Titles and Introductions

The preparation of orienting and introductory materials for journal articles is often a task left to the last minutes before a paper is sent off for review to a journal. Such materials typically include the title of an article, the abstract, and the introductory paragraphs. In some cases, including papers for *TCR*, short descriptive statements about the article are also used. The materials used to introduce an article and to locate it in the larger sea of scholarly work are crucial to the success of an article. They position the article before an audience faced with a large number of papers on any given topic. Orienting and introductory materials help authors find an audience for their work.

Crafting a title for a paper is particularly important because the words used in the title are often the basis for the classification of the paper by various indexing services. It may once have been the case that readers were able to review the papers published in a small number of journals in their field, and in certain fields reading one or two journals may still enable one to stay current with the literature. However, increasingly readers faced with a large number of journals come to academic papers in the course of a comprehensive search as part of a particular research activity. Thus it is becoming more important for papers to be titled in a way to ensure that they can be uncovered by automated search systems. Creative titles that give little clue as to the content of a paper may prevent it from being found by even motivated readers with a clear interest in the topic. Authors should consider the needs of scholars searching a large and growing research literature as they construct titles for their papers. Words that appear in a title often become the primary source of keywords for computerized searches. In attempting to balance the desire to be creative with the need to provide clear search terms many authors have been led to construct multipart titles in which a creative engaging title segment appears before a colon followed by a descriptive title segment after the colon.

Titles that attempt to be both creative and descriptive can quickly become long and cumbersome and even then they may not convey enough about the substance of a paper. To overcome some of these limitations at *TCR* we have adopted the practice of including a short descriptive sentence or two for each paper that we publish. We now include these statements in the
table of contents for each issue. These short descriptive statements allow readers of TCR in print and online to know at a glance the substance of a paper.

Abstracts are another key element in the set of orienting and introductory materials for a paper. Abstracts allow authors the opportunity to set forth the entire argument presented in the complete paper. Carefully crafted descriptive abstracts enable readers to determine quickly whether a paper is appropriate for their particular needs. Abstracts vary in length according to the specifications of a particular journal or abstractor. Most abstract length limits will only allow a sentence or two to represent each of the major sections of a paper. It is important to distill the essence of a paper into this compact form. In doing so authors should consider the perspective of the scholar using the abstract to determine whether to delve further into the complete article and should strive to develop an abstract that faithfully represents the article.

The introductory section of a paper is important for a number of reasons. First, the introduction to a paper, whether it is a single paragraph or several pages, sets the expectations of the reviewers and readers and often determines how a paper is ultimately evaluated. Second, the related material that introduces an article can determine whether the paper will find an audience, or the right audience, the one most likely to be interested in the topic covered. Attention paid to introductory material is likely to be rewarded with a favorable decision from reviewers and editors as well as a wider readership.

Introductory sections of papers can alert editors, reviewers, and readers to the goals of the paper. When the goals are clearly articulated at the outset editors can make quick determinations as to the appropriateness of a paper for a particular journal. Of course, authors should have already taken the time to ascertain whether a paper fits the criteria for the journal to which they are sending it. Nonetheless, a clear introductory statement will allow the editor to confirm that fit before proceeding to a full and often lengthy review process. A careful decision about the appropriateness of an article for a journal based on a clear statement of the goals of a paper can save authors months in a review process that otherwise might conclude that a perfectly fine paper is just not right for a journal.

The introductory statement of the goals of a paper also sets the expectations of the reviewers. Each reviewer, indeed each reader, of a paper brings certain assumptions not only about how a particular topic should be handled, but also about what constitutes legitimate and appropriate scholarly activity. Because reader expectations and assumptions can vary widely, it is important for authors to introduce readers to a paper by providing a clear statement of the goals of the paper and an equally clear statement of the means by which those goals will be pursued.
Achieving clarity of communication in the introductory section of a paper requires the use of terms that are widely shared by members of the reading audience. For example, if a claim is made in the introduction that the paper will report on a longitudinal study, then the following material should describe a study that meets readers’ expectations for a longitudinal study. If a particular paper is departing from convention in some way it is essential to describe exactly how the approach in the paper at hand differs from what readers might otherwise expect to find.

Because readers’ expectations are set in the introductory section of a paper, failure to make a clear promise that can be fulfilled by the end of the paper will often lead reviewers to judge the paper a failure. Similarly, if the introduction clearly communicates the parameters of the paper to follow and if the paper conforms to those parameters, readers will be more likely to judge the paper a success, at least in its own terms. Success comes from promising only what will actually be delivered in the paper.

Those elements of a scholarly paper designed to help readers locate the paper and aid them in becoming oriented to the work are often given only passing attention. Investments of more time in the preparation of these materials will be repaid as the paper is found by a larger and more appreciative audience.

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