

Some notes on writing papers

Karthik Durvasula

1. Paper organisation

- (a) Have an *Abstract* before the Introduction, where you summarise the main focus and your findings in about 200 words.
- (b) Present the focus of your paper and your findings early in the paper. Normally, the greatest temptation is to treat your paper like a mystery novel. Don't do that! You aren't writing a mystery.¹
- (c) Be clear and stick to a professional format. If you aren't sure, then look at the relevant journals, *e.g.*, if you are presenting/analysing standard phonological data, then look at the journal *Phonology*, if you are presenting experimental data, then look at the *Journal of Phonetics* or the *Journal of Laboratory Phonology*.
 - i. Make sure examples/figures/tables are in a standard format (look at journals).
- (d) Have proper sections (a possible list is given below)
 - i. *Introduction*, where you present the crucial topic, and your findings.
 - ii. *Background*.
 - iii. *Your Data and Analysis* (you could break this up into two or keep it as one).
 - iv. *Conclusions* (Should include a brief discussion of why others should care about your results).

2. What should be in the Introduction?

- (a) The naïve assumption is to think of the *Introduction* as a section to discuss all the possible facts on the topic. This is a mistake. An *Introduction* is a place to introduce the **relevant facts**.
- (b) What are the **relevant facts**?
These are the facts that lead the reader to the question that you are interested in probing in the paper. Which means, by the end of the *Introduction*, the reader understands not only what you are going to do in the paper and what you will show, but **why** that is necessary to do given previous research on the topic.
- (c) Therefore, the *Introduction* is a chance to bias :) the reader to think of your question and research as relevant and useful.
- (d) Note: I am not saying that you should present facts that only support your point/claim — that is not acceptable :).

3. Paragraph organisation

- (a) **Make sure that each para has a purpose/focus**. Start the paragraph with a sentence that clarifies its purpose, and make sure that the rest of the para revolves around and addresses that main purpose.
- (b) When you write multiple paras of text in a section, try to connect them properly with connectives (“First, Second, ...” (or) “In a similar vein...” (or) “Extending this line of inquiry...”).

¹Sadly, some journals like the *Journal of Phonetics* do want mysteries, so if you are submitting something there, remember that.

- (c) Think carefully about the order of the paras and make sure that the order has a clear purpose too.
- (d) Make sure you don't have super long sentences. Wherever possible break up into shorter sentences.

4. Data organisation

- (a) If you have experimental/count data, make sure to have plots, and make sure that they are legible with proper axes and clear text. Discuss what to see in the data and the main point of the data you are presenting BEFORE you present the figure/table/....
- (b) If you have linguistic examples/data, make sure that you discuss the example/data BEFORE presenting the example/data.
- (c) Make sure that the organisation of the examples/data makes it easy for the reader to follow.

5. Other basic formatting facts

- (a) Have section numbers (Word allows you to generate this. Use that if you can...it will save you a LOT of time in the future. L^AT_EX makes it much easier of course!)
- (b) Make sure all the cross-referencing of section numbers/example numbers/figures/tables is automated. You shouldn't be typing it out manually
 - i. If you don't automate it and you move around the sections/examples/text/..., then you will have a nightmare fixing all the inappropriate cross-references. If you automate it, then you won't have to worry about it.
- (c) Have proper citations (use reference software with Word - [Zotero](#) and [Mendeley](#) are free, and have plug-ins for Word/Open Office/...).
 - Citations should be at the end of the sentence, unless you are citing different parts of a sentence with different citations.
- (d) Add page numbers.

6. Proofraed!! :)

- (a) Check for errors/typos.
- (b) **Whether you are a native English speaker or not, get another student to read your manuscript.** You should also volunteer your time to read others' papers, even for topics that are not related to your interests. This'll help others and will aid in your own intellectual growth!² In fact, it'll help you become a better writer and a better researcher! Furthermore, reading other people's work and having people's feedback on your own helps build resilience which is very important both to become a better researcher and to develop the right attitude to deal with the revision process for journals.³

7. Beyond the immediate concerns of your paper, **keep working on your writing** - this is a lifelong learning process. There are free online courses available for you to follow (example: [Coursera](#), [edX](#)), and really nice books you can read on the topic (examples: [Stephen Heard](#), [Paul Silvia](#), [Paul Silvia](#) again). A lot of graduate time is wasted on writing and re-writing based on edits. If you become a better writer, you are likely to save a TON of time. So, you should really value this.

²I can't tell you how many syntax/semantics papers/dissertations I proofread in grad school! I learnt so much!

³Thanks to Silvina Bongiovanni for pointing this out.

8. Other useful resources

- (a) [Simple trick to make your paper more comprehensible.](#)
- (b) [This link is good to get an idea of how to organize a paper.](#)
- (c) [Some Dos and Don'ts.](#)
- (d) [Some more information from Bruce Hayes if you are interested.](#)