

# How to write a theoretical ecology paper that people will cite

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It's important to write about an interesting topic, but that's not enough. To investigate what makes a theoretical paper attract citations, the Ellner-Jones-Cooch theoretical ecology "lunch bunch" read the most cited and least cited model-centered papers from the 1996 volume of *American Naturalist* – enough time for the citation numbers to be meaningful, but recent enough for us to appreciate the substance of the papers (this idea came from Alan Hastings, who ran a seminar doing this on an issue-by-issue basis a while ago). We also examined a paper from the middle of the pack – about 75 out of 150 in the ISI citation ranking – that several of us know well and consider to be a significant paper. Here are our conclusions.

## 1. Don't maintain suspense.

- Present the topic clearly at the very beginning.
- Explain the relevance of the paper at the very beginning.
- Quickly telegraph where the entire paper will be going. Give away all your punchlines in the abstract, and do it again in the Introduction.

## 2. Make the paper easy to skim.

- Make sure that the "meat" – the core that everyone should read – is well labeled and easy to find.
- Explain your main results using graphs.
- Remove from the main text any technical details that aren't needed for the flow of ideas. Readers shouldn't have to stop and think about whether or not they have to think about an equation.
- Use signposting to help people "peel the onion" – get as deep into the paper as they want, but no deeper. Technical sections should be prefaced by an explanation of what and who it's for, so it's easy for a reader to tell if they should read it, skim it, or skip it for now.