

Finance PhD Student Tutorial: Writing an Introduction

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Today's Agenda

Focus: How do I write a high-quality introduction?

1. **Opening Discussion and Reflection (10 min):** What has my experience writing introductions been like?
2. **Practical (25 min):** Structure for writing introductions
3. **Feedback Overview (25 min):** Share a draft of an introduction with what was done well and areas for improvement

Opening Discussion

Reflect on Your Experience

When I write an introduction:

1. How often do I feel stuck with a writing flow that lacks sharpness?
2. What resources have I studied or use to help in the writing process?

Discussion time: 10 minutes

Your Introduction Should Reduce Confusion Not Create It

✓ Strong Introduction

Clarity arrives immediately

Grab attention with a real puzzle

State the research question

Describe the approach

Report the main results

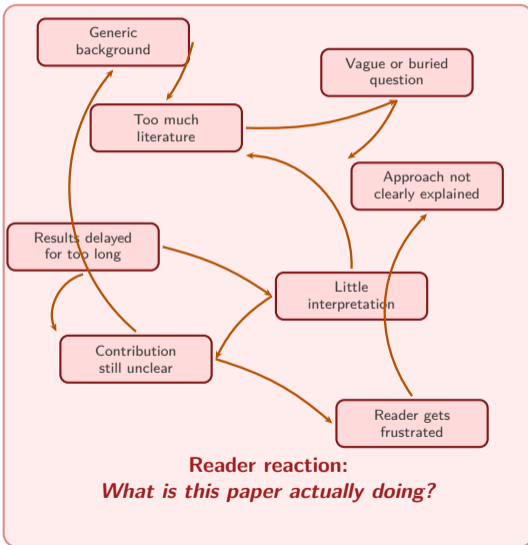
Interpret what the results mean

Discuss broader implications

Reader finishes page 1 knowing:
the question, the method, and the answer

An introduction is a roadmap,
summary, and sales pitch

× Weak Introduction



Goals of the Introduction

- The title and abstract **get** readers to your introduction
- The introduction **gets** readers to your paper

1. Title:

- ▶ Descriptive: “Creative Destruction, Stock Return Volatility, and the Number of Listed Firms”
- ▶ Clever: “Let’s take the Con out of Econometrics”

2. Abstract:

- ▶ Serves as an advertisement of the paper
- ▶ Keep shorter and emphasize what’s novel
- ▶ Motivation/question → Main Results → Meaning of Results → Implications

How to Structure the Introduction?

1. **Motivation:** Grab reader's attention (1-2 paragraphs)
2. **Question:** Clearly state the question you are asking (1 paragraph)
3. **Method:** Empirical approach (1 paragraph)
4. **Detailed Results:** Report the results (3-4 paragraphs)
5. **Contribution:** Value-added relative to related literature (1-3 paragraphs)
 - Note: writing might differ slightly based on contribution and novelty of your paper

Motivation (1-2 paragraphs)

- Most papers must explain why their work is important
- Use first paragraph to explain why the issue is important
- Ways to do this include the following:
 1. **Compare buckets:** Point out gap between literature and real world
 2. **Big question:** Put issue being discussed in a larger context
 3. **Program evaluation:** Here's a major policy that many entities engage in
 4. **Debate:** Big unanswered debate in economics

Question (1 paragraph)

- After showing importance, narrow that issue to a specific question or two you'll address
 - ▶ This should be clear and explicit by 2nd or 3rd paragraph
- **Clarity:** helpful for you, your audience, and co-authors to know exactly what you should learn from analysis
- Some examples include:
 1. "This paper asks whether elite colleges help students outside of historically advantaged groups reach top positions in the economy."
 2. "In this paper, we study the impact of a novel community health delivery program."
 3. "This paper investigates how working alongside friends affects employee productivity and whether this effect varies as a function of a worker's personality skills."

Method (1-2 paragraphs)

- You explain clearly *how* you're going to answer the research question
 - ▶ What paper does and what's special about it
- Focus on what's necessary for **general** understanding rather than **nuanced** details
- Some examples include:
 1. "My first econometric strategy exploits the plausibly exogenous staggered timing of a policy change that required elite private schools to offer free places to poor students."
 2. "We compare individuals and firms in locations in Africa that are on the terrestrial network of Internet cables to those that are not. We compare these two groups during the gradual arrival on the coast of submarine cables from Europe that greatly increase speed and capacity on the terrestrial network."

Detailed Results (3-5 paragraphs)

- Follow lay-out of the paper:
 1. Mention main tests
 2. Explain how they work
 3. Discuss results of each
- Discuss empirical estimates in detail
 1. Actual estimates
 2. Economic magnitude
 3. Is effect meaningful?
- Anticipate objections to analysis **ex-ante** and respond to them in advance
- Readers should be able to **confidently** cite your paper after they read your introduction

Contribution

- **Value add:** What *your* paper contributes above and beyond the existing literature
- What do your results *mean*?
 - ▶ What theories do they support or put in doubt?
 - ▶ How robust are your results and what important caveats exist?
 - ▶ Don't over-interpret your results
- Goal of Introduction: **Introduce** *your* work, so don't make readers wade through paragraphs of others' to get to it
 - ▶ Bulk of references should come later and earlier citations are only to aid reader's understanding of your work
- Don't just review the literature: Review it as it relates to your paper and highlight what your paper adds
- Some examples include:
 - ▶ “A large literature shows that providing information to households affects decision-making across many domains”... “However these interventions have primarily delivered information that one might not expect households to know, even richer or well-informed households.”

Before Next Week (1 Hour)

- Reflect (1 Hour): Revisit one of your previously written introductions in comparison to these tips in what you did well and what can be improved

References

- Evans, David. 2020 (February). *How to Write the Introduction of Your Development Economics Paper*. <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/how-write-introduction-your-development-economics-paper>. Center for Global Development blog, accessed 2026-04-29.
- Weisbach, Michael S. The Economist's Craft. *In: The Economist's Craft*. Princeton University Press.