Fussy Professor Starbuck's Cookbook of Handy-Dandy Prescriptions for Ambitious Academic Authors

(with editing and additions from Jane)

The author is William Haynes Starbuck graduated from Harvard University and the Carnegie Institute of Technology. He is an organizational scientist who has held professorships in social relations, sociology, business administration, and management. I think he first published this guide in 1989, so I have updated and made a few changes (in red).
Part 1. Develop the General Structure

Part 2. Better Grammar

Part 3. Writing about Research & Making it Interesting

Part 4. Copyedit What You Wrote
Part 1. DEVELOP THE GENERAL STRUCTURE

Your writing determines:
- whether people read what you have to say,
- whether they understand it,
- whether they agree with it, and
- whether they remember it.

You have to pursue each of these goals somewhat independently. If you ignore any of these goals, your publications will fall short of their potential by attracting fewer readers, conveying less information, persuading or motivating fewer readers, or by drawing fewer citations.

Just get it down on paper

Worry about big issues of what to say and when to say it, not details of precisely how to say it. I’m a big proponent of timed writing exercises in which you just write, don’t stop, don’t edit, don’t correct, don’t second guess. Editing is a separate step in the process. I think many individuals believe they can’t write, and are too critical of themselves. They become frustrated with the process, and they dread starting the next article. Try the two-step process. There is a very good book on this process. A used paperback will set you back around $5. It’s called Writing Down the Bones by Natalie Goldberg (1986).

Start with a seductive introduction

- Tell a story.
- Defend an implausible statement.
- Contradict an authority.
- Contradict common sense.
- Make a simple positive statement.
- Show your creativity and sense of humor.

For example, Daft and Weick began their article on "Organizations as interpretation systems" (AMR, 1984) by writing, "Consider the game of 20 questions. Normally in this game one person..."

Researchers I have worked with for years liked to sneak into their manuscript titles or introductions lines from popular songs and movies. Humor is seductive! My journal once published an article that got us into Slate Magazine. The article found that country music was most likely to make depressed subjects commit suicide. Incensed country music fans (and researchers) responded with a rejoinder titled “An Achy Breaky Heart May Not Kill You.” That garnered a mention on The TODAY Show.
End with a memorable conclusion

Do not point out that this manuscript does not answer all questions or that more research is needed. These are clichés. These deserve a mention in limitations, but they are not the last thoughts you want to leave with your reader.

- Point out a few practical implications
- Tell a story
- Spring a surprise
- Give your findings an ironic twist
- Reiterate your most important contribution to the literature
- Make a positive recommendation for future research

Put the main ideas into the introduction and conclusion

Readers are most likely to remember the last thing they read. They are next most likely to remember the first thing they read. They are least likely to remember material that was in the middle. Therefore, you should put the most important information at the end of a manuscript and at its beginning.

An introduction should:

- persuade readers that they want to read the whole manuscript
- convince readers that you are a credible source of information
- give readers an idea of the scope of the manuscript, but not an outline

A conclusion should:

- summarize the manuscript's main arguments and conclusions
- make readers glad they read your manuscript

You cannot make readers feel satisfied by discussing the deficiencies of your study. Discuss deficiencies… where you describe your methodology, perhaps where you analyze your findings, or in Limitations.

Thus, together, an introduction and conclusion should provide a rather complete document—one that motivates readers, orients them, and provides them with the most important information.
Maintain a logical flow (AB > BC > CD)

- from sentence to sentence,
- from paragraph to paragraph, and
- from section to section.

While, Therefore, Although, To summarize, In conclusion, Also—These words do not provide adequate transition. You must finish your thoughts and anticipate what’s next in your readers’ minds—within sentences, paragraphs, and sections of your manuscript. A finished document should flow linearly from the first words in the first sentence to the final words in the final sentence. Readers should understand the first sentence without reading any other part of the document. They should understand the second sentence without reading anything except the first sentence, and so on.

Help your readers

- Put topic sentences at the beginnings of paragraphs.
- Put the main points at the beginnings or ends of paragraphs.
- Put topic sentences at the beginnings of sections.
- Summarize the whole document near the end. Restate the key points. Briefly. Not verbatim.