

Writing a research paper for the Humanities

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This paper provides useful guidelines for young researchers to write a research paper for the field of linguistics and language studies. It describes how information should be organized in the different sections, what aspects each of the sections should contain and how they should be developed. The following points are addressed: title, abstract, introduction, review of the literature, statement of purpose and method. Finally, a description of the conclusion section is offered, focusing on the importance of the discoveries and the future implications of the research. It also includes an overview of how references should be cited considering the two most relevant citation styles, MLA and APA. Reference is also made to the process of revising the paper before submitting it for publication and to the impact and eigenfactor in the selection of a journal.

Keywords: Research, writing, guidelines, style, methodology.

Escribir un artículo de investigación en Humanidades. Este artículo ofrece pautas de utilidad para los jóvenes investigadores en el proceso de escribir un artículo de investigación en el campo de la lingüística y los estudios de lenguas. El artículo describe cómo debe organizarse la información en las diferentes secciones de un artículo, qué aspectos debe incluir cada sección y cómo deben desarrollarse. Nos centramos en los siguientes puntos: título, resumen, introducción, revisión de la bibliografía, establecimiento de los objetivos y método. Finalmente, se incluye la descripción de la conclusión, centrándose en la importancia de los descubrimientos y las implicaciones para investigaciones futuras. También incluye una revisión de cómo debe citarse un trabajo, considerando las dos guías de estilo más relevantes: MLA y APA. También se hace referencia al proceso de revisión del artículo antes de su publicación y al factor de impacto y “eigenfactor” en la selección de una revista.

Palabras clave: Investigación, escribir, pautas, estilo, metodología.

Research aims at communicating new knowledge or proving/disproving existing ideas. A good research paper must be well organized in a logical and systematic way. Many guides have been published regarding how to write a paper or the different sections of a paper (Ballenger, 2009; Berry, 1986; Day, 1998; Hall, 2008; Kozak & Hartley,

2011; Slafer, 2009; Soler, 2011; Turabian, 2007; Walker, 1993; Winkler & McCuen, 2012). A recent study by Hartley (2012) indicates current techniques in how to write an academic paper; it also compares the writing conventions of Spanish and English. The writing of research papers has also been the object of study in many fields such as psychology (Fernández-Ríos & Buena-Casal, 2009; León, 2005) and in the area of applied linguistics (Brown, 1988; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991), even institutions related to European Communities have published studies providing guidelines for this

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type of publications (Hengl & Gould, 2006). As these authors acknowledge, research articles follow a rigid structure, divided into three levels, macro (sections), meso (paragraphs) and micro (sentences). These levels fit into the structure *Introduction-Methods-Results-Discussion*.

The aim of this paper is to provide basic guidelines for young researchers in the elaboration of a research paper in the humanities, more specifically in the area of applied linguistics. For this purpose, it includes the different sections of a paper, i.e. the theoretical background and empirical study, and the guidelines on how to revise the paper before it is submitted for publication. Finally, it focuses on the selection of a journal and the explanation of what the impact and eigenfactor consist of.

Sections of a paper

Title, abstract and introduction

Several authors (cf. Ackles, 1996) have investigated the principles that guide the creation of a title, in fact the title of a paper should provide the most relevant information about the piece of research in a few words. It must also attract the reader's attention, be short and simple and avoid redundant expressions. It is immediately followed by the abstract. Many authors have analyzed the contents and style of the abstract and introduction of an article (Gopen & Swam, 1990; Kirkman, 1992; Turk & Kirkman, 1989). The abstract summarizes what was done in the study, what was found and what the main conclusions are. In order for the contents to be well organized it must include a clear statement of the topic and purpose of the article, a brief description of the participants in the study, an explanation of the procedures followed and the data analysis used as well as a summary of the results and their implications for the field. No citations, tables or figures should be introduced in the abstract. The introductory section introduces the topic of study; it is agreed that this section should relate this topic to current knowledge and most importantly it

should indicate the gap there exists in the field of study. The piece of research the author writes is supposed to fill that gap in the corresponding field of research, which constitutes the next step in the introduction: to introduce the author's work. At the end of the introduction it is common to place the research questions and objectives, sometimes these come in a separate section called "statement of purpose". As mentioned above, this contains the purpose and objectives of the study as well as, if necessary, specific research questions and hypotheses.

