

Essay Introductions

The introduction creates the first impression your reader will have of your essay, and previews what you will cover in the essay's body. In essence, it serves three important functions: 1) to engage the reader's interest; 2) to provide context for your topic; and 3) to articulate the argument you intend to develop in the essay through a clearly expressed thesis statement.

Engaging your reader's interest

Beginning your essay with a general statement and narrowing to a more specific focus as the introduction progresses (the "funnel model") is a common and acceptable strategy. When using this approach, ensure that your opening statement makes a direct comment about your topic; avoid opening with a statement that is *too* general. Statements that begin with phrases such as "Since the beginning of time" or "Throughout human history" likely have little to do with the particular issue you are addressing in your essay, and this over-used strategy will repel rather than engage your reader's interest. For example, if you are writing an essay about the connection between love and death in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, an opening statement such as "Throughout history, writers have pondered the eternal themes of love and death" would be too general; on the other hand, a statement like "Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, although considered a classic love story, opens with a bloody duel and concludes with the suicides of its main characters" or "Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* grapples with the complexities of love and desire and the ways in which these emotions are affected by violence" would provide a more specific starting point for your discussion (and yet would be more general than a thesis statement). The key to an effective opening paragraph is to signal your essay's precise focus as early as possible.

Other effective opening strategies include using an interesting or provocative quotation that is directly relevant to your topic to stimulate the reader's interest; posing a question to which you will offer an answer (or provisional answer) as the introduction progresses; presenting a shocking fact or statistic that grabs the reader's attention and anchors the topic in a concrete way; introducing a point-of-view that you disagree with, in order to establish your own contrasting perspective; and employing an analogy or illustration to familiarize your reader with your topic, particularly if your topic is somewhat abstract or potentially outside of the reader's experience.

There are a number of introductory strategies that you should avoid, as well. These include providing a standard dictionary definition that doesn't add anything significant or new to the reader's understanding of your topic; offering a broad generalization about human nature, a group (or groups) of people, society, history, etc. that cannot be substantiated by credible evidence; using self-conscious language to tell the reader what you "will do" or "will say" in the essay (e.g., "In this essay, I will discuss ..."), rather than just going ahead and discussing the subject; and beginning the essay without establishing the essential details about your subject, as if the reader should already know what you are talking about without

you having told him/her (your essay should be intelligible to any reader—not just your instructor/marker).

Providing context for your topic

As noted above, the introduction should include the basic details necessary to the reader's understanding of your topic. For example, it should identify the author and title of a work of literature you are analyzing, the time frame of a conflict you are examining, the specific geographic area you are discussing, particular thinkers or scholars you will be addressing, and any other essential information. An introduction should also provide any other context that will help the reader to make sense of the discussion to follow, such as your theoretical framework, relevant historical details, the way you will be using particular terms or concepts or the current state of debate about your topic. Note, however, that the introduction is not the place to go into an overly-detailed discussion of your argumentative points or minutiae related to your topic. A concise, well-focused introduction will engage your reader far more than will a wordy, rambling one. Save more extensive elaboration for the body of the essay (you may provide a contextual paragraph or paragraphs following the introduction in order to flesh out important context in more detail; just remember to be as concise as possible and include only what is absolutely necessary).

Articulating the argument you intend to develop

Arguably the most important feature of your introduction is the thesis statement, which usually appears towards the end of the introductory paragraph (a logical although not required position for it). Be sure that your thesis statement clearly expresses the point of your paper, and that, having read your introduction, your reader has a good grasp of what you intend to discuss or argue and why it matters. See these handouts for more on the thesis statement:

<http://sass.queensu.ca/writingcentre/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2013/06/Developing-a-Thesis-Statement1.pdf>
<http://sass.queensu.ca/writingcentre/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2013/06/Three-Models-of-Thesis-Statements.pdf>

Final tips

It is possible to write your introduction first, as a means of mapping out the essay to follow and firming up your thesis statement as you prepare to write the body paragraphs. However, most introductions require revision after the essay has been written (you want to ensure that whatever you included in your introduction appears in the body of the essay, and that whatever you included in the body of the essay is previewed in your introduction), and it is often a good idea to write the introduction last, once you have a firm grasp of the essay's contents.

Note that the length of your finished introduction should be in proportion to the overall length of your essay (e.g., a brief essay necessitates a brief introduction). Finally, be sure to proofread carefully – a well-crafted, error-free introduction will make a favourable impression on your reader from the outset.