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16.1 The Common Structure of Introductions
Whenever we read about a scientific breakthrough or a crisis in world affairs, we benefit from the research of those who report it, who in turn benefited from the research of countless others. When we walk into a library, we are surrounded by more than twenty-five centuries of research. When we log on to the Internet, we can read millions of reports written by researchers who have posed questions beyond number, gathered untold amounts of information from the research of others to answer them, then shared their answers with the rest of us so that we can carry on their work by asking new questions and, we hope, answering them.

Teachers at all levels devote their lives to research. Governments spend billions on it, businesses even more. Research goes on in laboratories and libraries, in jungles and ocean depths, in caves and in outer space, in offices and, in the information age, even in our own homes. Research is in fact the world’s biggest industry. Those who cannot do it well or evaluate that of others will find themselves sidelined in a world increasingly dependent on sound ideas based on good information produced by trustworthy inquiry and then presented clearly and accurately.

In fact, research reported by others, in writing, is the source of most of what we believe. Of your three authors, only Williams has ever set foot in Australia, but Booth and Colomb believe it exists, because for a lifetime they have read about it in reports they trust.
and have seen it on reliable maps (and heard reports about it from Williams). None of us has been to Venus, but we believe that it is hot, dry, and mountainous, because that’s what we’ve read. But we trust that research only because we think it was done carefully and reported accurately.

Without trustworthy published research, we all would be locked in the opinions of the moment, prisoners of what we alone experience or dupes to whatever we’re told. Of course, we want to believe that our opinions are sound, yet mistaken ideas, even dangerous ones, flourish because too many people accept too many opinions based on too little evidence. And as recent events have shown, those who act on unreliable evidence can lead us—indeed have led us—into disaster.

That’s why in this book we will urge you to be amiably skeptical of the research you read, to question it even as you realize how much you depend on it. Are we three authors 100 percent drop-dead certain of reports that Venus is hot, dry, and mountainous? No, but we trust the researchers who have published reports about it, as well as the editors, reviewers, and skeptical readers who have tested those reports and published their own results. So we’ll go on thinking that Venus is hot and dry, at least until we see better evidence that it’s not.

1.1 WHAT IS RESEARCH?

In the broadest terms, we do research whenever we gather information to answer a question that solves a problem:

**Problem:** Where do I find a new head gasket for my '65 Mustang?

**Research:** Look in the yellow pages for an auto-parts store, then call to see if it has one in stock.

**Problem:** To settle a bet, I need to know when Michael Jordan was born.

**Research:** You Google “Michael Jordan birthday.”
**Problem:** I'm just curious about a new species of fish.

**Research:** You search the Internet for articles in newspapers and academic journals.

We all do that kind of research every day, and though we rarely write it up, we rely on those who wrote up theirs: Jordan's biographers, the fish discoverers, the publishers of the yellow pages and the catalogs of the auto-parts suppliers—they all wrote up their research because they knew that one day someone would have a question that they could answer.

If you're preparing to do a research project not because you want to but because it's been assigned, you might think that it is just make-work and treat it as an empty exercise. We hope you won't. Done well, your project prepares you to join the oldest and most esteemed of human conversations, one conducted for millennia among philosophers, engineers, biologists, social scientists, historians, literary critics, linguists, theologians, not to mention CEOs, lawyers, marketers, investment managers—the list is endless.

Right now, you may feel that the conversation is one-sided, that you have to listen more than you can speak, and that in any event you have little to contribute and only one reader. That may be true, for the moment. But at some point, you will join a conversation that, at its best, can help you and your community free us from ignorance, prejudice, and the half-baked ideas that so many charlatans try to impose on us. It is no exaggeration to say that, maybe not today or tomorrow but one day, your research and your reports of it can improve if not the whole world, at least your corner of it.

### 1.2 Why Write It Up?

For some of you, though, the invitation to join this conversation may still seem easy to decline. If you accept it, you'll have to find a good question, search for sound data, formulate and support a good answer, and then write it all up. Even if you turn out a first-rate report, it may be read not by an eager world but only by your teacher.
And, besides, you may think, my teacher knows all about my topic. What do I gain from writing up my research, other than proving I can do it?

One answer is that we write not just to share our work, but to improve it before we do.

1.2.1 Write to Remember

Experienced researchers first write just to remember what they’ve read. A few talented people can hold in mind masses of information, but most of us get lost when we think about what Smith found in light of Wong’s position, and compare both to the odd data in Brunelli, especially as they are supported by Boskowitz—but what was it that Smith said? When you don’t take notes on what you read, you’re likely to forget or, worse, misremember it.

