Three Templates for Introductions to Political Science Articles

Andrew T. Little[*]

February 2016

Learning to write strong introductions to journal articles is one of the most important skills to develop as an academic. However, most young scholars do not acquire this skill until they start piling up rejection letters, often with phrases like "poorly written," "should be framed differently," "not sure what the contribution is," or "unclear why I should bother reading this." (I speak from personal experience, both on the giving and receiving end.) Whether they realize it or not, what the referees are often trying to tell you with these complaints is "the introduction sucks."

Despite the clear importance of writing strong introductions, and many articles and books about academic writing in general,[1] I am unaware of any guide dedicated solely to the art and science of the introduction. One might think this is because there are no rules, or that only practice and experience can teach how to write those first few pages. The main advice I received as a graduate student and in the years just after graduating was to have mentors and other experienced writers read my work and to heed their (inevitably harsh) criticism. No guide can fully spare you from this process. However, after reading many introductions across top political science journals (and related fields) in order to give some advice to graduate students in a writing seminar, I was surprised to find there really are not many ways to structure an introduction. Here I present these structures as templates, along with some more generic advice, in the hope that it will slightly steepen your

[*]Assistant Professor of Government, Cornell University. andrew.little@cornell.edu.

[1]Sword (2012) gives an overview of the advice given in many books on academic writing, including some suggestions for opening "hooks," but not a comprehensive approach to intoductions. (McCloskey, 1998) and (Weingast, 2010) are two I find useful for economics and political science.

learning curve.[2]

The Draft Introduction and Research Design

Some suggest writing the introduction to your paper after you have written the main body. How can you describe your results without knowing what they are?

This is bad advice. Trying to write an introduction before the main sections of the paper are done serves two important purposes. First, as with any writing, the more passes you take at your introduction the better. Time spent writing and editing sentences on the page is never time wasted. If you have a draft introduction to start with, going back once you have the results will be much easier. As Adam Przeworski frequently admonishes his students, “This is the job: you rewrite, and you rewrite, and you rewrite.”

More importantly, thinking through what will make a compelling introduction can greatly improve the focus of your actual research. If you can’t think of how to sell your results with one of (or a combination of) the templates below, you probably do not have a good research strategy to start with. Drafting an introduction forces you to think about how what you expect to find will make a paper worth reading.

If the idea of “selling” your ideas seems dirty, get over it. Our job is not only to learn about the world but to communicate what we learn to others. This does not mean the sales job is more important than the actual quality of your research. Rather, think of the research and the writing as complementary parts of the same process: better research is easier to sell, and the process of working through how to best communicate your results will sharpen your thinking about what you really want to say.

[2] This advice is mainly aimed at political science graduate students, but I suspect many of the general ideas could be useful to scholars at other levels or in other disciplines.

The Goals

Before getting to the templates, we should have a good sense of what an introduction needs to accomplish. On this point there is general consensus that you must do three things:[3]

1. Introduce the general topic you will be addressing in a way that grabs the readers' attention, or at least convinces them that you are addressing something worthy of their time.

2. Explain why the existing work on the topic is incorrect or incomplete.

3. Describe how you fix this by laying out your approach and what you find.

Do these three things as quickly as possible and you should be in good shape. Do just enough of (1) to convince an editor who may not work on this area that you are writing about something important. Do just enough of (2) to motivate your intervention and convince the referee who *does* know a lot about the question that you have something new to say. And do just enough of (3) that a reader without the time to go through the whole paper carefully gets a good sense of your main contribution. Not coincidentally, the editor, referee, and over-hurried reader should be the main audiences you have in mind.

There are also a few optional things that can be useful to include if not necessary:

- Some articles state the research question in the beginning of the introduction, often as the first sentence. If you are stuck on how to start, this is a perfectly fine way to do so.

- A good way to clearly state the third goal is to just have a sentence that says "The main contribution of this paper is ..." Or, if you have two contributions, have two sentences (or paragraphs) laying these out. If you think you have three or more contributions, you are

[3] For example, this parallels Weingast's 2010 sparse advice for introduction writing. Another nice statement of these goals comes from, of all places, a blog about research on fire safety engineering: `http://edinburghfireresearch.blogspot.com/2011/06/writing-good-journal-paper-introduction.html`

probably trying to do too much in one paper. (I am being more generous than Weingast (2010), who only gives you one major point to make!)

- After stating the contribution of the paper, it can also be valuable to sum up with a sentence or paragraph that reinforces why the results are important. As with the contribution, one need not be too clever here: just say "These results are important because ..." If you can't finish that sentence before (or worse, after) doing the research, this is cause for concern.

- Some strongly recommend ending introductions with a "roadmap" paragraph that lays out what you do in each section (Weingast, 2010). Others find this practice rarely useful (Kreihbiel and McCarty, 2009) or even abhorrent (McCloskey, 1998). Clearly not everyone can be pleased on this front. As a compromise, I suggest using a roadmap if the "what we do" section does not also preview the structure of the paper, and the paper does not follow a standard format.

The Templates

How do you accomplish these three goals? Here are three templates. Virtually all political science journal articles use one of these or some combination of them. One can usually identify which template is being used by reading the first sentence, if not the first paragraph of an article. I first lay out the "pure" cases, and then how they can be combined, which is quite common.

Template 1: Fact(s) about world $\Longrightarrow$ existing work explains poorly $\Longrightarrow$ we explain better.