Review of the literature

The next step comes under the headline "Review of the literature". The background or rationale for the study is included here as well as a demonstration of how previous research is related to the study, together with its limitations. Finally, the framework for the study should be included.

The empirical study

When the theoretical sections of the paper are finished, the empirical study is presented. This section should answer a series of *wh*-questions: who participated in the study, when and where (subjects), what type of materials were used (materials), what the participants were asked to do (procedures), how the analysis of the data was carried out (data analysis).

Subjects

As regards the subjects, the following contents should be present in the paper, the number of informants, who they were, their age, sex, school they belong to, native language background, proficiency level, nationality, socioeconomic status and a short explanation of the criteria followed for the selection of the participants.

Materials and procedures

The second step in the empirical study is devoted to the materials used. The most frequently used materials in the field of applied linguistics tend to be questionnaires, protocols, interviews, tests, self-reports, diaries

and classroom observation. Once the materials have been described, the study should focus on the procedures. This section states how the materials and equipment were used, what the subjects did or what was done to them, how the materials were prepared, administered and scored, if there was any kind of piloting, what the environmental conditions were and how long the process took.

Data analysis and results

When the author has explained the preceding sections, the data analysis is introduced. This is devoted to the description of how the data were analysed in the study, what statistical procedures were used and which variables were considered. The data analysis is followed by the results section. Here, the grouped data and the results of the statistical analyses carried out are included. Figures, tables and graphs are also placed here, as well as a summary or description of the data. Information such as the subjects' average scores or ratings and how the scores varied among the different groups should also be included in this section.

Discussion

The discussion section comes after the data analysis. In the data analysis the results of the study are exposed in technical terms, nevertheless in the discussion the results are explained in non-technical terms. Direct answers to the original questions or hypotheses are included, in other words, the verification of the hypotheses goes here. The answers to the questions or the hypotheses must be explained, supported and defended with results. This explanation should consider the conflicting results, unexpected findings and discrepancies with other research. It is relevant to include the implications of the study, a comparison with previous research, innovations and the contribution of the study to new developments.

Conclusion and references

Finally, the conclusion contains the summary of the main results, the questions that have been resolved and raised, the sug-

gestions for further research, a brief statement on the limitations of the project and any pedagogical implications the paper may indicate.

The final section of a paper includes the references. Two main style guides are used: the Modern Language Association (MLA) and American Psychological Association (APA). In the MLA style guide, publications must be cited in this order:

Books:

- author(s) or editor(s)
- complete title
- edition if indicated
- place of publication
- shortened name of the publisher
- date of publication
- medium of publication

Nunan, David. *Language Teaching Methodology*. London: Longman, 2000. Print

Articles in journals:

- author(s)
- title
- publication title
- volume number
- publication date
- inclusive page numbers
- medium of publication

Bylund, Emmanuel. "Ultimate attainment of event segmentation and temporal structuring patterns in speakers of L2 Swedish" *Vigo International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 8 (2011): 29-53. Print

The APA style guide includes references as follows:

Book:

- author (s)
- initials
- year of publication
- title
- place of publication
- publisher

Nunan, D. (2000). *Language Teaching Methodology*. London: Longman.

Articles in a journal:

- author(s)

- initials
- date of publication
- article title
- journal title
- volume number
- issue number (if applicable)
- page numbers

Bylund, E. (2011). Ultimate attainment of event segmentation and temporal structuring patterns in speakers of L2 Swedish. *Vigo International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 8, 29-53.

Finally, a research paper can include the appendices of the materials used in the study. This can contain sample copies of the questionnaire, test or interview carried out by the researcher. It can also provide the reader with the full statistical analyses and the list of codes used in the piece of research.

