

Nurse Author & Editor

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I Say “Introduction”; You Say “Background”

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Roger Watson

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I think the Introduction and the Background to an academic paper are different things and both essential. Some journals do not specify either; some only specify one. My journals, *Journal of Advanced Nursing* and *Nursing Open*, specify both and I am often asked to explain the difference. Let’s dive in!

INTRODUCTION

First, whether or not a journal specifies either or none as main headers, it is still in the gift of the author to provide Introduction and Background as sub-headings. The Introduction comes first and is a relatively short section of the manuscript—I recommend no more than 500 words—which sets the study you are reporting in its widest context. The context can be: policy; practice; education; or previous

research. The Introduction should anchor the study in the mind of the reader (remember, the first reader is the editor and the next ones are the reviewers) as being relevant, justified, and likely to provide useful information. Therefore, the Introduction is the place to say why the study was important, what it addressed and why you did it. There is no need to support statements in the Introduction with too many references; one or two key references such as government policy documents related to nursing and a seminal piece of research related to that are all that is required. If you can introduce an international element to the Introduction, then this will increase the value of your manuscript in the eyes of the editor and reviewers—especially in journals that purport to be international. The study you carried out may well have been national, local, or confined to one clinical centre; but think how you can make your study of interest to someone in another country—how may it address their situation?

BACKGROUND

Where the Introduction sets your work in its widest context, the Background is the place to begin to focus on what, specifically, you investigated. Essentially, the Background is a literature review—but *not* a systematic literature review. You have the luxury of being quite selective (but balanced) here and to use the available literature to justify your work. Keep in mind that it is very important to synthesize the research in this section. You don't want to have a laundry list of research articles with a one paragraph synopsis of each one. As Shellenbarger (2016) notes, “Synthesis requires decision making, analysis, evaluation, and creation of new material, all rather high levels of thinking.” Summarizing the literature effectively is a skill that can be learned and takes constant practice to do well.

It is assumed that you know the literature well and have found a line of enquiry which has led to your specific research question. Therefore, the Background should follow naturally from the Introduction and, while you can continue to cite,

for example, policy or research documents, you should be explaining here what is already known about your topic and what gaps remain to be filled. Naturally, that should lead you to state clearly what gap your study intends to fill. Having “set the scene” for your work, the Background should end with your research question and this should, logically, be derived from the knowledge of, and gaps in the existing literature. By “research question” I mean an “interrogative statement ending with a question mark.” A research question is not a re-statement of the aims or objectives of the study. A research question is essential as it lets the reader know exactly what it is you investigated. It is also important because your design and, subsequently, your methods should stem directly from your research question(s).

All that follows from the Introduction and Background is a mirror-image of those sections. The design and methods should reflect—directly—the Background section. The Results section, the most focused and pivotal aspect of a manuscript, precedes the Discussion which should then reflect, partly, the Background but, ultimately, the Introduction. Some of the literature you will bring into the Discussion will be from the Introduction and Background sections, so this final section of the manuscript will refer back to the ideas and the problem raised in the Introduction and provide the reader with an impression of whether or not and to what extent you have addressed the issues. In the Discussion you will compare and contrast your findings with the prior literature that you cited, mostly found in the Background. Were your findings congruent with prior research? Were there findings that were discordant? Both of these questions should be thoughtfully discussed and conclusions drawn based on evidence—both what you learned from your study as well as findings reported previously. Last, how do your findings extend what was previously known?

Keep in mind that the Discussion should be the most interesting section of the paper and is the part where you can most freely write about your ideas, thoughts,

and conceptualizations without having reference citations at the end of every sentence. Still, keep in mind that you cannot go off wild flights of fancy and you need to keep everything grounded in the context of prior research and what your study provides as new knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The opening sections of an academic article are as important as the opening lines of a novel, so craft these well. Read them over yourself, especially after the manuscript is complete. Ensure that you are introducing what you actually wrote about and not what you thought you were going to write about; this may have changed in the process of writing the manuscript. Finally, have someone else read your Background and Introduction and see if they “grab them” and convey what the article is really about. If not, then be prepared to edit it until it does.

REFERENCE

1. Shellenbarger, T. (2016). Simplifying synthesis. *Nurse Author & Editor*, 26(3), 3. Retrieved from <http://naepub.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/NAE-2016-26-3-3-Shellenbarger.pdf>

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