

Making a Good First Impression: Writing Better Introductions

A Writing Center workshop

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Purpose:

Sets tone

Excites reader's interest

Alerts reader to direction paper will take

Provides background

Addresses reader concerns or corrects misconceptions

Creates a relationship with the reader

Tells the reader why he or she ought to read the work

Some Opening Strategies:

- Start with several concrete details. These may be striking in their firmness or in some other aspect; they may be puzzling, surprising, shocking, funny. They may provide background information or they may illustrate the relevance of the topic.
- Start with a little story, or anecdote. The story may be from your own life, it may be hypothetical, or it may be a case study. Selection of detail is key – it's got to be quick but telling.
- Ask a good question. A good question should be open-ended; it will not have a simple answer, and it should not assume the reader will have a specific attitude. It should invite the reader to ponder, with the writer, the topic of the essay or one of the issues to be discussed. Sometimes this strategy is broadened into a series of questions.
- Start with a strong quotation, one that will capture attention, creating conflict or mystery. You'll want something about the quote to be striking, possibly the voice, which will sound different from your own. A quote may come from an authority in the field or from an observer of life.
- If there is a dilemma, start by concisely juxtaposing two points of view.
- Open with the thesis. This creates a strong first impression, but may alienate the reader. With this structure you fill in the background after you have given the main idea. This is an unusual approach, as the thesis usually appears at the end of the introduction, but it may be used for effect.
- Present an opposing viewpoint, which the essay will refute, or an assumption, which the essay will challenge.

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- In a research paper, identify subject, provide background, state the problem and end with the thesis statement. Background information could include a literature review, a summary, and definition of key terms.
- Relate the topic to something well known.

Making the Strategy Work:

- Use ample, well-selected detail. Generalizations are boring and often unconvincing.
- Avoid using details that will be presented again later in the paper.
- Look carefully at transitions. The structure of an introduction may be quite different from that of the content paragraphs. You may know why one bit follows the other, but it's the transitions that communicate that information to the reader. As you move from getting started to launching into the body of the paper, you want to make sure your reader has traveled the journey with you.
- Use good writing style: avoid clichés; use precise, direct language; vary the sentence structures; be aware of connotations,
- Think about pace. When the pace is too fast, writing is unconvincing because the reader has not had time to come to share the writer's perspective. When pace is too slow, the writing is boring.
- Make sure that all the background necessary to lead up to the thesis is covered; if it's a two-part thesis, there are probably two ideas that will need to be addressed in the introduction. Make sure both are introduced.
- Avoid using a simple purpose statement, unless required by the instructor or in the case of empirical research; avoid repeating the title of the paper in the introduction; avoid posing complex questions that may puzzle the reader.
- Avoid quoting dictionary definitions. Usually these do not provide enough depth to be interesting. If you want to define a term in your introduction, consider using a more specialized source than a general dictionary or using a definition provided by an authority in the field. Or make up your own definition.
- Avoid using humor unless you do it *very* well.

Strategies for Inventing Content:

- Write the introduction and conclusion as a pair after completing the body paragraphs. Think of these two paragraphs as a frame. Using a stand-in sentence, such as “The purpose of this paper is ...,” during drafting may help you get started writing the body paragraphs. This sentence is later replaced by a full introductory paragraph.

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- Write your body paragraphs; then study them, asking yourself questions such as: What does my reader need to know to understand this information? Which parts of this essay may my reader disagree with at first? Why is this topic important to my reader? What is surprising about this information? Answers to questions like these may produce content for the introduction.
- Look at the introduction as a promise to the reader. Make sure the promise matches what the paper will deliver.
- Always gather more information than you can use. You may be able to harvest the odd interesting fact that will make your introduction come alive from the extra stuff you didn't use in the body of the essay.
- Look around you for connections to your topic that might make an interesting way in. Even if you've researched the topic at the library, everyday life and the real world you live in may still offer something you can connect in an interesting fashion to your topic. Such real-world detail can make an interesting point of departure.

Structure:

- Pattern of details moving to thesis.
- Details, background, anecdotes leading to a suggestion.
- Thesis, followed by background.

And while you're thinking about writing ...

“Warming up is for leftovers; an introduction should set a fresh appetizer before your reader.” — M. Garrett Bowman

“The most important sentence in any article is the first one. If it doesn't induce the reader to proceed to the second sentence, your article is dead.” — William Zinsser

“No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money.” — Samuel Johnson

Tone:

- Euphemisms vs. crude expressions
- Cliches
- Precise, direct language

Explore possible tones

Compare boring, broad first sentences with direct ones

And while you’re thinking about writing ...

“Warming up is for leftovers; an introduction should set a fresh appetizer before your reader” (M. Garrett Bowman, *Ideas and Details*, 88).

“The most important sentence in any article is the first one. If it doesn’t induce the reader to proceed to the second sentence, your article is dead” (William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*, 55).

“No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money.” Samuel Johnson

Bibliography

Bowman, M. Garrett. *Ideas and Details: A Guide to College Writing*. New York: Harcourt College Publishers, 2001.