The opening move of this strategy is good for getting the attention of a wide audience: say something interesting about the world which you will spend the paper explaining or unpacking. You can begin by pointing out that something is ubiquitous ("even the most autocratic regimes hold elections") or rare ("war between democracies is nearly non-existent"). A notable or surprising correlation ("major oil producing countries tend to have repressive governments") can do the trick as well.

Your fact can also be more specific, telling a particular story that your theory will explain or empirical analysis will generalize. One can have a bit of poetic license here: one of my favorite opening lines using this strategy is "As dusk fell upon Tulua (Colombia) at the end of an election day in 1871, while the votes were being counted, one of the electoral tables was suddenly dragged away from the polling station by a man on horseback wielding a lasso" (Posada-Carbó, 2000). The reader immediately becomes curious about why cowboys would choose this particular technology of fraud and what it says about electoral manipulation more generally. Often the specific story segues into describing a more general phenomenon.

Once your fact is introduced, we need to be convinced that it is not yet explained. Again, this can take several forms. The general pattern you raise may be inconsistent with dominant theoretical ideas. Perhaps the related literature is inconsistent with the particular story you told (and hopefully other cases). The aim here is not to comprehensively describe the literature, but to prevent a knowledgeable reader from thinking "but we already know why this is the case, so why should I read your article?"

Finally, what are you going to do to make us understand the motivating fact better? This is generally the longest part of an introduction, but needs little specific advice: just highlight the main findings of the paper. The challenge in writing this section is that you know every detail about your results, so it can be hard to inhabit the mind of a less informed reader. Make sure some peers or mentors who don't already know the paper well take a look at this section so that it makes sense even to a fresh reader.

Template 2: This topic is heavily studied and important $\Longrightarrow$ *but something is missing/wrong* $\Longrightarrow$ *and we fix it.*

This opening is usually less explicitly grabby than template 1, but signals in a simple way what big idea or literature you plan to speak to. However, you should be careful to make sure someone who is not familiar with this area will recognize the importance of what you are doing. You can be relatively specific ("Political scientists have long been interested in whether campaign spending is effective") or general ("Downsian party competition models are one of the most prominent applications of game theory to political science"). For political theory, the topic will often be the thought or writings of a major figure.

There are several ways to get at what is missing or wrong. A major theory could be inconsistent with recent developments or the case you analyze (often this leads to a hybrid with template 1). Or the existing literature leaves an important mechanism unspecified. Some major theories haven't been tested properly; this template can work well for the increasingly common types of studies that introduce new data or aim to establish a causal effect more credibly than past work.

The "how we fix this" part is then pretty straightforward: say what you do in the paper and frame it in light of what the existing important literature misses.

Template 3: Theories/facts seem contradictory $\Longrightarrow$ *we support one side or resolve tension.*

This template is slightly different than the other two in that you introduce the topic and the important parts of the literature at the same time. Usually these introductions start by contrasting existing theories or approaches ("Some have argued that parliamentary systems are more stable, others claim presidential ones are"). The disagreement can also be empirical ("Some studies find that killing leaders of violent groups reduces their effectiveness, while others find it is counterproductive").

Once the debate has been set up, you can proceed in a few ways, depending on what your paper actually argues or finds. First, you can provide evidence that theory 1 is right and theory 2 is wrong. Or, you can show that theory 1 is right under some conditions while theory 2 works in others. Finally, you can argue that in fact both are right, or both are wrong.

Hybrid Templates

While nearly every introduction can be primarily classified as one of these three, many blend elements of both. In fact, any pairing can work well together:

1 + 2

If you are speaking to a large important literature, but a particular fact or story will do a good job of motivating what you are going to add, then combining the first two templates works well. This can be done in either order. You can start with an interesting fact or story, then point out that many have tried to answer questions like this, but the answers aren't fully satisfactory for this particular case. Or you can start by introducing an important literature, and then point to a case that motivates what is missing.

1 + 3

Opening with two (or more) seemingly contradictory facts or examples is a natural combination of templates 1 and 3. For example, two empirical regularities may seem inconsistent with each other ("many regimes commit fraud and also invite election monitors who may detect this"), motivating you to find the theory where they both happen. Another hybrid is to start with an interesting fact before pointing out that different theories will interpret it differently.

2 + 3

In most major areas of study there are conflicting theories, so there is often an opportunity to signal you are talking about something interesting by the fact that there are multiple major schools of thought.

What Else?

It is worth reiterating that if you can't think of how to frame what you are doing in your paper in one of these fashions, you probably do not have a good paper. Writing a strong introduction is just a microcosm of writing a strong paper and doing good research more generally. Writing a strong conclusion is less important since many won't read that far anyways.

References

Kreihbiel, Keith and Nolan McCarty. 2009. "Quarterly Journal of Political Science Style Guidelines." Available at http://gbytes.gsood.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/QJPS-Style-Guidelines.pdf.

McCloskey, Deirdre N. 1998. *The rhetoric of economics*. Univ of Wisconsin Press.

Posada-Carbó, Eduardo. 2000. "Electoral juggling: A comparative history of the corruption of suffrage in Latin America, 1830–1930." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 32(03):611–644.

Sword, Helen. 2012. *Stylish academic writing*. Harvard University Press.

Weingast, Barry R. 2010. "The Caltech Rules for Writing Papers: How to Structure your Paper and Write and Introduction." Manuscript.