1.2.2 Write to Understand

A second reason for writing is to see larger patterns in what you read. When you arrange and rearrange the results of your research in new ways, you discover new implications, connections, and complications. Even if you could hold it all in mind, you would need help to line up arguments that pull in different directions, plot out complicated relationships, sort out disagreements among experts. I want to use these claims from Wong, but her argument is undercut by Smith’s data. When I put them side by side, I see that Smith ignores this last part of Wong’s argument. Aha! If I introduce it with this part from Brunelli, I can focus on Wong more clearly. That’s why careful researchers never put off writing until they’ve gathered all the data they need: they write from the beginning of their project to help them assemble their information in new ways.

1.2.3 Write to Test Your Thinking

A third reason to write is to get your thoughts out of your head and onto paper, where you’ll see what you really can think. Just about all of us, students and professionals alike, believe our ideas are more compelling in the dark of our minds than they turn out to be in the cold light of print. You can’t know how good your ideas
are until you separate them from the swift and muddy flow of thought and fix them in an organized form that you—and your readers—can study.

In short, we write to remember more accurately, understand better, and evaluate what we think more objectively. (And as you will discover, the more you write, the better you read.)

1.3 WHY A FORMAL REPORT?

But even when they agree that writing is an important part of learning, thinking, and understanding, some still wonder why they can't write up their research in their own way, why they have to satisfy demands imposed by a community that they have not joined (or even want to) and conform to conventions they did nothing to create. Why should I adopt language and forms that are not mine? Aren't you just trying to turn me into an academic like yourself? If I write as you expect me to, I risk losing my identity.

Such concerns are legitimate (most teachers wish students would raise them more often). But it would be a feeble education that did not change you at all, and the deeper your education, the more it will change the “you” that you are or want to be. That’s why it’s so important to choose carefully what you study and with whom. But it would be a mistake to think that learning to write sound research reports must threaten your true identity. It will change the way you think, but only by giving you more ways of thinking. You will be different by being freer to choose who you want to be and what you want to do with the rest of your life.

But the most important reason for learning to report research in ways readers expect is that when you write for others, you demand more of yourself than when you write for yourself alone. By the time you fix your ideas in writing, they are so familiar to you that you need help to see them not for what you want them to be but for what they really are. You will understand your own work better when you try to anticipate your readers’ inevitable and critical questions: How have you evaluated your evidence? Why do you think it’s relevant? What ideas have you considered but rejected?

All researchers, including the three of us, can recall moments
when in writing to meet their readers’ expectations, they found a flaw or blunder in their thinking or even discovered a new insight that escaped them in a first draft written for themselves. You can do that only when you imagine and then meet the needs and expectations of informed and careful readers. When you do that, you create what we call a rhetorical community of shared values.

You might think, OK, I’ll write for readers, but why not in my own way? The traditional forms that readers expect are more than empty vessels into which you must squeeze your ideas. They have evolved to help writers question their thinking in ways they might not otherwise; they also embody the shared values of a research community. Whatever community you join, you’ll be expected to show that you understand its practices by reporting your research as its members do. Once you know its standard forms, you’ll be better able to answer your particular community’s predictable questions and understand what its members care about and why.

But regardless of these differences among communities, what counts as good work is the same, whether it’s in the academic world or the world of government, commerce, or technology. If you learn to do research well now, you gain an immense advantage in the kind of research you will do later, no matter where you do it.

1.4 WRITING IS THINKING

Writing a research report is, finally, thinking with and for your readers. When you write for others, you disentangle your ideas from your memories and wishes, so that you—and others—can explore, expand, combine, and understand them more fully. Thinking for others is more careful, more sustained, more insightful—in short, more thoughtful—than just about any other kind of thinking.

You can, of course, take the easy way: do just enough to satisfy your teacher. This book will help you do that, but you’ll shortchange yourself if you do. If instead you find a topic that you care about, ask a question that you want to answer, then pursue that answer as best you can, your project can have the fascination of a mystery whose solution richly rewards your efforts. Nothing contributes more to successful research than your commitment to it, and noth-
ing teaches you more about how to think than a successful (or even unsuccessful) report of its product.

We wish we could tell you how to balance your belief in the worth of your project with the need to accommodate the demands of teachers and colleagues, but we cannot. If you believe in what you're doing and cannot find anyone else who shares your beliefs, all you can do is put your head down and press on. With our admiration.

Some of the world's most important research has been done by those who persevered in the face of indifference or even hostility, because they never lost faith in their vision. The geneticist Barbara McClintock struggled for years unappreciated because her research community considered her work uninteresting. But she believed in it and pressed on. When her colleagues finally realized that she had already answered questions that they were just starting to ask, she won science's highest honor, the Nobel Prize.