Writing a discussion summary

Introduction

Your discussion section helps draw connections between your findings, existing theory, and other research. It does this by both analysing and interpreting the results of a study, placing these results in the context of published literature, and explaining how the results affect the field.

Purpose

An effective discussion will

- Review the findings
- Put the findings in the context of overall research
- Explain the importance of the results and where they fit with current literature
- Acknowledge the limitations of the study
- Make recommendations for future research

Planning a discussion section

Planning for a discussion starts with analysing your data. Depending on the type of research, this may wait until the data is collected, or occur earlier as the data already exists. A typical approach to this stage of the process is:

- Analysing the results by organising your data, identifying trends or causal relationships in the themes
- Selecting significant results by focusing on a number of issues that agree or disagree with your hypothesis or previously published work
- Relating the results to the literature by showing the connection to papers that led to your hypothesis, experimental design and results
- Moving from the narrowest to the broadest in your discussion by discussing the narrowest (your specific findings) to the broadest (the wider scientific community)

Structuring your discussion

A discussion section usually contains most of the following steps:

- Step 1 – review research purpose, theory and methodology
- Step 2 – summarise key results
- Step 3 – comment on key results
- Step 4 – state the limitations of the study
- Step 5 – make recommendations for implementation/future research

These steps may vary depending on whether the study is published in a journal article or as a thesis.

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Writing a discussion section

Language tip 1
Researchers choose language that reflects the level of confidence in their interpretation of results. These choices include:

- Boosters – *clearly/importantly/evidently*
- Hedgers – *likely/possibly/to some extent/seems*

Language tip 2
It is important to use language that differentiates your research from others.

- Your research – *my data/our findings/this research/this study has shown/this research has demonstrated*
- Other research – *Smith (2019) found/Previous studies highlighted/this study has similar findings to those found my Smith (2019)*

Language tip 3
It is important to use a range of language to discuss different aspects of your study. For example

- Summarizing your results – *the purpose of this study was/the results of the present study support/there are three key findings of the present study*
- Linking your findings to previous research – *these results are consistent with/this finding is similar to/the findings of this study support*
- Explaining the results – *one reason for this result may be/one possible explanation for this is/this may be due to*
- Evaluating the results – *these results are important because/this is valuable because*
- Discussing limitations – *there are at least three potential limitations/A first limitation concerns/Certain limitations could be addressed by/although the results support….it is important to note*

Language tip 4
It is important to use tenses appropriately
- Past tense is used to summarise key findings and refer to previous studies
- Present perfect is used to refer to the work of previous researchers, especially when it is ongoing
- Present tense is used to interpret the results or describe significance of the findings
- Future is used to make recommendations for further research or future direction

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