

What is an introduction and how to build one

Paul W. L. Lai Copyright 2012

1. What is an Introduction?

Introduction is the first section to be written in the main body of an academic paper. Its main role in the paper is to act as a 'bridge' to connect the main focus of the paper with many different kinds of readers. In this sense, a satisfactory introduction will be able to guide readers with different backgrounds and interests to the same direction intended by the paper.

In order to make the connection between the paper and the readers smooth, an introduction normally begins with *an attractive beginning* whose content is attractive and, in the usual case, understandable by readers in general. Then the introduction will proceed with a step-by-step guidance about *the background information* concerning the main focus of the research and why the research was carried out. Let's look at these two introduction components in turn.

2. Attractive Beginning

Providing an attractive beginning is one of the main functions of introduction in acting as the bridge between the paper and different kinds of readers. The basic purpose of this function is to attract the attention of the paper.

There are many different ways of writing an attractive beginning. For example, one could choose to write an attractive beginning by providing a piece of startling information.

Starling information must be true and verifiable, and it does not need to be totally new to your readers. It could simply be a pertinent fact that explicitly illustrates the point you wish to make in the paper. If you use a piece of startling information, follow it with a sentence or two of elaboration.

*Example of an attractive beginning using **starling information**:*

(Information that aims to dispute a claim made based on the evolution theory)

"Survival of the fittest" was the hallmark of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, encapsulating the importance of adaptation in the ever-changing world. However, contrary to many Darwinian proponents, the evolution theory is not really about survival. Adaptation, or variability claim that are famously made by the evolution theory goes exactly against the characteristic of survival; namely stability.

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Another popular choice of an attractive beginning is anecdote. An anecdote is an interesting short story that illustrates a main point. Here is an example of anecdote:

*Example of an attractive beginning using **anecdote**:*

(An anecdote that aims to introduce a study on word meaning)

"When I was a child, I saw a giant balloon flying over my house. The balloon was completely covered with a blue fabric. But interesting enough, on the top of the balloon there was a label writing "I am a pink balloon". I could not understand why the blue balloon labelled itself as a pink balloon. Now I come to think of it, maybe it was the meaning "pink" that I did not understand..."

Although attractive beginnings are used to target at readers in general, many attractive beginnings can be also used to target at readers of a specific field. Below are five samples of attractive beginning that are used to target at specific readers.

Sample 1:

Begin with a quotation.

In the opening passage of his celebrated book, *the Wisdom of the Body*, Walter Cannon writes:

Organisms, composed of material which is characterized by the utmost inconstancy and unsteadiness, have somehow learned the methods of maintaining constancy and keeping steady in the presence of conditions which might reasonably be expected to prove profoundly disturbing. For a short time men may be exposed to dry heat at 115 to 128 degrees Centigrade without an increase of their body temperature above normal. On the other hand arctic mammals, when exposed to cold as low as 35 degrees Centigrade below freezing do not manifest any noteworthy fall of body temperature. ... In short, well-equipped organisms - for instance, mammalian forms - may be confronted by dangerous conditions in the outer world and by equally dangerous possibilities within the body, and yet they continue to live and carry on their functions with relatively little disturbance. [Cannon, W. B., *The Wisdom of the Body*. 1963. P. 21 - 23.]

The passage highlights the amazing ability of mammalian species to survive under the hostile conditions. The amazing survival ability is fundamentally supplied by a physiological mechanism called "Homeostasis". The objective of this paper is to show why understanding homeostasis is the basis of understanding mental content. In particular, I shall first introduce the relation between homeostasis and mental content through a relation between perceptual constancy and perceptual illusions... Then I shall

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argue that perceptual constancy is a member of homeostatic mechanisms... Finally I shall argue that the occurrence of perceptual illusions is the result of a perceptual constancy breakdown; hence showing that the change of mental content is a reflection of the change of homeostasis. ...

Sample 2:

Begin with a question

What is the significant difference between human beings and other living species in terms of survival maintenance *Means*? No doubt all living species have their proprietary *Means* to maintain survival. Lions and leopards, for example, are able to run at a very high speed and they are equipped with powerful claws and teeth so that they can chase and hunt almost any kind of animals living in the plains. Turtles, on the other hand, don't have powerful weapons and speed, but they have impenetrable shells that will enable them to resist almost any kind of attack coming from land and sea. Those who aren't born with powerful weapons or strong shields nevertheless have other *Means* to survive. For example, chimpanzees have the ability to get food by using tools and the ability to hunt and defend themselves by forming a society and even a culture. Human beings, needless to say, are the most successful tool-using and social species. We not only have the ability to use tools, but more importantly, the ability to modify and develop the tools that we are using. And our society, unlike every other kinds of society on Earth, is run by communications using complex languages.

One objective of this paper is to introduce a mechanism that enables human beings to develop such powerful survival maintenance *Means*. This mechanism is called "Homeostasis". The idea of homeostasis is not new, but its relation to the mind is. The burden of this paper is to establish, based on an *a priori* argument, how homeostasis is related to the mind. In particular, I shall first introduce ... Then I shall argue ... Finally I shall argue ...

Sample 3:

Begin with an acknowledgment of an opinion opposite to the one you plan to take

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According to Jerry Fodor, a satisfactory theory of content must meet two requirements. First, it must be couched in naturalistic vocabularies that are exclusively nonsemantic and nonintentional so that they do not postulate irreducibly psychic properties. Second, it must be able to account for the robustness of mental content. The aim of this paper is to provide a naturalistic theory of content that can account for the robustness of mental content, but differs from Fodor's theory of Asymmetric Dependence. As we shall see, the center of my theory lies in a relation between mental content and homeostasis. I shall argue that homeostasis, through its resistance to external variations, is what fundamentally accounts for the robustness of mental content. In particular, I shall first introduce ... Then I shall argue ... Finally I shall argue ...

