

Discussions

Discussions, like introductions, have a typical structure. Lewin *et al.* (2001) and Swales and Feak (2004) describe typical ‘moves’ in the discussion sections of academic research papers. Putting these descriptions together suggests the following moves:

- *Move 1*: Restate the findings and accomplishments.
- *Move 2*: Evaluate how the results fit in with the previous findings – do they contradict, qualify, agree or go beyond them?
- *Move 3*: List potential limitations to the study.
- *Move 4*: Offer an interpretation/explanation of these results and ward off counter-claims.
- *Move 5*: State the implications and recommend further research.

Discussions, then, go beyond a summary of the findings and, indeed, there may be disciplinary differences in how they are approached. Holmes (1997), for instance, found that the discussion sections of papers in sociology and political science were similar in format to those in the sciences, whereas those in history were less complex. Swales and Feak (2004) state that some scientists believe that a long discussion implies weak methods and results, whereas social scientists and people in the arts may well believe the opposite.

AN EXAMPLE

Lewin *et al.* (2001) provide numerous quotations from the discussion sections of several research articles to support the above ‘moves’ analysis. In terms of Slatcher and Pennebaker’s (2006) paper referred to earlier, we may note the following sentences contained in the six paragraphs of their discussion section:

- *Move 1*: Restating the findings and accomplishments:
 - Par. 1: ‘The very simple act of writing about their romantic relationship changed the way in which participants communicated . . .’;
 - Par. 2: ‘Taken together these findings shed light on processes underlying interactions in close relationships . . .’;
 - Par. 3: ‘An advantage of the current design is that . . .’;
 - Par. 6: ‘Unlike previous expressive-writing studies, this is the first to demonstrate . . .’.
- *Move 2*: Evaluating how the results fit in with previous research:
 - Par. 3: ‘In particular, the findings relating to increases in emotion words illuminate previous research [3 references provided]’.
- *Move 3*: Stating the limitations:
 - Par. 5: ‘There are some potential limitations in this study. First . . . Second . . .’.
- *Move 4*: Warding off alternative explanations:
 - Par. 5. ‘. . . make this an unlikely possibility’.
- *Move 5*: Stating implications:
 - Par. 4: . . . [this finding] ‘has clear implications for clinicians’;
 - Par. 5: ‘. . . future studies should address this issue’.

These quotations illustrate that the five moves are present, but they are not as clearly sequenced or indicated as might be implied from the list above. Authors seem more flexible in how they tackle their discussions, although the moves listed are usually present.

Discussion sections are difficult to write because their aim is to discuss and comment on the findings, rather than just to report them. Day and Gastel (2006) suggest that journal editors reject many papers because of their weak discussions. They recommend that discussions should end with a short summary regarding the significance of the work, which, they claim, is not always adequately considered.

Woods (1999) recommends:

- 1 that writers should keep notes about what it might be useful to include in the discussion as ideas occur to them when they are writing other sections; and
- 2 that it might be wise to set aside a day or two to tackle this section of the paper.

This, he says, will make the task less daunting.

REFERENCES

- Day, R. A. & Gastel, B. (2006). *How to write and publish a scientific paper* (6th edn). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holmes, R. (1997). Genre analysis, and the social sciences: An investigation of the structure of research article discussion sections in three disciplines. *English for Specific Purposes*, 16(4), 321–37.
- Lewin, B., Fine, J. & Young, L. (2001). *Expository discourse: A genre-based approach to social science research texts*. London: Continuum.
- Slatcher, R. B. & Pennebaker, J. W. (2006). How do I love thee? Let me count the words. *Psychological Science*, 17(8), 660–4.
- Swales, J. M. & Feak, C. B. (2004). *Academic writing for graduate students* (2nd edn). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Woods, P. (1999). *Successful writing for qualitative researchers*. London: Routledge.

FURTHER READING

- Calfee, R. (2000). What does it all mean? The discussion. In R. J. Sternberg (Ed.), *Guide to publishing in psychology journals* (pp. 133–45). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

