

Introductions and Conclusions

Introductions

All writing must begin somewhere. For the writer, the first few words or sentences can be the most difficult because the blank page appears so formidable and because the actual opening of a paper may not be the best part to begin drafting. In practice, many writers compose the introduction after they have drafted the rest of the paper.

Why are good introductions so hard to write?

The writer confuses *process* with *product*, attempting to write the paper in the order it will be read instead of starting the drafting stage of the writing process *wherever it is easy to fill paper*.

The writer isn't ready to write the introduction. An introduction introduces a paper. Therefore, the writer has to know the thesis or main point of the paper, the purpose of the paper, the kind of development the paper uses, the length and shape of that development, and what the reader knows and does not know--all before even planning for the introduction!

Frequently, it is difficult to imagine more than one way of beginning a paper. Usually, there are a dozen or more possible paper openings.

Although the introduction is a tight and clear forecast of the paper's content, many writers mistakenly think an introduction must cover . . . everything. Tain't so.

Many writers have been told in the past that there are a few tried and true ways of opening a paper. Have you ever begun a paper with a question, with a quotation, or with a brief story? If you have, you have used some good techniques that, unfortunately, have been overworked.

And why are introductions so important?

An introduction is the writer's first contact with the reader. If the writer overlooked the audience, assuming readers are just burning to read the paper, he or she may be in for a big disappointment. Some people may read the paper only as a tedious chore or, even worse, refuse to read because it is something they don't want to hear. The audience's needs and interests must be addressed so the reader will continue ... reading.

An introduction is a tight and *clear forecast* of the paper, so it must promise an interesting and informative experience for the reader. The introduction, then, must be the most engaging material of the paper.

The introduction has three parts:

The HOOK--You must grab the reader's attention in the first sentence or two. That is all you have--two sentences or twenty words. That's about ten seconds!

The LEAD--The next two to five sentences develop the idea of the hook, maintaining reader interest, and leading into or preparing for the final sentence of the introduction.

The THESIS--The last sentence of the introduction clearly identifies the topic, the writer's position or

attitude toward the topic, and the way the paper is likely to be *developed*.

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Here are three introductions--each radically different from the others and each an appropriate opening for the same paper:

#1

Want to insult someone's intelligence? Then tell them that running is good for them. Explain how running improves cardiovascular function. Demonstrate with statistics how runners have fewer heart attacks and fewer nervous breakdowns. Keep this up and you may receive a polite "Yes, I know, but I don't enjoy running." The surprising part is that running need not be a bore or even an unpleasant task.

#2

A famous television commercial spotlights a young boy who discovers his breakfast cereal tastes good, even though it's good for him. Mikey "likes it!" The success of that commercial lies in the common assumption that products or activities good for us are usually not enjoyable. This is especially true of novice runners. They know running is good for them, but they find running a bore. The surprising fact is running can be so interesting and pleasant that we would continue even if it wasn't so good for us!

#3

They start out with great expectations. After a few weeks--in some cases, just a few days--they dread it. The daily run. They come up with some pretty good excuses. "I'm too tired." "I've got too much work to do." "It's too hot." "It's too cold." "I'd rather do something enjoyable." Sound familiar? Most novice runners do not know how to enjoy the running experience. And that's the easy part.

What is the topic and purpose of the paper introduced by the above paragraphs?

Has the author used all three elements of an introduction--Hook, Lead, and Thesis--in each paragraph?

Which introduction is most effective? Why?

Which introduction is least effective? Why?

From the list of ideas for introductions on the next page, select the three most promising ideas and show how they might work for the running topic.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Additional Ideas for Introductions

Although some writing projects, by their nature, force a very narrow range of introduction strategies, the following *generic* introduction ideas can be adapted to the specific content of most of your papers. As always, make sure you keep your readers in mind, as you *hook* their interest and *lead* them to your thesis. Be brief and sharply focused.

