Fourteen Steps to Writing an Effective Discussion Section

San Francisco Edit

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The purpose of the Discussion is to state your interpretations and opinions, explain the implications of your findings, and make suggestions for future research. Its main function is to answer the questions posed in the Introduction, explain how the results support the answers and, how the answers fit in with existing knowledge on the topic. The Discussion is considered the heart of the paper and usually requires several writing attempts.

The organization of the Discussion is important. Before beginning you should try to develop an outline to organize your thoughts in a logical form. You can use a cluster map, an issue tree, numbering, or some other organizational structure. The steps listed below are intended to help you organize your thoughts. If you need additional help see our articles *Eight Steps to Developing an Effective Manuscript Outline* and *Twelve Steps to Developing an Effective First Draft of your Manuscript* at www.sfedit.net/newsletters.htm.

To make your message clear, the discussion should be kept as short as possible while clearly and fully stating, supporting, explaining, and defending your answers and discussing other important and directly relevant issues. Care must be taken to provide a commentary and not a reiteration of the results. Side issues should not be included, as these tend to obscure the message. No paper is perfect; the key is to help the reader determine what can be positively learned and what is more speculative.

1. Organize the Discussion from the specific to the general: your findings to the literature, to theory, to practice.

2. Use the same key terms, the same verb tense (present tense), and the same point of view that you used when posing the questions in the Introduction.

3. Begin by re-stating the hypothesis you were testing and answering the questions posed in the introduction.

4. Support the answers with the results. Explain how your results relate to expectations and to the literature, clearly stating why they are acceptable and how they are consistent or fit in with previously published knowledge on the topic.

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5. Address all the results relating to the questions, regardless of whether or not the findings were statistically significant.

6. Describe the patterns, principles, and relationships shown by each major finding/result and put them in perspective. The sequencing of providing this information is important; first state the answer, then the relevant results, then cite the work of others. If necessary, point the reader to a figure or table to enhance the "story".

7. Defend your answers, if necessary, by explaining both why your answer is satisfactory and why others are not. Only by giving both sides to the argument can you make your explanation convincing.

8. Discuss and evaluate conflicting explanations of the results. This is the sign of a good discussion.

9. Discuss any unexpected findings. When discussing an unexpected finding, begin the paragraph with the finding and then describe it.

10. Identify potential limitations and weaknesses and comment on the relative importance of these to your interpretation of the results and how they may affect the validity of the findings. When identifying limitations and weaknesses, avoid using an apologetic tone.

11. Summarize concisely the principal implications of the findings, regardless of statistical significance.

12. Provide recommendations (no more than two) for further research. Do not offer suggestions which could have been easily addressed within the study, as this shows there has been inadequate examination and interpretation of the data.

13. Explain how the results and conclusions of this study are important and how they influence our knowledge or understanding of the problem being examined.

14. In your writing of the Discussion, discuss everything, but be concise, brief, and specific.