Revising the paper

The revision process starts with the title, the author should check if it is clear and reflects the content and the main findings of the paper. The key terms mentioned in the study must be clear as well as the objectives. It is important to check that all the materials used are explained and that the results of the study are linked to relevant existing knowledge. The objectives should be clearly connected with the results and the finding should be clearly seen in tables, figures and clearly stated in the text.

Secondly, it must be checked that the conclusions reflect the questions or hypotheses stated at the beginning of the study. The text must be revised in order to see whether it is coherent. The author must make sure that the abstract can be understood standalone. Finally, the author should verify that all the abbreviations are explained and all the tables and figures are relevant. The references must be carefully checked so as not to skip a book or paper and confirm that they are up to date. For a full account of the revision process, Hengl & Gould (2006) is a useful manual.

Before submitting the paper, three final points should be considered: the stated ideas

must be backed up by solid arguments, the implications of the study must be clearly developed and the style of the paper has to be checked.

As regards style, punctuation must be checked, issues such as the use of full stops, commas, semicolons, dash or brackets should be revised. For example dashes tend to be used to add a surprising element in the text or to make an extra comment while brackets are preferred to include information which is not really relevant. Grammatical aspects like verbal agreement must be considered. This implies the correction of typical mistakes. For instance, the expression “a number of” is followed by a verb in the plural as in *A number of studies have been conducted*. Nevertheless, the expression “the number of” is followed by a verb in the singular as in *The number of studies is characteristic of the field*. Authors should also take into account whether the article will be published in a British or in an American English publication because there are spelling differences between both varieties, as in honour (UK style)-honor (US style)

Two common errors in academic writing are due to the lack of hedges in a text or to the use of dangling modifiers, as exemplified in the following paragraphs.

- Hedging: This is a technique used in academic writing which consists of resorting to vague language in order to be cautious in the statements we make about our paper. Hedging minimizes the effect that a researcher may produce on other researchers who read the article. For examples, if we compare these two sentences: *The data reveal...* *The data seem to reveal...*, the former is direct, no hedges are used to be careful with the reactions the readers may have. The latter is more cautious thanks to the use of the hedge “seem”. Hedging constitutes a key element in academic writing, it can be included in the text by using the following elements: modal verbs, verbs of cognition such as *seem* or *appear*, modal

adverbs, for instance *probably* or *likely*, modal adjectives such as *certain* or *probable*, modal nouns of the type *assumption*, *possibility*, *suggestion*, disjuncts such as *actually* or *in fact*, or impersonal active constructions of the type *this indicates*, *reveals*, *suggests*, etc.

- Dangling modifiers: In English a participle, which is a modifier, needs a subject to refer to and the subject is the nearest element in the next clause. When this does not happen, the participle is said to be unrelated (cf. Alonso, 2009). *Ing* and *-ed* participles need to be related to a subject in adverbial and relative clauses. The same happens with infinitives when there is no clear subject. For example, in the sentence “Considering the outcome of the experiment, the data were useful” the reader understands that it was the data that considered the outcome of the experiment. The right sentence in English would be “Considering the outcome of the experiment, we found the data useful”. Dangling modifiers can be avoided in the article by three means: the subject of the action must be the subject of the main clause, secondly the participle can be turned into a finite clause and finally, by changing the order of the clause, the unrelated participle is avoided.

Moreover, some common language mistakes in writing a paper are summarized below, a full account of the most typical errors can be found in Alonso (2011):

- Among or between? *Between* is used with two or more objects, places, people, etc. *Among* is used with a mass or a group of more than two.
- Beside or besides? *Beside* means alongside or at the side of, however *besides* means in addition to.
- During or for? *For* is used to talk about a period of time. *During* refers to when something happened.
- If or whether? Both of them introduce a question in reported speech but *whether* is used after prepositions and before infinitives.
- In spite of or despite? *In spite of* is followed by a noun, its meaning is similar to although. *Despite* has the same meaning but it does not take a preposition.
- Last, latest or the last? *The last* usually refers to the last in a series. We can also use *the last* to refer to a period that continues up to the present. *Last* is used to talk about something immediately preceding the present, as in *last day* or *last year*. *Latest* means something new.

