

STRATEGY AND COMMUNICATION

Helping health and medical researchers, teams and organisations
across Australia position strong science for funding, impact and reach

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Research Narrative Framework

Researchers are often asked to explain the significance of their work in grant applications, impact statements, policy discussions, professional profiles and public forums.

One way to approach this is to clarify the **research narrative** that ties together a body of work: the problem it addresses, the contribution it makes, and why that contribution matters.

A clear research narrative helps make the significance of the research more visible. It also provides a stronger foundation for research positioning, strategic communication and engagement with audiences beyond the immediate field.

The framework below outlines five questions that will help make that narrative clearer.

Before working through the questions, it can be useful to consider the audience and purpose: who needs to understand this research, and what do they need to recognise about its value?

1. What problem does this research ultimately address?

Begin by identifying the broader scientific, clinical or health-related problem motivating the research.

This might involve:

- a disease burden
- a limitation in current treatments
- a gap in biological understanding
- an unmet need in healthcare systems
- uncertainty in clinical or policy decision-making.

The aim is to articulate why the problem matters, not only within the discipline but also for health outcomes, healthcare systems, policy, practice or future discovery.

Context

Most researchers can describe the specific focus of a study. However, the broader problem motivating the work is not always clearly articulated.

For example, a paper might focus on a particular biological pathway or clinical mechanism. Yet the larger problem – such as improving treatment options for a disease, understanding why existing therapies fail, or addressing an unmet clinical need – may only be briefly mentioned.

Clarifying this underlying problem helps anchor the research in a broader scientific or clinical context.

2. What is the central question driving the research program?

Across a program of work, there is often a core scientific question that connects multiple studies.

For example:

- What biological mechanisms drive disease progression?
- Why do current therapies fail for certain patients?
- How can early detection or diagnosis be improved?
- What evidence is needed to improve clinical or policy decisions?

This question provides intellectual direction for the research program.

Context

Individual studies often address tightly defined research questions.

However, across a program of work, there is usually a larger intellectual question connecting multiple studies. This question often reflects the core curiosity, concern or challenge that has shaped the researcher's work over time.

When this central question is clearly articulated, it becomes easier to explain how different projects contribute to the same broader goal.

3. What does the research contribute to addressing the problem?

Next, consider the key insights, evidence or advances generated by the research.

These contributions might include:

- identifying biological mechanisms
- revealing therapeutic targets
- improving diagnostic approaches
- generating evidence to inform clinical decisions
- clarifying risk, prevention or disease progression
- informing health policy or implementation.

The aim is to clarify how the research advances understanding of the problem.

Context

Research programs typically generate many findings over time. However, the contribution of those findings is not always described at the overall program level.

The narrative becomes clearer when individual findings are linked back to the original problem.

This helps show not only what the research has found but also what the work contributes to a larger scientific, clinical or health-related challenge.

4. Why does the research matter beyond the discipline?

For audiences outside the immediate field, it is often important to explain the broader relevance of the work.

This may involve implications for:

- patient outcomes
- disease prevention
- diagnosis or treatment
- healthcare systems
- clinical practice
- public policy
- future therapies
- future research directions.

Making this relevance explicit helps connect specialised research to wider decision-making contexts.

Context

Within specialised fields, the significance of research may seem self-evident.

Outside the field, audiences often need help understanding why the work matters, who it may ultimately affect, and how it could contribute to better knowledge, better decisions or better outcomes.

This is especially important when communicating with audiences involved in funding, policy, clinical translation, institutional strategy or public engagement.

The aim is not to overstate impact. It is to make the relevance of the research easier to recognise.

5. How do the individual studies connect?

Finally, consider how different projects fit together across the research program.

Questions that can help include:

- How do individual studies build on each other?
- What progression of knowledge can be seen across the work?
- How does the research move understanding of the problem forward?
- What is the connective thread across the program?
- How would you explain the body of work as a coherent whole?

This step helps reveal the narrative underlying the program of research.

Context

Researchers are trained to write about individual studies.

But decision-makers often want to understand how a body of work fits together.

When the connections between studies are visible, the research begins to look less like a collection of projects and more like a coherent program addressing an important problem.

This is particularly useful when developing grant applications, researcher profiles, impact statements, institutional narratives or public-facing summaries.

Bringing the narrative together

Researchers often answer parts of these questions across multiple publications, applications and presentations.

Bringing the answers together in one place helps clarify the overall narrative of the work: the problem it addresses, the central question guiding it, the contribution it makes, and why it matters.

Together, these questions help clarify:

- the problem being addressed
- the intellectual direction of the research
- the contribution of the work
- its broader relevance
- the connection between individual studies.

When these elements are clearly articulated, many forms of research communication become easier to develop – from grant applications and policy discussions to professional profiles, impact statements and public-facing communication.

A clear research narrative does not change the research itself. It makes the significance of the research easier for others to understand, recognise and act on.

A simple narrative template

After working through the five questions, it may be useful to bring the answers together in a short statement:

My research addresses [broader problem] by investigating [central question]. Through this work, I have made [key contribution(s)], advancing understanding of [specific aspect of the problem]. This matters because [broader relevance for patients, health systems, policy, practice or future research].

This statement can then be adapted for different purposes, including grant applications, researcher profiles, impact statements, presentations, summaries for media and public-facing communication.

Final thoughts

If your research is strong but difficult to explain consistently across grants, profiles, impact statements, or public-facing communications, this framework can help identify where the narrative may need clarification.

In my work with health and medical researchers, I help make this narrative visible so the significance, value and contribution of the research can be more clearly recognised by the audiences that matter most.

Feel free to reach out if you'd like support in clarifying your research narrative.

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