

Writing Introductions to Economics Papers

A Handout from the EcoTeach Center, Duke University

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Every economics paper contains an introduction, a section that brings your reader into your paper. A good introduction gives your reader a context, a frame, for ordering and understanding the information in the body of your paper.

Although drafts of your introduction can be written at any time in the writing process, final versions of introductions are often best written last. Why? Because a good introduction sets up the body of the paper that *actually exists*. A common error is to write an introduction based on one version of your paper, then to change your paper as you progress in your research but not make any necessary corresponding changes in the introduction. A mismatch between the introduction and the body of your paper can confuse, and lose, your reader forever.

Although an introduction to an economics paper can take any number of forms, many, if not most, provide certain pieces of information, and often in a certain order. It may be helpful to think of your introduction as progressing through four “moves.” Move 1 establishes a research territory. Move 2 reviews the literature. Move 3 establishes a niche. And Move 4 occupies the niche. Let’s look at each of these in more detail.

Move 1: Establish a research territory. In Move 1 in your introduction, you introduce your subject.

Move 2: Review the literature. In Move 2 you review the relevant literature, or, if you plan to save your literature review for a section of its own, at least briefly explain what has been done on your topic.

Move 3: Establish a niche. In this move, you identify a gap or problem or deficiency in the current literature. It will be the gap or problem or deficiency that your study will address.

Move 4: Occupy the niche. Here, you state your study’s purpose, what it will “do,” what it will contribute. This is in direct response to the gap etc. you identified in Move 3. In this move, you may also state your main findings. It is also customary to end with an outline of your paper (“In section 2 I will . . .”).

It is not necessary to make these moves in the order just given. Some articles, for instance, begin with Move 4 (articles that begin, “This paper will . . .”). But until you develop a secure feel for introductions, I recommend that you follow the moves in the order here given.

In learning to write introductions, it is helpful to simply read the introductions to published economics articles. For good examples of the four-move pattern, check out John A. List’s article, “Young, Selfish, and Male,” in the January 2004 issue of the *Economic Journal* (vol. 114), or our very own Tom Nechyba’s “Mobility, Targeting, and Private-School Vouchers” in the March 2000 issue of the *American Economic Review* (vol. 90, no. 1).