After the paper has been revised the author must find the right journal where it could be published. The first decision to be made is whether the author wants to have it published online or in print and what type of journal it is going to be sent to, whether it will be a relevant journal which follows a process of double-blind review or a less demanding publication. In order to choose the appropriate journal, the author should be familiar with the impact factor, i.e., the measure which indicates the average number of citations of the articles published in relevant journals. It usually shows the significance of the journal in the corresponding area of research. The Journal Citation Reports calculate the impact factor of the journals included in Thomson Reuters every year by entering articles in their database. The average number of annual citations determine their relative impact factor. In recent years the so-called “eigenfactor” has become significant. It is included in the Eigenfactor Project, an academic project developed at the department of Biology at the University of Washington. This project tries to develop new methods to assess the influence of periodicals and to map the structure of academic publications. Two indexes can be distinguished in determining the eigenfactor, the index of influence of the journal, known as eigenfactor score (EF) and the article influence score (AF). The eigenfactor webpage

(www.eigenfactor.org) provides information about the percentile where each journal is placed in the classification of each area of knowledge. This new bibliometric index is more accurate than the impact factor. As Villar (2011, p. 85) summarises, it considers a five-year citation window (instead of the two years period included in the impact factor), citations are considered by the relevance of the citing journal. Besides, it includes the citation patterns of the different research fields, it generates an endogenous classification into 87 different and exclusive fields, the same database as the impact factor is used (some 7,000 journals listed in the JCR) and it is free and easily available in the web.

Authors can consult the different indexes in order to know the relevance of a definite journal in a scientific field, the most relevant in the area of linguistics are the ISI Web of Knowledge, the European Reference Index for the Humanities (henceforth ERIH), Language Abstracts and Language and Linguistics Behavior Abstracts. The ISI database is divided into three main types of journals: Arts and Humanities Citation Index, Science Citation Index and Social Sciences Citation Index. Journals must pass a rigorous evaluation process to be included in ISI. There are journals which are not indexed in ISI, but which have a certain relevance in their field. In this case, they generally appear in electronic journals published in well known websites, such as Elsevier, Blackwell, Cambridge or Oxford University Press. In order to exemplify a classification of journals in a database, the ERIH typology is explained.

NATional (NAT): This category comprises European publications with a highly relevant consideration in the respective research domains. It refers to publications which are aimed at the national academic community.

INTernational (INT): This includes European and non-European publications which are internationally recognised and which are cited worldwide on a regular basis.

ERIH classifies international journals into two sub-categories based on their influence and scope:

INT1 Sub-Category: This refers to international publications with high relevance in different countries and which are regularly cited all over the world.

INT2 Sub-Category: This includes international publications with significant visibility and which are relevant in different countries.

W Category Journals: This category is formed by journals whose first issue was published three years or less before the ERIH has revised it for its lists.

When the selection of the journal has been done, the author must tailor the style to the demands of the particular journal where the article will be published.

Conclusion

The different sections of a paper have been explained, from the organization of the contents in the abstract to the information that the conclusion should include. Articles must be clear and logic, written in grammatically correct sentences and the contents have to be clearly organized in the different sections. When information is misplaced, even if the contents are consistent, the paper is rejected. Arguments should be built up in solid sections and subsections with definite research objectives, questions and/or hypotheses, the main discoveries must be carefully explained and answers to the main questions have to be provided. Special relevance has been given to how references must be cited as it tends to be a confusing issue for those researchers who are starting their academic career. Finally, some guidelines for revision before the article submission have been provided. The description of impact factor and eigenfactor as well as the classification of journals according to ERIH index have been included so as to exemplify how the quality of a journal is typified in a highly recognized indexing list.

Referencias

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