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From the editor

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Nearly two years ago I wrote about three reasons I reject papers without a formal evaluation by external reviewers. They are that papers do not fit within the aims and scope of the journal, do not contain an adequate review of existing literature, and do not provide an effective and informative conceptual framework (James 2010).

In this essay I explain another problem I often see in papers submitted to *Agriculture and Human Values*. It is the inadequacy of the paper's introduction. When I invite authors to revise and resubmit their papers, asking them to rewrite the introduction is one of the most common requests I make. A badly written introduction, which includes an introduction that is too short or too long, is not generally a reason to reject a paper, but because I see so many problems with them, I believe there is value in explaining what I expect from the introductory section of papers.

What is the purpose of an introduction to a published scholarly paper? Quite simply, the introduction explains to readers what the paper is about and why they should bother reading it. One would think that this is obvious, but I see too much variation in the quality of introductions to believe that this is common knowledge. *Agriculture and Human Values* is an interdisciplinary journal, and I am not an expert in everything. If the introduction can help me understand what the author is doing and why, then I have a better chance of learning something interesting and important by reading the entire paper. If I want to read it, then I can expect others will also, so this will incline me to want to publish the paper. However, if introductions are weak, vague or poorly written, then the chance that I will be able to figure out what is going on in the rest of the paper is diminished. And if I can't, then I might reasonably expect readers to have difficulty with the paper too, which makes me wonder why I should publish it. Authors don't want an editor having this thought as he reads their papers.

Here are three elements of a strong and effective introduction.

First, authors need to begin by explaining what the general topic of their paper is. Some commentators refer to this as the "big picture," because it is a discussion of the broader scholarly context and setting of the paper. For example, if the paper presents a case study of a farmer's market, then the "big picture" might be a discussion of the general topic of alternative food networks or community food systems. If the paper is an analysis of data from a survey of farmers asking about their use of genetically modified crops, then the "big picture" might include a discussion of the adoption and diffusion of agricultural technologies. To be clear, the "big picture" is not a statement of the specific objectives of the paper, although a carefully written general issue will naturally lead into a discussion of these specifics. "A useful rule of thumb is to introduce the problem in generalities, then progressively narrow the focus … to more specific, precise problems on which information is needed," states one commentator (Ethridge 2004, p. 105).

Importantly, the discussion of the "big picture" needs to be tailored to specific audiences. For example, I recently completed a paper with one of my doctoral students. In the paper we report results of an empirical analysis linking the ethical worldview of farmers to their decisions to participate in controversial farming practices, such as using chemical farm inputs, planting genetically modified crops, or dehorning cattle rather than raising polled cattle breeds. As we worked on the paper, we could not agree on where to publish it. We originally wanted to target a business

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ethics journal because the paper was inspired by research published in the *Journal of Business Ethics* and similar journals. With this outlet in mind, we began the introduction with a general discussion of how ethical frameworks relate to individual behavior, comparable to studies we referenced in our paper. However, as the paper developed we decided that it was too "agricultural" to be accepted in a business ethics journal, so we decided to focus instead on a more agriculturally-oriented publication. As a result, we reoriented the introduction away from the topic of ethical frameworks to address the general issue of farmers engaging in controversial farming practices. Although we raised the issue of ethical frameworks as well as cognitive moral development in the introduction, this discussion was subservient to the primary focus on farmer decision-making.[1] The point of this story is that framing the general or "big picture" issue in the introduction must be made with a clear understanding of who the writer wants to read the paper. Research projects can be targeted to different audiences. As such, the discussion of the "big picture" should be directed toward the general concerns and interests of those readers whom the author wants to reach.

Second, authors need to make clear what they are doing specifically in their paper. Whereas the first part of an introduction describes the problem in general terms, the second part of the introduction explains the specific researchable problem and objective that the author seeks to accomplish with the paper. For example, authors might say that they are developing a new model, analyzing data collected from a survey or ethnography, or presenting a case study. This discussion should be brief, but it should also give enough detail so that readers have a clear idea of what to expect in the rest of the paper. Importantly, the specific research problem should inform on the general or "big picture" problem presented earlier. Personally, I also like to see specific research *questions*, especially in empirical papers. A written research question that is carefully phrased helps readers obtain new knowledge—at least if the author is successful in answering it—because an answer to a question is usually easier to remember than a collection of facts or concluding bullet points. Writing a specific research question also helps writers remain focused. When the paper is completed, authors should ask themselves if they have in fact answered their written research question. Making this answer explicit in the concluding section of a paper is a way of tying all parts of the paper together.

Third, authors need to provide a suitable motivation for the paper. Asserting that the specific research objective adds to our understanding of the general issue might be part of the motivation, but it is not sufficient. Authors need to be explicit in stating why the paper and the underlying research efforts are important and meaningful for scholars. There is a glut of published and publication-intended research. Why should readers be interested in *your* particular paper? To put it succinctly, authors need to answer the question, "So what?" ("So what?" is also a favorite question of dissertation examination committees). The written motivation need not be long or excessively wordy, but an explicit and concise statement of why the research is important will give readers a good reason not only to continue reading the paper but also to use and promote within their sphere of influence the new knowledge the paper creates. This is an ideal outcome for both author and editor.

This issue of *Agriculture and Human Values* contains scholarship that addresses a variety of important research problems and advances our understanding and knowledge of the food and agricultural system in a meaningful way. In the lead article, Kolady and Lesser consider how the introduction by public institutions in India of open-pollinated varieties of Bt eggplant will affect the diversity of crops on smallholder farms. Hatt and Hatt use the Canadian listeriosis outbreak in 2008 as a case study to explore the role of science and neoliberalism in food safety public policy. Reimer, Thompson, and Prokopy interview Midwest farmers in the US to establish links between environmental attitudes and conservation behavior. Mincyte argues for a more comprehensive theory of sustainable consumption through a study of the informal raw milk market in Lithuania. Zader uses a cultural economy lens to investigate the meaning of "quality" in a case study of Chinese japonica rice. Hatanaka, Konefal, and Constance document the process by which food product standards are developed and influenced by agribusiness and other food industry stakeholders. Lee examines how assertions about the safety of food products affect and are affected by agrifood governance structures, especially those relating to food product innovation. Schupp and Sharp try to understand the attitudes and demographic characteristics of people who practice home gardening. In his discussion paper, Mount reflects on how "scaling up" affects the way people think about local food systems. Book reviews and an updated books-received list round out this issue of *Agriculture and Human Values*.

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[1] Our paper (Cardoso and James, in press) will be published in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*.