

AI & writing the background section

by AI Affiliate Claris & Dr. Kasztalska

Using AI to find additional background information

1. Identify gaps in your background information. Since you've already gathered some background information, AI can help you determine what might still be missing. By sharing a summary of what you found, you can ask AI to suggest additional context or key points you may have overlooked.

Sample prompt: "Here is the background information I've gathered on [topic]: [brief summary]. Based on this, what important context, definitions, or historical details might still be missing? Suggest additional information that would help make this section more complete and clear for an academic audience."

2. Identify terms and concepts that need explanation or clarification. Some terms in your research topic may be unfamiliar to an average reader, have misleading everyday definitions, or be commonly misunderstood. AI can help pinpoint which terms require clear explanations in your background section.

Sample prompt: "I'm writing about [topic]. Identify key terms that should be explained for clarity. Focus on (1) terms that an average reader might not know, (2) terms that are often defined incorrectly or imprecisely, and (3) terms that are commonly misunderstood or associated with misconceptions. Provide definitions and explanations that clarify their meaning in an academic context."

3. Consider what a naive reader needs to know. Researchers become experts on their topic and sometimes forget that an average reader may not know as much as they do. AI can play the role of a naive or uninformed reader to help you identify key background information that a general audience would need to understand the topic. This ensures that you provide clear context without making assumptions about the reader's prior knowledge.

Sample prompt: "I'm writing a research paper about [topic]. What background information would a reader with no prior knowledge need to understand this topic? List key concepts, definitions, historical context, and relevant statistics."

4. Consider different types of readers. Different readers bring different experiences, knowledge levels, and perspectives to a text. AI can help identify information that may need additional explanation or alternative framing to be clear and accessible for a variety of readers.

Types of readers to consider:

- Readers from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds – May interpret key terms, examples, or historical references differently.
- Readers from different academic disciplines – A term commonly used in one field (e.g., "bias" in AI vs. psychology) may have a different meaning in another.
- Readers with differing political or ideological perspectives – Certain terms or framing choices might carry unintended connotations or assumptions.

Sample prompt: "I'm writing about [topic] for an academic audience that may include readers from diverse cultural or language backgrounds. Here is my background section: [paste text]. Identify any terms, references, or examples that might be unclear or unfamiliar to some readers."

Using AI to organize and write the background section

1. Brainstorm different ways to organize your information. Ask AI about the organization of information and development of your background paragraph. In particular, AI can help you decide which information should be included in the section, which can be omitted, and what different ways to structure the information (chronologically, thematically, conceptually, etc.) are.

Sample prompts:

“How should I organize the background section of my research paper on [your research topic]? Suggest a logical structure, including key elements I should cover.”

“Here is the background information I’ve gathered on [topic]: [brief summary]. I want to move from broad facts and definitions to more specific ideas and finally connect this information to my topic. What is the best way to organize this information?”

AI-suggested structure for a background section

- i. Introduction to the Topic
 - Provide a general introduction to the research problem.
 - Define key concepts and terms.
- ii. Historical Context or Background Information
 - Discuss the historical evolution of the topic.
 - Present key developments that led to the current research interest.
- iii. Current Situation
 - Summarize recent studies, trends, and significant findings.
 - Highlight relevant statistics, data, or case studies.
- iv. Justification & Importance Marking
 - Show that there is a problem or question that needs to be addressed.
 - Explain why your research is important.
- v. Transition to the Research Problem
 - Conclude by pointing to your research question or objectives.

2. Avoid “data dump” and add metacommentary. AI can help you pinpoint areas where an explanation is missing, where a reader may not understand the meaning or purpose of the background information, or where they may feel overwhelmed by the data. It can also help you connect background details to your research question/problem.

Sample prompt: “Here is my background section: [paste text]. Identify places where a reader might wonder why I’m including certain facts or where they might feel overwhelmed by too much data. Suggest ways to clarify the significance of key information and connect it to the research problem I’m investigating.”

3. Solicit feedback on your writing style and clarity. You can ask AI for language enhancement and style. For example, you can use it to help you improve clarity and conciseness, sentence structure and flow, use domain-specific terminology accurately, or maintain objectivity and avoid bias in your background section.

Sample prompt: “Can you give me suggestions to make my background section more concise and clear while maintaining an academic tone?”

Sample prompt: “Can you give me suggestions to enhance the sentence structure and improve flow in this background section?”

Sample prompt: “Refine this background section to include accurate and precise domain-specific terminology.”

Sample prompt: “Can you give me suggestions to make my background section more objective and research-focused?”