Writing a Research Article: The Introduction and Background Sections

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Introduction

Writing for publication is a discipline, or perhaps even a habit. Like all disciplines (and habits), your writing will develop through repetition and undoubtedly benefit from sage guidance. One of the heartening thing about writing research articles or any other publications is that there is an abundance of guidance available. In this short paper I will give advice, but will also direct the readers to other available references on how to write the introduction and background sections for a research article. I will use the Journal of Advanced Nursing’s (JAN) advice on empirical research papers as a framework (JAN, 2007). All references provided will be sourced online, as befits an online journal.

Writing an introduction

It is generally agreed that the introduction (as distinct from the background section) ought not to be more than two pages, double spaced. The most important aspect of the introduction is that it states the problem you intend to address, your intent in undertaking the research, your purpose or rationale and provides your reader with the interest and justification for continuing to read your paper. A good tip when writing is always to think about your reader – ask yourself the question: who am I writing for? Imagine who is going to be reading your research paper and what will induce them to continue to read it until the conclusion. Take your reader on your journey – begin with broad statements and narrow down your focus to your particular work. Writing up research in total has been likened to writing in the shape of an hourglass (Bem, 2003) – you begin by identifying the gap in the broader literature, then focus right down into your own study and then broaden out from your findings to the wider application again.

Ensure that your rationale places your work in a theoretical context so that the reader understands how and why you undertook the research and why you are publishing your work. At this stage, briefly describe the importance of your work and situate it in the international context. Make sure you define your terms so that the reader is clear about the scope and focus of your work (Hengl & Gould, 2006). It is also desirable to state your principal findings in your introduction so that the reader is clear from the start where the paper is going and is thus able to focus on your method and processes.

Writing the Background Section

There is some debate in articles recommending desirable structures as to whether or not the introduction and the background section are separate or one and the same. To some extent, whether you include the background information in the introduction or make it into a separate section will depend on your word limit and what else you wish to include in the article, most particularly in the discussion section. It will also depend on the instructions to authors in your chosen journal. However, for the purposes of this article I will discuss them as separate issues, which may mean that there is a degree of repetition between the introduction, where the context of the research is laid out, and the
literature review, where the relevant literature will be analysed in greater detail, in order to position the research appropriately and demonstrate the contribution that it will make to extant knowledge.

In relation to the literature review, the amount of literature that needs to be included need not equate to a systematic review. Whilst there “should be a substantial, critical literature review” (JAN, 2007), by the same token, it is “neither necessary nor desirable to provide a full-blown literature review as a prelude to the study” (Perneger & Hudelson, 2004, p.191). What is required is to situate the research within its relevant field of inquiry through a “critical review of relevant theoretical and empirical literature” (JAN, 2007). A useful piece of advice when writing a literature review is to write about the issues, not the authors. The purpose of a review of the literature is to ascertain what is known about a topic, rather than who has written about it. Thus, if you find yourself telling the reader that “Black wrote this but White said that”, your literature review is probably descriptive, rather than analytical. However, the aim of explaining what is known is to demonstrate how your study will make an original contribution to the existing knowledge base and address a shortfall in the literature. That will be a major reason why the editor will decide that it is worthy of publication.

Once the gap in the literature is established, the next task of the background section is to position the work in a theoretical framework, so that the reader will understand why you have chosen a particular “lens” through which to study your topic. Again, this does not need to go into significant detail, but you need to be clear about how you have come to the decision to research the topic in this particular way, and what factors influenced you when you decided on the design of the study, both in terms of what study variables you identified and how you chose to define the parameters and elements of your study. These decisions you have made also need to be supported by and situated within the literature. A maxim I offer to my own research students is that nothing should ever come as a surprise to the reader of a research study – they should never be left wondering, because your writing will answer all their “But why...?” questions. Even if they disagree with the track you have taken, at least you will have justified it.

The final part of the background section is the link to the ensuing method section, where you draw together all the findings from the literature and situate your own study as a critical piece of work to address the information you have identified as missing or to clarify the uncertain issue you have identified. You need to be really clear at this stage what you imagine your study design will be capable of delivering, as a result of the particular theoretical framework you have used and the study design you have chosen. Be modest in your claims – it is always better to be proven wrong in that situation.

**Conclusion**

The introduction and background sections to a research article are often overlooked and fitted in around the study design. Everyone is understandably keen to write up their method and publish their results. But not only do these sections set the tone and structure for both the article and the study to be described, they also have the potential to ensure that the article is read, remembered and cited, as they provide significant insight to the reader into the skills and abilities of the author. It is well worthwhile making the effort.

**References**

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