



Introductions

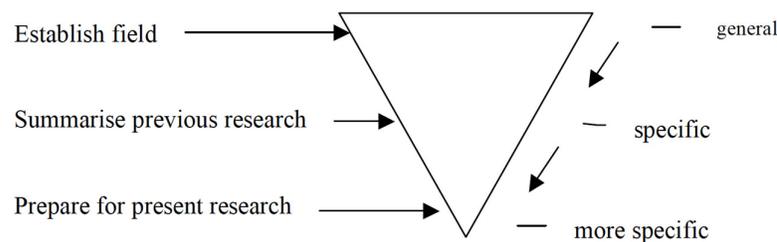
PURPOSE

The first chapter of any thesis functions to give the reader some context for the research project and its findings, and a preview of the whole text to come. The scope of this chapter/section can vary significantly according to the discipline and the nature of the study. In a thesis based on experimental research (“Type 1”), the introduction to the whole thesis will usually be in the first chapter. In other types of thesis, where there may be various different approaches to a problem being explored, or several related but different topics, there may be introductory sections for each of the main body chapters (“Type 2”). Here we look only at the function and staging of the introductory chapter or section for the WHOLE thesis.

The introductory chapter traditionally functions to introduce the whole research project by establishing its context and why the new research seems necessary, important and interesting. A thesis introduction moves through various stages, which function to:

- identify the field of the research and the specific topic
- summarise previous research in the field
- identify the gap in existing knowledge that the new contribution fills, or raise questions prompted by previous research
- state the purpose or aim of the research
- preview/outline how the whole thesis is organised, so readers know what to expect.

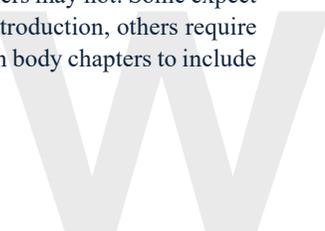
These stages or moves within the text provide a logical progression of information, from the most general to the most specific (see the example introductions from Biology, Engineering & Education). These rhetorical moves in the text help readers quickly grasp how the new research being presented in the thesis relates to the wider field, and to the work of other researchers in that specific field, and to an evident need for more or better knowledge, which the thesis will provide. Establishing that there is a gap in existing knowledge provides a rationale for the presentation of the new research. The diagram below represents these moves:



In identifying where a gap in knowledge exists, you are showing that the research story so far in this area is not yet complete, and that your thesis is going to contribute something important to what is currently known or understood. Alternatively, the introduction can prepare readers for the new research being presented in a thesis by highlighting the fact that there are differing perspectives on an issue, which the thesis will explore and clarify.

Some disciplines expect the introduction to include an outline of the whole thesis, others may not. Some expect a summary and critical discussion of previous research (a literature review) in the introduction, others require that in a separate chapter. In some theses (Type 2), it can make most sense for the main body chapters to include a review of the literature on the specific and different topics being treated in each.

ACADEMIC LITERACY



To get a good sense of what is normally expected in your own discipline, discuss this resource with your supervisor, and look at other theses that have been produced in your discipline recently, or that use the research methodology you've chosen. If not all of these functions are included, discuss why.

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