

Improving Your Own Writing Style - Introductions

Why bother writing a good introduction?

1. **You never get a second chance to make a first impression.** The opening paragraph of your paper will provide your readers with their initial impressions of your argument, your writing style, and the overall quality of your work. A vague, disorganized, error-filled, off-the-wall, or boring introduction will create a negative impression. On the other hand, a concise, engaging, and well-written introduction will start your readers off thinking highly of you, your analytical skills, your writing, and your paper.
2. **Your introduction is an important road map for the rest of your paper.** Your introduction conveys a lot of information to your readers. You can let them know what your topic is, why it is important, and how you plan to proceed with your discussion. It should contain a thesis/controlling idea that will assert your main argument.
3. **Ideally, your introduction will make your readers want to read your paper.** The introduction should also capture your readers' interest, making them want to read the rest of your paper. Opening with a provocative lead can get your readers to see why this topic matters and serve as an invitation for them to join you for an interesting intellectual conversation.

Strategies for Writing an Effective Introduction

- **Open with an attention grabber (lead).** Sometimes, especially if the topic of your paper is somewhat dry or technical, opening with something catchy can help. Consider these options:

Content-related strategies:

1. an intriguing example
1. a provocative quotation
2. a puzzling scenario
3. a vivid and perhaps unexpected anecdote
4. a thought-provoking question

Syntactical strategies:

1. parallelism
2. simple sentences
3. strategic use of punctuation (Jedi-knight)

(⚠CAUTION! ⚠) Five Kinds of Less Effective Introductions (⚠CAUTION! ⚠)

1. The Place Holder Introduction. When you don't have much to say on a given topic, it is easy to create this kind of introduction. Essentially, this kind of weaker introduction contains several sentences that are vague and don't really say much. They exist just to take up the "introduction space" in your paper. If you had something more effective to say, you would probably say it, but in the meantime this paragraph is just a place holder.

Yuck: Slavery was one of the greatest tragedies in American history. There were many different aspects of slavery. Each created different kinds of problems for enslaved people.

2. The Restated Question Introduction. Restating the question makes you look simple-minded and lazy. Besides, a good thesis will demonstrate that the writer understands and is addressing the prompt.

3. The Webster's Dictionary Introduction. Anyone can look a word up in the dictionary and copy down what Webster says. Also recognize that the dictionary is also not a particularly authoritative work -- it doesn't take into account the context of your argument and doesn't offer particularly detailed information. If you feel that you must seek out an authority, try to find one that is very relevant and specific. Perhaps a quotation from a source reading might prove better? Dictionary introductions are also ineffective simply because they are so overused. You might find a more creative way to define your terms, or perhaps you could weave a definition into a more attention-grabbing introductory paragraph.

Yuck: Webster's dictionary defines slavery as "the state of being a slave," as "the practice of owning slaves," and as "a condition of hard work and subjection."

4. The Dawn of Man Introduction. This kind of introduction makes broad sweeping statements about the relevance of this topic since the beginning of time. It is usually very general (similar to the place holder introduction) and fails to connect to the thesis. You may write this kind of introduction when you don't have much to say--which is precisely why it is ineffective.

Yuck: Since the dawn of man, slavery has been a problem in human history.

Yuck: For hundreds of year, man has shown violent tendencies.

5. The Book Report Introduction. This introduction is what you had to do for your fifth-grade book reports. It gives the name and author of the book you are writing about, tells what the book is about, and offers other basic facts about the book. You might resort to this sort of introduction when you are trying to fill space because it's a familiar, comfortable format. It is ineffective because it offers details that your reader already knows and that are irrelevant to the thesis.

Yuck: Frederick Douglass wrote his autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, in the 1840s. It was published in 1986 by Penguin Books. He tells the story of his life.

- **A thesis statement:**
 - tells the reader how you will interpret the significance of the subject matter under discussion.
 - is a road map for the paper; in other words, it guides the reader as to what to expect from the rest of the paper.
 - directly answers the question asked of you. A thesis is an interpretation of a question or subject, not the subject itself. The subject, or topic, of an essay might be World War II or Moby Dick; a thesis must then offer a way to understand the war or the novel that others might dispute.
 - is usually a single sentence somewhere in your first paragraph that presents your argument to the reader. The rest of the paper, the body of the essay, gathers and organizes evidence that will persuade the reader of the logic of your interpretation.

How do I know if my thesis is strong?

When reviewing your first draft and its working thesis, ask yourself the following:

- *Do I answer the question?* Re-reading the question prompt after constructing a working thesis can help you fix an argument that misses the focus of the question.
- *Have I taken a position that others might challenge or oppose?* Thesis statements that are too vague often do not have a strong argument. If your thesis contains words like "good" or "successful," see if you could be more specific: Why is something "good"; What makes something "successful"?
- *Does my thesis pass the 'So What?' test?* If a reader's first response is, "So what?" then you need to clarify, to forge a relationship, or to connect to a larger issue.
- *Does my essay support my thesis specifically and without wandering?* If your thesis and the body of your essay do not seem to go together, one of them has to change. Remember, always reassess and revise your writing as necessary.

Be straightforward and confident. Avoid statements like "In this paper, I will argue that Frederick Douglass valued education." While this sentence points toward your main argument, it isn't especially interesting. It might be more effective to say what you mean in a declarative sentence. It is much more convincing to tell that "Frederick Douglass valued education" than to tell us that you are going to say that he did. Assert your main argument confidently. After all, you can't expect your reader to believe it if it doesn't sound like you believe it.