

Writing Introductions

An introduction serves as a transition by moving the reader from the world outside of your paper to the world within. A good introduction, generally speaking, defines for the reader what the essay is going to address and divides the topic of the essay into the parts to be discussed. In other words, a good introduction leaves the reader with a good idea of what the essay is all about and how the writer intends to “attack” his/her topic.

Begin your introduction with a general statement, and with each sentence that follows, get more and more specific until you get to the last sentence— a clearly stated thesis.

Example

General Sentence

Dealing with emotional issues can be both complicated and perplexing.

Less general sentence

Now and then, a poet is willing to expose two very distinct facets of his or her emotional nature.

Even less general (more specific)

Such a poet is courageous enough to look back on sadder times, as well as to recollect a fond memory--a writer honest enough to know that life includes both the swing of birches and the darker moments of the soul.

Even more specific

Robert Frost is such a poet.

Specific thesis statement

The difference in the tone of his poems “Birches” and “Acquainted with the Night” reveals a poet equally adept at portraying both the lighter and darker sides in life through his use of setting, imagery and structure.

Example

Begin with a big picture sentence or two that are related to your topic before focusing in on the details of your argument.

Begin with a quotation. Just make sure you explain its relevance.

Begin with a thought-provoking question.

Begin with an acknowledgment of an opinion opposite to the one you plan to take.

Begin with a very short narrative or anecdote that has a direct bearing on your paper.

Begin with an interesting fact.

Begin with a definition or explanation of a term relevant to your paper.

Begin with irony or paradox.

Begin with an analogy. Make sure it's original but not too far-fetched.

Other tips...

Don't be afraid to write a tentative introduction first and then change it later. Some people find that they need to write some kind of introduction in order to get the writing process started. That's fine, but if you are one of those people, be sure to return to your initial introduction later and rewrite if necessary.

Try writing your introduction last. You may think that you have to write your introduction first, but that isn't necessarily true, and it isn't always the most effective way to craft a good introduction. You may find that you don't know what you are going to argue at the beginning of the writing process, and only through the experience of writing your paper do you discover your main argument.

It is perfectly fine to start out thinking that you want to argue a particular point, but end up arguing something slightly or even dramatically different by the time you've written most of the paper. The writing process can be an important way to organize your ideas, think through complicated issues, refine your thoughts, and develop a sophisticated argument. However, an introduction written at the beginning of that discovery process will not necessarily reflect what you have written by the end.

You will need to revise your paper to make sure that the introduction, all of the evidence, and the conclusion reflect the argument you intend. Sometimes it's easiest to just write up all of your evidence first and then write the introduction last—that way you can be sure that the introduction will match the body of the paper.

Pay special attention to your first sentence. Start off on the right foot with your readers by making sure that the first sentence actually says something useful and that it does so in an interesting and error-free way.

Be straightforward and confident. 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!

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