Graduate Writing Center

Research Paper Introductions: an Applied Linguistics Approach

Those of you that have worked with our tutors and attended other workshops will remember the three questions we often use to frame introductions in the field of English:

1. What is the situation now?
2. What is the problem?
3. What am I going to do about it?

Here, we discuss a different approach to the same idea.

**Moves in Research Paper Introductions (Swales, 1990)**

*Move 1: Establishing a Research Territory* [“What is the situation now?”]

1. By showing that the general research area is important, central, interesting, problematic, or relevant in some way (optional)
2. By introducing and reviewing items from previous research in the area (obligatory)

*Move 2: Establishing a Niche* [What is the problem?]

By indicating a gap in the previous research or by extending previous knowledge in some way (obligatory)

*Move 3: Occupying the Niche* [What am I going to do about it?]

1. By outlining purposes or stating the nature of the present research (obligatory)
2. By listing research questions or hypotheses (dependent on the conventions of the field)
3. By announcing major findings (depending on field)
4. By stating the value of the present research (depending on field)
5. By indicating the structure of the research paper (depending on field)

Find examples of research papers in your field that you enjoy reading (consider consulting the databases discussed in the corpora workshop). Examine the following elements of the introductions:

1. Divide the text into three basic moves
2. How many paragraphs would you divide the text into? And where would you draw the paragraph boundaries?
3. Underline or highlight any words or expressions that have been used “to establish a research territory” in Move 1.

Paragraph Flow

In conventional English writing, we often progress sentences from old information to new information. Consider the following paragraph:

All materials can be classified into three groups according to how readily they permit an electric current to flow. These groups are: conductors, insulators, and semiconductors. All conductors are metals. An insulator is a material that does not easily release electrons.

Note how the author first introduces the three groups. The following sentence then elaborates on the groups—moving from old information to new (groups = old information; conductors, insulators, and semiconductors= new information). The next sentence then explains further about conductors, following the same pattern, etc.

Find a sample paragraph in a research paper from your field. Answer the following questions:

1. Identify the theme of each sentence or clause. Underline the theme or mark the theme in some way
2. Look at each theme and determine whether it is old information or new information.
3. If the theme is old information, highlight or circle it and highlight or circle any places in the preceding sentences where it appears.
4. Draw lines to connect the old and new information.