

Giving a Paper a Narrative Structure

Here you can learn how to

- **give your paper a better narrative structure.**

This information sheet is connected to a worksheet on identifying narrative structures in abstracts.

Why should papers contain a narrative structure?

Getting a narrative structure into writing is important; it makes a text easier to remember and believe.

The issue of narrative (also referred to as storytelling) in research reporting, e.g., in a paper, is contentious. Some maintain research reporting would benefit by having more narrative; others think it dumbs down the reporting. There are at least two good arguments for including a narrative structure: 1) human brains are wired to remember a good story and 2) people are more willing to believe an argument arising from a narrative than they are to believe one from a more logical-scientific text, as long as the writing does not appear too persuasive.

How can a paper contain a narrative structure without looking too much like a story?

All stories possess a beginning, a middle, and an ending. Papers contain these elements too, e.g., Introduction (beginning), Methods, Results and part of Discussion (middle), the remaining Discussion and Conclusion (ending). Beyond this basic structure, two further structures are useful when considering narrative in papers: ABT and OCAR.

The ABT Structure

ABT stands for ... *And ... But ... Therefore* For example,
*Monsoon intensity is greatly influenced by interactions with the land surface. **(and)** An accurate understanding of the interactions would be beneficial in predicting monsoon intensity. **But**, simulations of these interactions remain difficult due a lack of research. **Therefore**, this research investigates the three most important land factors for monsoon intensity.*

The ABT structure is useful when starting an abstract (see also Information Sheets 1 and 1a on writing abstracts). It can also be used in other places in a paper, e.g., in the first paragraph of the introduction, as well as for grant and PhD proposals.



Some alternative words for *and*, *but*, *therefore*:

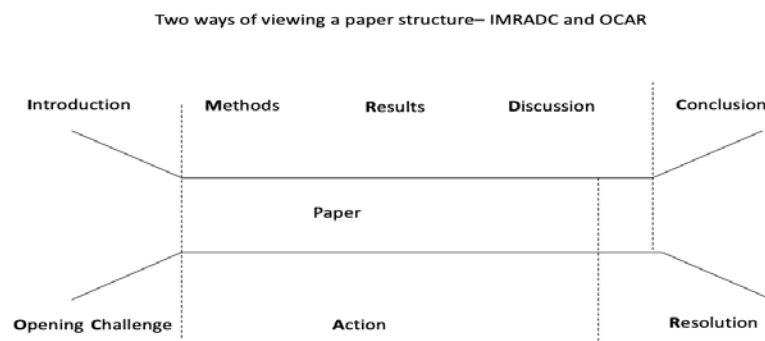
And: also, equally, identically, like, moreover, as well as, furthermore, likewise, similarly

But: despite, however, yet, conversely, rather, whereas, although, otherwise, instead, albeit

Therefore: so, thus, consequently, hence, thereupon, accordingly, as a result, henceforth, for this reason, in that case

The OCAR structure

OCAR stands for *Opening*, *Challenge*, *Action*, *Resolution*. The first three elements are similar to the ABT elements: Opening = *And*, Challenge = *But*, Action = *Therefore*. But the structure contains the extra element *Resolution*, the ending of the story, which links back to the beginning and thus provides a full narrative structure for a paper or abstract. The *Resolution* reflects back on how the *Actions* (methods, results and early discussion) have managed to solve the *Challenge* and what implications this has for the bigger picture in the *Opening* of the paper. A diagram of how the OCAR structure can be fitted into a classic IMRaDC paper structure could look like this



Useful Resources

Olson, R., 2015. *Houston, We Have a Narrative: Why science needs story*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Schimmel, J. 2012. *Writing Science: How to write papers that get cited and proposals that get funded*. Oxford. OUP Houston.

Final Comments/Tips

- In an abstract, the ABT elements do not have to be in that order. A TAB structure is also possible, e.g., *In this paper we investigate ... (Therefore). We do this to further research into (And). This investigation is necessary because ... (But).*

