the field)
 - a moderate level may make the discussion more interesting,
...but remember that the line between moderate and excessive may become a matter of contention
 - rule of thumb: one layer of speculation only
 - the editor will ask him/herself if this is reasonable and interesting or unfounded
- Be sure to clearly spell out your interpretations/conclusions – leaving the reader mid-thought may leave him/her:
 - wondering which of two interpretations is meant
 - completely in the dark, especially if unfamiliar with the topic
- Strategies:
 - use subtitles if it makes the discussion more interesting/easier to follow
 - recommended (but not required) order of discussion:
 - brief summary of major finding(s)
 - cover every aspect of the study, though briefly and generally
 - be sure to address the main questions that are raised in the introduction
 - discussion of the fit with literature (more detail on all points)
 - cover both where the fit is good and where it is not
 - discuss the implications, especially where the fit is not good (usually key point of interest of the paper)
 - spell out the limitations of the study *but* not in a position of emphasis
 - i.e., not be at the very beginning or the very end
 - avoid giving the impression that you don't believe in the significance of your findings.
 - summary of how your findings change, or will potentially change, the field (and possibly other speculation)