



How do writers establish research niches? A genre-based investigation into management researchers' rhetorical steps and linguistic mechanisms

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ABSTRACT

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'Establishing a niche' often constitutes a crucial rhetorical move in research proposals and journal papers in various academic disciplines. Research proposals and reports submitted by novice writers may at times be rejected on grounds of their inability to demonstrate a need to carry out research in a suggested area. This genre-based investigation looked into how experienced writers use rhetorical steps and linguistic choices to establish research niches in the introductory sections of high impact management research papers. Apart from revealing how 'indicating a gap' and 'adding to what is known' are strategically deployed by writers using a wide spectrum of persuasive communicative resources and linguistic mechanisms aimed at downplaying the significance of past research and foregrounding the 'newness' of their studies, this paper discusses ways of minimizing the difficulty involved in drawing a distinct line of demarcation between these different and yet inter-related rhetorical steps under specific circumstances. I have also demonstrated the extent to which my findings have pertinent theoretical and practical implications concerning the need to distinguish and present research niches using the contextual information derived from research-based discourse.

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1. Introduction

In the process of writing proposals or research introductions, researchers often need to present a convincing and impressive introduction to capture the interest of the audience, particularly peer researchers and reviewers. Novice researchers attempting to write research introductions are also expected to acquire sufficient background knowledge pertaining to the genre in their quest to meet the expectations of members of their academic discourse community. One of the important rhetorical moves in research introductions appears to be associated with how writers establish their research niches as an initial endeavor to justify the position of the study being reported (Swales, 1990; 2004).

To provide a framework for analyzing niche establishments, we need to consider the theoretical development of genre-based investigations into research introductions that underpins the analysis. In this regard, Swales (1990) first proposed a 3-move structure in which 'establishing a territory' (comprising centrality claims, topic generalizations, and reviews of past research in Move 1) is generally ensued by 'establishing a niche' (in Move 2) and 'occupying a niche' (in Move 3). 'Establishing a niche' in his previous framework, in particular, comprised four options which were "counter-claiming", "indicating a gap", "question-raising", and "continuing a tradition" (Swales, 1990, p. 141).

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Notwithstanding the widespread use of Swales' (1990) 'Create a Research Space' (CaRS) model for analyzing and comprehending introductory sections, Swales (2004) revised his previous analytical framework after considering several deviations reported in past studies (e.g. Anthony, 1999; Kwan, 1996; Samraj, 2002). In terms of niche establishments, Swales reduced the four options to two, comprising step 1A (i.e. 'indicating a gap'), step 1B (i.e. 'adding to what is known') and step 2 (i.e. 'presenting positive justification'). His decision to condense these original four steps into just two distinct steps (i.e. 'indicating a gap' and 'adding to what is known') in 2004 appears justifiable. The segments which were previously regarded as "counter-claiming" and "question-raising" (Swales, 1990, p. 141) are now more aptly considered by Swales (2004) as part of 'indicating a gap'. As 'counter-claiming' actually means "claiming that previous work in this research area was wrong" (Hamp-Lyons & Heasley, 2006, p. 45), it is understandable that showing the limitations, weaknesses, or shortcomings of previous work actually implies that there is a research 'gap' that needs to be occupied. Similarly, the appearance of "raising a question" (Kanoksilapatham, 2005, p. 275) also suggests that a 'new' study needs to be conducted to seek information that provides answers to the question raised. Hence, using Swales' (2004) new framework, posing a question (about a theory or some previous research) is now more appropriately conceptualized as an implicit indication that a research 'gap' still exists and needs to be filled.

