Introductions

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Most of us are so busy that our time is valuable. When writing, it’s important to remember that simply because you write something, it doesn’t mean your audience is necessarily going to read it. Committing to a book, article, or essay requires the reader to make a choice between your essay and something else. Convincing them to make that sacrifice is a delicate process that begins with your introduction.

Typical Introduction Elements

Although writing a compelling and informative introduction is as much an art as it is a science, there are four distinctive parts that are necessary for an effective introduction to help you lay the groundwork for your argument and create a foothold for readers to ease into your writing.

General Introduction Format:
1. **Use an opening attention-grabber:** Within the first few sentences, you are reaching out to your reader and trying to gain their interest, particularly if they wouldn’t be interested in your topic otherwise. An attention-grabber can also be called a lead or a hook and can take several forms including a fact or statistic, quotation, or an interesting story. Depending on the type of academic prose you are writing, an attention-grabber may not be appropriate. For example, the humanities love to use attention-grabbers, but the natural and social sciences often do not.
2. **Explain the question to be investigated:** Some writers will state the question directly and end the sentence with a question mark. Other writers will imply the question and hope that the audience is able to understand from the surrounding framework. Whether a question is stated or implied, the reader should understand why a topic is significant by the end of your introduction.
3. **Provide background information:** As you write an introduction, you’re looking for a way to show that you’re joining a conversation. Consider that you most likely had to research your topic before sitting down to write a persuasive, informative, or creative essay. Sometimes your readers also need this background information that you have discovered in your own investigation. Background information can take many forms, such as defining key terms, showing a sequence of events leading up to the current discussion in your paper, or offering other factual details that might be significant for the reader to understand the topic. For some subjects you may only need a few sentences of background information, but others may need a full literature review.
4. **Preview the remainder of the paper by formulating a strong thesis statement:** In the preview, you are offering a glimpse into what the rest of your paper will be discussing. Here is where you are offering new information by indicating your take on the issue or topic you are discussing, which is why it comes last. Your final statement will be the way that readers navigate through the rest or your paper. Such a statement is traditionally called a thesis statement.

Examples of Different Introduction Types

There are several different ways that you might think about structuring your introduction. Below are some of the different introduction types available to you. Be sure to check with your instructor or review disciplinary conventions to ensure that you are using an appropriate introduction for your discipline.

**Inverted Triangle (sometimes called The Funnel)**

One of the most common, and probably most familiar, methods of structuring an introduction is the inverted triangle method, sometimes called the funnel method, where ideas move from general to specific. This type of introduction typically has three parts: a hook, the bridge, and the thesis.
• **Hook:** The hook should be a statement or question about your subject that catches the reader’s attention and initiates a gradual transition into your argument. All hooks present the reader with the most fundamental information, ideas, or prompts necessary to commence the writer’s argument.

• **Bridge:** Once you’ve drafted a gripping hook, your next challenge is finding a way to “bridge” the distance between that hook and your thesis. Your bridge should introduce progressively more specific information pertaining to your argument until the context the reader needs to grasp your thesis has been provided.

• **Thesis Statement:** In simplest terms, a thesis statement is your main idea or argument. Everything in the body of your paper flows out of and effectively refers back to the thesis statement since the primary function of your body paragraphs is to support the argument advanced in your thesis. A strong thesis statement specifically states your argument, provides a compressed version of necessary supporting evidence, and highlights some of the main points you’ll address later in the paper. Think of it as a “road map”: something that shows your reader where you’ll be taking them over the course of the paper.

Consider the following example:

For years humans have been using antibiotics to wage war against the microbe; recently, bacteria have started fighting back. When antibiotics were first introduced in the 1940s, they were heralded as man’s greatest weapon against infectious disease. Today, doctors and hospitals are seeing more and more occurrences of antibiotic resistant strains of bacteria. What’s worse is that the same infections that used to be confined to sick patients in hospitals have begun to strike perfectly healthy people outside of hospital walls. Most experts agree that inappropriate use and general overuse of these naturally occurring compounds has led to this resistance. The views of how to cope with and overcome the problem is where they differ. With the threat of antibiotic resistance looming ever closer, patients and doctors alike must look at their usage of antibiotics and how it affects the drug’s effectiveness in order to understand how to combat this growing pandemic.

**Pitfalls to Avoid with the Inverted Triangle (Funnel) Introduction**

• **Vague generalizations:** Vague generalizations don’t offer much to the reader. For example, “Throughout human history…” or “In today’s society.” These are likely to bore your reader and make them lose interest.

• **An announcement of paper topic (unless required by discipline):** Your introduction should be engaging and should show the reader why the topic is important and noteworthy. Starting with “The purpose of this essay is…” or “In this essay I will…” may make your reader lose interest. However, some disciplines do require this approach, so be sure to check with your instructor or with materials in your discipline.

• **An apology for your opinion:** When you write your thesis statement you are asserting an argument. Remain firm on your argument and what you believe. Don’t use statements like “I’m not sure I’m right…,” “I don’t know much about my topic, but…,” “I think…,” or “I believe.” These undermine your credibility and may make your reader less inclined to read further.