Sample 4:

Begin with a very short narrative or anecdote that has a direct bearing on your paper

Here is a very interesting conversation between Jerry Fodor and his colleague on sailboats, and it goes like this: "What should you do?", Fodor's colleague asked rhetorically, "if you are in a situation where there is a strong wind, and a lee shore, and your boat doesn't have an auxiliary engine?" Fodor's reply was this, "Look, just stay out of situations where there's a strong wind and a lee shore and your boat doesn't have an auxiliary engine."

The story demonstrates Fodor's advice on how one could avoid the trouble by staying out of the situations that are likely to cause the trouble. This advice, however, will not do to Fodor's own trouble in dealing with the disjunction problem.

One objective of this paper is to show how Fodor's theory of content got into a serious trouble that he could have avoided in the first place. Another is to introduce a solution to Fodor's trouble by reference to a notion of homeostasis. In particular, I shall first introduce ... Then I shall argue ... Finally I shall argue ...

Sample 5:

Begin with a definition or explanation of a term relevant to your paper

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The term "homeostasis" literally means "like or similar condition" (homeo = "like" or "similar"; stasis = "condition"). The term was coined by Walter B. Cannon to designate the maintenance of the constancy of an internal (bodily) environment in the face of external variation.

The objective of this paper is to introduce the notion of homeostasis and its relation to mind. In particular, I shall first introduce ... Then I shall argue ... Finally I shall argue ...

Exercise 1:

Build an attractive beginning to introduce the main focus of your research

3. Background Information

The main role of background information in the introduction section of an academic paper is to introduce (i) the main research focus of the paper, and (ii) why the research was carried out by reference to some historical background. Note that in writing about the historical background that leads to your present research, you should only focus on the previous research(s) that is/are **directly relevant** to your present research.

The following is a template on how to write a historical background leading to your present research.

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Note that in writing about the historical background that leads to your present research, you should only focus on the previous research(s) that is/are **directly relevant** to your present research.

Please answer the following questions as clearly, specifically, and concisely as possible. Feel free to substitute any of the words or phrases in the blue color below (they were provided only to inspire your thoughts, not to replace them).

Step 1:

What is the main task of your research? Please answer the question in ONE sentence.

You may answer the question by beginning with: "The main focus of the present research lies in ..."

Step 2:

What was the previous research that inspired or motivated your present research? You may answer more than one previous research. Please specify (i) the name of the researcher(s), and (ii) research publication details. And if possible, specify why was the research carried out.

You may answer the question by beginning with: "The origin of this research can be traced back to [WHEN], when [WHO] published [WHAT RESEARCH], proposing that ... The purpose of [WHO]'s research was to ..."

Step 3:

What was so special about the previous research? For instance, was it very successful in solving some particular problem? Or, did it achieve something that had never been achieved before?

You may answer the question by beginning with: "The most remarkable achievement of [WHO]'s research was a new solution/insight into ..."

Step 4:

What was the major problem of the previous research? For instance, what was majorly wrong in the previous research? Or, what was the major problem that the previous research failed to solve? And if possible, explain briefly why it could not solve the problem. For instance, was it due to the limitation of the technology at that time?

You may answer the question by beginning with: "Although [WHO]'s theory was very powerful in explaining... it could not deal with..."

Step 5:

Taking the defect of the previous research into account, what is special about your research? This is a very important step. It helps you to highlight the specialty and originality of your research. For instance, what have your research achieved whereas others have not?

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You may answer the question by beginning with: “To tackle the problem confronted by the previous research, we are proposing a solution that ... ”

Step 6:

How are you planning to carry out your research? Please list your overall plan to implement your research.

You may answer the question by beginning with: “In particular, our research will be implemented in the following way: In section 2 we shall do [WHAT 1]. In section 3 we shall do [WHAT 2]. In section 4 ... Finally we shall ... ”

Introduction (overall format):

Paragraph 1 [Attractive beginning]

{Think of an attractive beginning using ONE of the following: (i) Startling information, (ii) Anecdote, (iii) Dialogue, (iv) Definition}

Paragraph 2 [Main research focus]

The main focus of the present research lies in ...

Paragraph 3 [Origin of your research]

The origin of this research can be traced back to [WHEN], when [WHO] published [WHAT RESEARCH], proposing that ... The purpose of [WHO]’s research was to ... The most remarkable achievement of [WHO]’s research was a new solution/insight into ...

Paragraph 4 [Problem of the previous research]

However, although [WHO]’s theory was very powerful in explaining... it could not deal with...

Paragraph 5 [Specialty and originality of your research]

To tackle the problem confronted by the previous research, we are proposing a solution that ...

Paragraph 6 [Overall implementation plan of your research]

In particular, our research will be implemented in the following way: In section 2 we shall do [WHAT 1]. In section 3 we shall do [WHAT 2]. In section 4 ... Finally we shall ...

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4. Differences between Introduction and Abstract

Abstract	Introduction
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Abstract provides a succinct SUMMARY of the paper's main ideas.- An abstract is an INDEPENDENT part of the paper.- What is important for an abstract is INFORMATIVE.- In an abstract, you need to summarize the following: (1) Background, (2) Main task, (3) Procedures & Results, (4) Conclusion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Introduction provides an ENTRY to the paper's main ideas.- An introduction is an INSEPARABLE part of the paper.- What is important for an introduction is ATTRACTIVE.- In an introduction, you need to introduce the following: (1) Background, (2) Main task, (3) Conclusion, (4)