1. Describe the person or group of people likely to find value in reading about the paper's topic.
2. Describe the place associated with your topic, the *stage* for the events of your topic.
3. Raise one or more questions about your topic, questions you are prepared to answer.
4. List one or more reasons your topic is important and, therefore, worth your reader's time.
5. Explain how you became interested in the topic.
6. Review what most readers already know about the topic. Make sure you indicate that your paper is going to develop *new* ideas for the reader.
7. Present a surprising or startling statistic or fact about your topic.
8. Show how your topic is misunderstood because it has been the object of some prejudice, lack of study, or confusion.
9. Show how your topic, one that *appears* common and uninteresting, is actually intriguing and unique.
10. Show how or why your topic has been neglected or overlooked.
11. Describe typical comments people make when they discuss the topic.
12. Describe a very brief scene that involves your topic. Either a fast paced exchange of dialogue between two people or a sharply focused description of one person's behavior can provide an engaging hook and lead.
13. List the various settings your topic affects.
14. Mention one or two opposing arguments, and then present your thesis statement that begins with "Although . . ." or "Even so, . . ." to lead into your position.
15. Forecast what might happen if we fail to solve the problem or resist following your advice.
16. Discuss how your topic is more widespread, far more important or more timely than most people think.
17. Describe what causes some people to confuse or complicate your topic.
18. Acknowledge some value, interest, need, experience, concern or attitude of the reader--a common ground between writer and reader.
19. Present the opposite angle of development you plan to present. If you are presenting effects, you could open with on or two major causes. If you are comparing to show similarities, you could open with a contrast of one or two differences. If you are in favor of a position about the topic, open with the opposing argument. In most cases, your thesis statement should begin with "Although . . ." or "However, . . ." to provide a natural and smooth transition.
20. Open the paper with that most natural and unassuming hook: "I remember . . .".

Advice about Introductions

Do not promise more than you can deliver in the body of the paper.

Do not announce yourself. Avoid such openers as "In this paper I will discuss. . .", "After you have read this essay, you will agree that. . ." or "the purpose of this paper is to contrast the. . ."

Do not extend the suspense about your topic beyond the hook.

Avoid dictionary definitions (unless you present a different and original definition of your own).

Unless you have good reason, keep the introduction to less than twenty percent of the paper.

Conclusions

Conclusions are usually shorter than introductions. A sentence or two will do the job for shorter papers. Even a three or four page paper requires only a few sentences. Why? Most readers will remember everything you just said, you may not have much room, or you do not want to bore the reader. Have you ever heard a speaker announce "In conclusion..." only to drone on for another fifteen minutes?! Know when to quit! Readers like a tight, concise and useful ending. Although a restatement of the thesis can conclude a paper, try the following ideas, which give the reader something new and fresh to think about. It's somewhat like a dessert for the dinner.

Ideas for Conclusions

1. Conclude with a question, one that either you, the writer, or your reader should or needs to answer.
2. Conclude with what you (or the reader) plan to do next.
3. Conclude with a call for action, something either the reader or some other group should do.
4. Declare your willingness to become involved (by helping, planning, participating, listening, etc.).
5. Conclude with a prediction. Describe what will happen if present conditions are not changed. Or describe the results of following your recommendations.
6. Describe how you or the reader is better off for having explored this topic.
7. Underscore the relative ease of solving the problem, performing the skill, or understanding the concept.
8. Comment on your personal motives for writing the paper or article.
9. List other settings, groups, or areas of human endeavor that are or could be affected by the topic.
10. Create a sharply focused narrative descriptive image, a parting picture you want to leave with the reader.
11. Suggest a specific and concrete time-line for action.
12. Suggest that the purpose of the organization (company, school, club, etc.) will be better fulfilled.
13. Conclude with the impact on the author--the lesson learned, insight gained, or behavior changed.
14. Describe an additional condition necessary for a successful solution, performance, or experience.
15. Conclude with a quotation--either from media or from one of the people involved with your topic.

16. Look over the preceding list of 20 ideas for introductions; one may be an ideal way to end your paper.

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