

## How to Write a Research Paper Introduction

The introduction to a research paper is where you set up your topic and approach for the reader. It has several key goals:

- Present your topic and get the reader interested
- Provide background or summarize existing research
- Position your own approach
- Detail your specific research problem
- Give an overview of the paper's structure

The introduction looks slightly different depending on whether your paper presents the results of original empirical research or constructs an argument by engaging with a variety of sources.

### Step 1: Introduce your topic

The first job of the introduction is to tell the reader what your topic is and why it's interesting or important. This is generally accomplished with a strong opening hook.

The hook is a striking opening sentence that clearly conveys the relevance of your topic. Think of an interesting fact or statistic, a strong statement, a question, or a brief anecdote that will get the reader wondering about your topic.

For example, the following could be an effective hook for an argumentative paper about the environmental impact of cattle farming:

#### Argumentative paper hook

Are cows responsible for climate change?

A more empirical paper investigating the relationship of Instagram use with body image issues in adolescent girls might use the following hook:

#### Empirical paper hook

The rise of social media has been accompanied by a sharp increase in the prevalence of body image issues among women and girls.

Don't feel that your hook necessarily has to be deeply impressive or creative. Clarity and relevance are still more important than catchiness. The key thing is to guide the reader into your topic and situate your ideas.

### Step 2: Describe the background

This part of the introduction differs depending on what approach your paper is taking.

In a more argumentative paper, you'll explore some general background here. In a more empirical paper, this is the place to review previous research and establish how yours fits in.

### **Argumentative paper: Background information**

After you've caught your reader's attention, specify a bit more, providing context and narrowing down your topic.

### **Argumentative paper background**

A recent study (RIVM, 2019) shows that cattle farmers account for two thirds of agricultural nitrogen emissions in the Netherlands. These emissions result from nitrogen in manure, which can degrade into ammonia and enter the atmosphere. The study's calculations show that agriculture is the main source of nitrogen pollution, accounting for 46% of the country's total emissions. By comparison, road traffic and households are responsible for 6.1% each, the industrial sector for 1%.

Provide only the most relevant background information. The introduction isn't the place to get too in-depth; if more background is essential to your paper, it can appear in the body.

### **Empirical paper: Describing previous research**

For a paper describing original research, you'll instead provide an overview of the most relevant research that has already been conducted. This is a sort of miniature literature review—a sketch of the current state of research into your topic, boiled down to a few sentences.

This should be informed by genuine engagement with the literature. Your search can be less extensive than in a full literature review, but a clear sense of the relevant research is crucial to inform your own work.

Begin by establishing the kinds of research that have been done, and end with limitations or gaps in the research that you intend to respond to.

### **Empirical paper background**

Various empirical studies have been conducted into Facebook usage among adolescent girls (Tiggermann & Slater, 2013; Meier & Gray, 2014). These studies have consistently found that the visual and interactive aspects of the platform have the greatest influence on body image issues. Despite this, highly visual social media (HVSM) such as Instagram have yet to be robustly researched.

### **Step 3: Establish your research problem**

The next step is to clarify how your own research fits in and what problem it addresses.

### **Argumentative paper: Emphasize importance**

In an argumentative research paper, you can simply state the problem you intend to discuss, and what is original or important about your argument.

Argumentative paper research problem

While efforts are being made to mitigate these emissions, policymakers are reluctant to reckon with the scale of the problem. The approach presented here is a radical one, but commensurate with the issue.

### **Empirical paper: Relate to the literature**

In an empirical research paper, try to lead into the problem on the basis of your discussion of the literature. Think in terms of these questions:

- What research gap is your work intended to fill?
- What limitations in previous work does it address?
- What contribution to knowledge does it make?

You can make the connection between your problem and the existing research using phrases like the following.

#### **Phrase**

#### **Connection**

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Although  $x$  has been studied in detail, insufficient attention has been paid to  $y$ .

You will address a previously overlooked aspect of your topic.

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The implications of  $x$  study deserve to be explored further.