• **Referencing the title:** Your title should speak for itself and it shouldn’t be necessary to discuss it in your introduction. If you feel the need to do so, revising your title may be needed.
Problem-Posing
In this method, you are aiming to start a conversation with the reader by discussing a problem. Writers may use rhetorical questions, the second-person pronoun “you,” or other ways to draw in the reader and make them consider the problem. While the problem may not be solved by the end of the paper, the problem-posing introduction is designed as a way to show the reader why there are potential issues that need to be addressed.

Consider the following example:

Imagine a school that has no toilet paper in the bathroom, has been flooded with sewer water more than once, has no school yard—only an empty lot—has broken lights in most of the classrooms, has a shortage of teachers, and has a graduation rate of only 55 percent. This is a nightmare that many kids would have trouble imagining, but for the kids of Martin Luther King Junior High School, this is a reality they have to face every day. If this is the American definition of equal opportunity for all, then we should redefine “equal.” When will the public open their eyes and face the realities that surround this nation?

Pitfalls to Avoid with the Problem-Posing Introduction
- **Carefully consider how you are using the second-person pronoun “you”:** Using “you” in an essay can be tricky. “You” can be a really affective tool to grab the reader’s attention and bring them into the essay topic. If used incorrectly, it can also sound like you are trying to lecture or yell at the reader.

Narrative
While writing this type of introduction, you’re aiming to tell a story that successfully catches the attention of the reader. This type of introduction is most often seen in the humanities.

Consider the following example:

Clutching the black, cold steel, my finger ready to fire, I approach the unfolding scene with caution. I was tipped off with the help of my radio scanner: “Ten dead, 12 wounded. Believed to be friendly fire.” The heat of the Afghan sun beats down on my face as bombs and gunfire are heard in the distance. I walk towards the commanding office and take a slight pause. He sees me. I kneel down into the burning sand and lean my head until he is in sight. Immediately I unload a burst of shots in quick succession. I can see his veins bulging in his neck as he screams, “STOP! This is a classified U.S. Government area! You cannot shoot here.” As he says this I remove my eye from the viewfinder and walk away. My camera swings in defeat at my side. I am a U.S. photojournalist covering the war in Afghanistan. My own government has denied me access.

Quotation with Strong Thesis Statement
When considering this type of introduction, it is important to find a quote from a source text that encompasses what you will be discussing. If the quote is ineffective, your introduction will be ineffective too. Additionally, you will need to be sure that your thesis statement relates to the quote and provides a clear map forward. This type of introduction is most often seen in the humanities.
Consider the following example:

“Then I got pregnant. I was sixteen. Family, church, school—each of those memberships that had embraced me as a child—turned their backs. Shunning is supposed to keep bad things from happening in a community. But it doesn’t correct the life gone wrong… Shunning is as precise as a scalpel, an absolute excision, leaving, miraculously, not a trace of a scar on the community body. The scarring is left for the girl, an intense, debilitating wound that weeps for the rest of her life. It’s quite a price to pay for having scared sex on a beach on a foggy Labor Day night” (Hall xi-xxvii). Meredith Hall’s memoir Without a Map represents the challenges that a pregnant teenage girl experiences in the 1960s and offers an argument for the long-term effect that shunning and invisibility can have on an individual’s perceptions of gender and motherhood.

Pitfalls to Avoid with the Quotation with Strong Thesis Statement Introduction

- Avoid dictionary definitions when quoting: One of the least effective quotes to begin a piece is a dictionary definition. If you need to define a term in your introduction, you may do so, but do not open with such a definition. These types of introductions are overused.

Intriguing Statement

An intriguing statement introduction is designed to catch the reader’s attention. The hook can be something playful, alarming, or even something obvious said in a new way.

Consider the following example:

You need sleep. It’s true; America is a sleep-deprived nation. Workers and students around the country engage in a culture so demanding and fast-paced that it tends to eat up hours of sleep at night. Many people do not get the eight hours of sleep that most sleep experts set as the average requirement. Fortunately, it is not too hard to compensate for insufficient sleep. Incorporating time for a nap can greatly improve the quality of life for the typical American.

Rhetorical Question(s)

Asking rhetorical questions in your introduction can be an effective way to begin your essay. Similar to a problem-posing introduction, questions show this issue is worthy of examination. Your goal is to answer these questions throughout your essay through the argument, information, or stories that you are telling.

Consider the following example:

We all know what it feels like to have that grumbling pain in our stomach once in a while when we miss breakfast or lunch. What if that pain rarely went away? What if you did not voluntarily skip breakfast, but rather had no food to eat? What if the little food you did have to eat was lacking essential nutrients? Individuals living in sub-Saharan Africa face these questions every day.

Pitfalls to Avoid with the Rhetorical Question(s) Introduction

- Carefully consider how you are using the second-person pronoun “you”: This is another introduction type where you may find yourself using “you.” Like the problem-posing introduction, you want to make sure you are avoiding lecturing or yelling at the reader by considering whether the tone of your essay would benefit from the use of “you.”

Works Consulted:
UNC-Chapel Hill Writing Center (www.writingcenter.unc.edu); Gustavus Adolphus College Writing Center (gustavus.edu/writingcenter); University of New Hampshire Connors Writing Center (www.unh.edu/writing/cwc); The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing, 5th ed. (Ramage, Bean, and Johnson); Transitions: University of New Hampshire Composition Program, 2008-2009 ed.