

# Keith Head

## The Introduction Formula

When I arrived at UBC, my colleague John Ries, who had been hired the year before, explained to me that Jim Brander had given him a formula for writing introductions. I'm afraid I didn't pay much attention at the time because I thought it would stifle my creative juices (is that a mixed metaphor?). Finally, I think I ended up internalizing the rules and now I thought I should make them explicit because they have served us well and I wish I could referee more papers that follow them.

1. **Hook:** Attract the reader's interest by telling them that this paper relates to something interesting. What makes a topic interesting? Some combination of the following attributes makes Y something worth looking at.

- Y matters: When Y rises or falls, people are hurt or helped.
- Y is puzzling: it defies easy explanation.
- Y is controversial: some argue one thing while other say another.
- Y is big (like the service sector) or common (like traffic jams).

Things to avoid:

- *The bait and switch* : promising an interesting topic but delivering something else, in particular, something boring.
- *"all my friends are doing it"* : presenting no other motivation for a topic than that other people have written papers on it.

2. **Question:** Tell the reader what this paper actually does. Think of this as the point in a trial where having detailed the crime, you now identify a perpetrator and promise to provide a persuasive case. The reader should have an idea of a clean research question that will have a more or less satisfactory answer by the end of the paper. Examples follow below. The question may take two paragraphs. At the end of the first (2nd paragraph of the paper) or possibly beginning of the second (3rd paragraph overall) you should have the "This paper addresses the question" sentence.
3. **Antecedents:** Identify the prior work that is critical for understanding the contribution this paper will make. The key mistake to avoid here are discussing papers that are not essential parts of the intellectual narrative leading up to your own paper. Give credit where due but establish, in a non-insulting way, that the prior work is incomplete or otherwise deficient in some important way.

4. **Value-Added:** Describe approximately 3 contributions this paper will make relative to the antecedents. This paragraph might be the most important one for convincing referees not to reject your paper. A big difference between it and the earlier "question" paragraph is that the contributions should make sense only in light of prior work whereas the basic research question of the paper should be understandable simply in terms of knowing the topic (from the hook paragraph). John suggests that "Antecedents" and "Value-added" may be intertwined. They may also take up to 3 paragraphs.
5. **Road-map:** Outline the organization of the paper. Avoid writing an outline so generic that it could apply to any paper ("the next section is the middle of the paper and then we have the end"). Instead customize the road map to the project and possibly mention pivotal "landmarks" (problems, solutions, results...) that will be seen along the way. But keep this short because many readers will now be eager to get to the heart of the paper.

Brander suggests that you write the intro first but then read and edit it every time you compose other parts of the paper. Thus by the end, the intro will have received more attention, more times, than any other part of the paper. The introduction is not just important because of the "first impressions" idea that it will tilt the referee for or against you (though it probably will). It is also vital to making sure you know yourself what you are doing in the paper and why. If you can't write a good introduction, then you may be writing the wrong paper.