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The Discussion Section of a Manuscript

Starting the “Discussion” Section of a Manuscript

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In my work around the world, delivering writing for publication workshops, a frequent question is: “How do you start writing the Discussion section of a manuscript?” It is worth noting that the question is not: “How do you write the Discussion section?” but: “How do you start...?” I have a similar question from my doctoral students about the Discussion chapter of their theses. So, what’s the problem?

I think people have an idea what is in a Discussion section and I assume they have read many of them and seen how others make a start. For some reason, whatever other authors are doing does not seem to “rub off” on them so I would

like to suggest a few ideas for starting a Discussion section but also for keeping going and completing it.

LOOK FOR EXAMPLES

My first idea, mentioned above, is to take a look at several examples of Discussion sections in the journal where you intend to submit your manuscript. There is no particular formula, but one of the best indicators of your likely success is to see what others have done in the past and what has clearly been acceptable to—and accepted by—the journal, and copy that style.

As you look at examples, pay particular attention to the length of the discussion, relative to the other sections of the article. Personally, I think too many authors shortchange the discussion and really, this should be the heart of the entire manuscript. You have laid out the question and the need for the study; described how data were collected and analyzed; and then presented the results. The Discussion is the section where you pull it all together and share your interpretation of what the findings mean and how they can be used by others—in clinical practice, research, leadership, or education. The Discussion is the one place you can share your opinion, backed up by facts, of course—but you have the freedom to say what you think, in your own words.

If looking at examples still leaves you feeling unclear about how to get started, then do what I do in this situation: have a formula and use it.

MY FORMULA

My formula for writing the Discussion section is to begin by inserting two sub-headings: *Limitations* and *Conclusions* and then inserting a few page breaks to give you room to write the main body of the Discussion. Then, applying [Aristotle's dictum](#): “Tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what

you told them” (which actually applies to giving a speech), use the various sections of a manuscript to do just this. You may well have outlined the study in the Abstract and again the Introduction and Background (that is, you’ve told them what you aim to do and what you did); use the Discussion to tell them again. Many people to whom I give this advice worry about repetition; you do not need to repeat yourself *verbatim*, but you can repeat the information. Therefore, one way to start the introduction is to repeat the aims of the study and the research question—but to paraphrase it. For example, if the aim of your study was expressed as follows:

The aim of this study was to investigate the best way to start writing the Discussion section of a manuscript and the study was designed to address the research question: Is there a best way to start writing a Discussion?

One way of starting the Discussion section is to re-express this as follows:

This study aimed to investigate the best ways to start writing the Discussion section of a manuscript and, specifically, was designed to address the question of whether or not there is a best way to start a Discussion section of a manuscript.

Then, assuming you obtained some results, you could briefly re-state these. For example, you may have discovered three things about starting to write the Discussion section of a manuscript as follows:

The results of the study show that experienced writers: lay out a standard structure for the Discussion section; start by repeating the aims and research question for the study; then, list the main results and discuss them under a series of sub-headings.

This is precisely what I do and the use of a series of sub-headings relevant to the main results is one way to provide a structure for the rest of the Discussion. This strategy overcomes part of the dilemma between discussing the results discretely and integrating them before drawing to a conclusion. If you treat each result separately then you can refer to the relevant literature, much of which may already be contained in the Introduction. Of course, there may be only one main result, but the same principle applies. Bear in mind that the literature referred to in discussing the results may not be mutually exclusive and some references may be relevant to more than one aspect of the results. Having discussed each of the results you need a further section—possibly but not necessarily sub-headed—to integrate the various aspects of the results and direct the reader back to the aims of the study you are reporting and the research question. Essentially you need to reflect on the extent to which the aims were addressed and how well the research question was answered. In the Background section you will have pointed to the gaps in knowledge that the study aimed to fill; paraphrase here and evaluate the extent to which those gaps have been filled and what further avenues of investigation may be followed to address any new research questions that arose.

Finally, address the limitations of the study and complete the Discussion with a Conclusion section that looks back over the study and re-states the main points, without the addition of any new ideas and without the use of references. Journals may have further requirements such as an Implications section; if so then ensure that you create sub-headings for these when you start the Discussion—it is easy to forget.

One caveat about limitations: don't go overboard. Certainly, you want to be honest and point out problems that limit your findings or generalizability. But I am regularly reminded of how good researchers are at enumerating the problems that plagued their study, while skipping over or minimizing their good work with a very brief

discussion. Change that in your writing: your Discussion is the place where you can shine and be proud of your study and its findings while the limitations should be briefly and succinctly stated with a comment of how to minimize these issues in a future investigation.

CONCLUSION

We all like to believe that our article will be read by thousands, downloaded a few thousand times more, and “tweeted” and “liked” a few thousand times beyond that. But remember, in the whole process of writing a manuscript and especially the Background and the Discussion sections that the first reader of your manuscript is likely to be an editor or editor-in-chief followed by the reviewers. Write your manuscript to convince them that it is worth publishing. Until you have won over that initial audience of 3 to 5 people, you will never have the opportunity to reach far and wide.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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