Despite the aforementioned arguments about the applicability of Swales' (2004) new model, some genre analysts (in subsequent studies reported after 2004) expressed different views in regard to the extent to which his latest model could provide a more consistent and reliable framework for analyzing niche establishments in certain academic disciplines. These analysts preferred to use the functional labels proposed in Swales' (1990) previous framework, and stated that the 1990 model was more widely used than the 2004 version. Hirano (2009), in particular, pointed out that its continual adoption was ascribable to the research tradition that had developed around the 1990 model. Del Saz-Rubio (2011, p. 260) was also of the view that the application of Swales' 2004 new model "might hinder the identification of some linguistic strategies enacted by writers" for certain moves, including 'establishing a niche'. To understand such views, we may first refer to Table 1 which illustrates the differences of the functional labels used for rhetorical steps of research article introductions (RAIs) across disciplines, including Conservation Biology (Samraj, 2002), Biochemistry (Kanoksilapatham, 2005), Educational Technology (Loi, 2010), and Agricultural Sciences (Del Saz-Rubio, 2011). Such cross-disciplinary comparisons are necessary as previous research (e.g. Harwood & Hadley, 2004; Holmes, 1997; Hyland, 2002; Lim, 2010, 2011a) has revealed that significant cross-disciplinary differences do exist in research-based discourse, thus suggesting that disciplinary variations need to be considered while developing materials aimed at helping novice writers acquire both the generic and linguistic skills required in writing research introductions. Table 1 shows that 'question-raising' and 'counter-claiming' [considered as parts of gap statements in Swales' (2004) new model] were viewed as different from gap indications in other investigations (e.g. Del Saz-Rubio, 2011; Kanoksilapatham, 2005; Loi, 2010). Likewise, in a more recent investigation into the evaluation of prior scholarship in literature reviews, Kwan, Chan, and Lam (2012) also used Swales' (1990) older model, thus considering 'counter-claiming' and 'raising a question' as being different from 'indicating a gap'. In response to this comment, I have used an analysis of management RAIs in this study to demonstrate the extent to which the rhetorical steps associated with niche establishments are aptly and adequately represented in Swales' (2004) new model (after considering the sub-steps associated with gap statements that might facilitate our identification of specific linguistic mechanisms).

Apart from the functional labels employed in indicating niche establishments (NEs) mentioned above, another interesting aspect that is worth investigating has to do with the cross-disciplinary differences in the frequencies of NE-related rhetorical steps. To be specific, NEs appear in most of the RA introductions in many disciplines, such as Biochemistry (Kanoksilapatham, 2005), Educational Psychology (Loi, 2010) and Wildlife Behavior, where they were found in 66.7%, 80%, and 91.7% of the research introductions respectively. More specifically, Ozturk (2007) found that 100% of the introductions in Second Language Acquisition (an established sub-discipline of Applied Linguistics) contained niche establishments while merely 70% of those in Second Language Writing (an emerging sub-discipline) incorporated NEs. While Ozturk (2007) did not specify the frequency of gap indications in particular, other analysts reported varying frequencies of gap indications used as niche establishments. For instance, although gap indications were incorporated in merely 50% of Conservation Biology introductions, they were found in 83.3% of Wildlife Behavior introductions (Samraj, 2002).

Table 1
Rhetorical steps related to niche establishments (NEs) in recent past studies on RA introductions.

NEs across disciplines (Swales, 2004: 230–232)	NEs in Conservation Biology (Samraj, 2002: 6)	NEs in Biochemistry (Kanoksilapatham, 2005: 274–276)	NEs in Educational Psychology (Loi, 2010: 274–276)	NEs in Agricultural Sciences (del Saz-Rubio, 2011: 258)
Step 1A: Indicating a gap or Step 1B : Adding to what is known Step 2 (optional): Presenting positive justification	Gap in (previous) research Problems in the real world Positive justification	Step 1: Indicating a gap Step 2: Raising a Question	Step 1: Indicating a gap Step 2: Raising a Question Step 3: Counter-claiming	Step 1a: Counter-claiming Step 1b: Indicating a gap Step 1c: Question raising Step 1d: Adding to what is known (continuing a tradition) Step 2 (optional): Presenting positive justification Step 3 (optional): Implicit inconsistencies precluding gap signaling

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