You will build on something suggested by a previous study, exploring it in greater depth.

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It is generally assumed that  $x$ . However, this paper suggests that  $y$  ...

You will depart from the consensus on your topic, establishing a new position.

### **Step 4: Specify your objective(s)**

Now you'll get into the specifics of what you intend to find out or express in your research paper.

The way you frame this varies. An argumentative paper presents a thesis statement, while an empirical paper generally poses a research question (sometimes with a hypothesis as to the answer).

### **Argumentative paper: Thesis statement**

The thesis statement expresses the position that the rest of the paper will present evidence and arguments for. It can be presented in one or two sentences, and should state your position clearly and directly, without providing specific arguments for it at this point.

Thesis statement

This paper argues that the Dutch government must stimulate and subsidize livestock farmers, especially cattle farmers, to transition to sustainable vegetable farming.

### **Empirical paper: Research question and hypothesis**

The research question is the question you want to answer in an empirical research paper.

Present your research question clearly and directly, with a minimum of discussion at this point. The rest of the paper will be taken up with discussing and investigating this question; here you just need to express it.

A research question can be framed either directly or indirectly.

- This study set out to answer the following question: What effects does daily use of Instagram have on the prevalence of body image issues among adolescent girls?
- We investigated the effects of daily Instagram use on the prevalence of body image issues among adolescent girls.

If your research involved testing hypotheses, these should be stated along with your research question. They are usually presented in the past tense, since the hypothesis will already have been tested by the time you are writing up your paper.

For example, the following hypothesis might respond to the research question above:

Hypothesis

It was hypothesized that daily Instagram use would be associated with an increase in body image concerns and a decrease in self-esteem ratings.

### **Step 5: Map out your paper**

The final part of the introduction is often dedicated to a brief overview of the rest of the paper.

In a paper structured using the standard scientific “introduction, methods, results, discussion” format, this isn’t always necessary. But if your paper is structured in a less predictable way, it’s important to describe the shape of it for the reader.

If included, the overview should be concise, direct, and written in the present tense.

- This paper will first discuss several examples of survey-based research into adolescent social media use, then will go on to ...
- This paper first discusses several examples of survey-based research into adolescent social media use, then goes on to ...

### **Research paper introduction examples**

Full examples of research paper introductions are shown in the tabs below: one for an argumentative paper, the other for an empirical paper.

### **Thesis statement**

Present the thesis statement you will argue for in the paper.

### **Argumentative paper introduction**

Are cows responsible for climate change? A recent study (RIVM, 2019) shows that cattle farmers account for two thirds of agricultural nitrogen emissions in the Netherlands. These emissions result from nitrogen in manure, which can degrade into ammonia and enter the atmosphere. The study's calculations show that agriculture is the main source of nitrogen pollution, accounting for 46% of the country's total emissions. By comparison, road traffic and households are responsible for 6.1% each, the industrial sector for 1%. While efforts are being made to mitigate these emissions, policymakers are reluctant to reckon with the scale of the problem. The approach presented here is a radical one, but commensurate with the issue. This paper argues that the Dutch government must stimulate and subsidize livestock farmers, especially cattle farmers, to transition to sustainable vegetable farming. It first establishes the inadequacy of current mitigation measures, then discusses the various advantages of the results proposed, and finally addresses potential objections to the plan on economic grounds.

### **Empirical paper introduction**

The rise of social media has been accompanied by a sharp increase in the prevalence of body image issues among women and girls. This correlation has received significant academic attention: Various empirical studies have been conducted into Facebook usage among adolescent girls (Tiggermann & Slater, 2013; Meier & Gray, 2014). These studies have consistently found that the visual and interactive aspects of the platform have the greatest influence on body image issues. Despite this, highly visual social media (HVSM) such as Instagram have yet to be robustly researched. This paper sets out to address this research gap. We investigated the effects of daily Instagram use on the prevalence of body image issues among adolescent girls. It was hypothesized that daily Instagram use would be associated with an increase in body image concerns and a decrease in self-esteem ratings.