

Introductions



An effective introduction arouses the reader's interest and establishes your topic and tone. The introduction is your best chance to "hook" your readers with tantalizing information that establishes the topic as worthy of their time and the writing as trustworthy. **Effective introductions present the topic, make some comment on it, and make readers want to continue reading.**

A good opening paragraph usually meets the following requirements:

- It focuses readers' attention on your subject and arouses their curiosity about what you have to say.
- It specifies what your topic is and implies your attitude.
- Often, it provides your thesis statement.
- It is concise and sincere.

Writers often leave the final drafting of the introduction until last because the focus of the piece may change during the process of writing.

You can engage the interest of your audience by writing introductions in a number of ways.

Ways to Write Introductions

- **The Funnel**

The Funnel introduction begins with a **statement or question about the subject**—a hook that relates to the readers' experience or knowledge. Then, it includes one or more **sentences that clarify or narrow the subject**. Finally, using these sentences as a bridge, the Funnel introduction **ends with a thesis statement**. This format takes the reader from the general to the specific while providing him/her with useful background information about the topic. For example:

The Declaration of Independence is so widely regarded as a statement of American ideals that its origins in practical politics tend to be forgotten. Thomas Jefferson's draft was intensely debated and then revised in the Continental Congress. Jefferson was disappointed with the result. However, a close reading of both the historical context and the revisions themselves indicates that the Congress improved the document for its intended purpose.

-Ann Weiss (student), "The Editing of the Declaration of Independence"

- **Open with an intriguing statement**

Nobody dies like Stalin did. He didn't just die, he took the world with him.

-Andrei Codrescu, "Stalin"

Ways to Write Introductions (continued)

- **Open with an anecdote**

Canada is pink. I knew from the map I owned when I was six. On it, New York was green and brown, which was true as far as I could see, so there was no reason to distrust the mapmaker's portrayal of Canada. When my parents took me across the border, and we entered the immigration booth, I looked excitedly for the pink earth. Slowly it dawned on me: this foreign, "different" place was not so different. I discovered that the world in my head and the world at my feet were not the same.

-Robert Ornstein, *Human Nature*

- **Open with a question your essay will answer**

Why are Americans terrified of using nuclear power as a source of energy? People are misinformed, or not informed at all, about its benefits and safety. If Americans would take the time to learn about what nuclear power offers, their apprehension and fear might be transformed into hope.

- **Open with an example**

Libby Smith knows what it is like to be a victim of gay bashing. First, there were the harassing telephone calls to her home. Then, one evening last March as she went to get her book bag out of a locker at the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire, she was attacked by two men.

-Mary Crystal Cage, "Gay Bashing on Campus"

- **Open with a strong opinion**

Men need a men's movement about as much as women need chest hair. A brotherhood organized to counter feminists could be timely because—let's be honest—women are no more naturally inclined to equality and fairness than men are. They want power and dominion just as much as any group looking out for its own interests. Organizing to protect the welfare of males might make sense. Unfortunately, the current men's movement does not.

-John Ruszkiewicz, *The Presence of Others*

- **Open with a quotation that leads to the thesis statement**

"It is difficult to speak adequately or justly of London," wrote Henry James in 1881. "It is not a pleasant place; it is not agreeable, or cheerful, or easy, or exempt from reproach. It is only magnificent." Were he alive today, James, a connoisseur of cities, might easily say the same thing about New York or Paris or Tokyo, for the great city is one of the paradoxes of history. In countless different ways, it has almost always been an unpleasant, disagreeable, cheerless, uneasy and reproachful place; in the end, it can only be described as magnificent.

-*Time*

Openings to Avoid

Here are some approaches that are likely to lead to an *ineffective introduction*. These methods may bore readers or make them question your sincerity or control.

- **A vague generality or truth.**

Don't extend your reach too wide with a line like *Throughout human history...* or *In today's world...* Most readers don't need the warm up.

- **A flat announcement.**

Don't start with *The purpose of this essay is...* *In this essay I will...*, or any similar presentation of your intention or topic. This is an elementary approach. Advanced introductions engage the reader without naming the purpose in the first sentence.

- **A reference to the essay's title.**

Don't refer to the title of the essay in the first sentence. The title should speak for itself.

- ***According to Webster...***

Don't start by citing a dictionary definition. A definition can be an effective springboard to an essay, but this kind of lead has become dull with overuse.

- **An apology.**

Don't fault your opinion or your knowledge with *I'm not sure if I'm right but...*; *I don't know much about this but...*; or a similar line. Your readers need to trust you as a writer and believe what you have to say.

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This handout was adapted from:

The Little, Brown Handbook Instructor's Annotated 10th Edition, Pearson-Longman, 2007.

The St. Martin's Handbook, 5th Edition, Bedford-St. Martin's, 2003.

The Writer's Harbrace Handbook Instructor's Brief 2nd Edition, Thomson-Wadsworth, 2005.