A GUIDE TO INTRODUCTIONS

When should I write the introduction?

The short answer – whenever you want! If you have a sense of your main idea and of the organization of your paper, writing the introduction early can help you fine tune your argument and prepare to write everything else. Other times, it's useful to write it (or revise it) after the rest of the paper is complete, so that the introduction more precisely matches the structure of the final draft.

What belongs in the introduction?

Contextual information: This is not a summary of the text, article, event, etc. It could be the author and title of the text you're writing about or the time and place of an historical event, but it must also include strategically chosen details that relate to your thesis. To figure out which details you need, try rereading your thesis and circling every phrase that requires more context– then provide only that, no more or less.

Important terms*:* If your paper requires you to use jargon specific to your discipline, or if you find that one term becomes crucial to your argument, defining it in the introduction ensures that your reader always understands you. Introductions are often a single paragraph, but for longer papers or ones with an especially complicated context and vocabulary, a second paragraph can help provide this information.

Thesis statement: This is the position you will defend. It is the most important component of your paper, and most (if not all) of the introduction builds up to it. For more tips on how to develop a strong thesis, see the Writing Center's resource "Creating a Thesis Statement."

How to write a strong first sentence

Get specific immediately. In no case should a paper open with phrases like "Throughout history," "All of mankind," "For thousands of years," or "Society has always…" Jumping right into your contextual information ensures an appropriately specific first sentence and helps hook your reader. For example:

> One of the many conflicts Maggie Tulliver faces in George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* is a romantic one: she finds herself caught between the affections of two men, unable to decide which, if either, she should choose for her lover.

Strategies for developing the rest of the introduction (Can be used individually or combined)

Pursue a logical chain of thought: Organize your introduction according to a clear, logical progression of ideas. When you complete one sentence, ask yourself what idea flows naturally out of it, or what your reader will want to know next. Your opening sentence is the starting point and your thesis the likely end point, so try draw a logical thread from the former to the latter– staying specific the whole time.

Defend the importance of your argument: Remind your readers why they should read your paper at all. You might be writing about an event, book, movement, policy, population, or place that you think is noteworthy. Or, if you have a strong thesis statement, it's likely saying something unusual, surprising, urgent, or complex. Highlighting these aspects will help you make a more emphatic argument.

Make a roadmap: Lay out your plan for the rest of the paper. In a couple sentences, summarize the points you will make in your body paragraphs, or describe the type of evidence you will use to defend your argument. This transforms your introduction into an outline for everything that follows. It can be a rigid list of what will come, but the strongest introductions– when they employ this tactic– do so in a way that does not hinder smooth writing or a logical flow of ideas.

Examples of Strong Introductions

Literature 206 - Note the specific opening sentence, strategic contextual information, roadmap for the rest of the paper, definition of key terms, and one-sentence thesis statement:

One of the many conflicts Maggie Tulliver faces in George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* is a romantic one: she finds herself caught between the affections of two men, unable to decide which, if either, she should choose for her lover. The men often talk to Maggie about the possibility of a future with her, and when they do, they engage in specific discourses. Philip Waken's is a discourse of free will– the idea that a person can make choices voluntarily– as he attempts to convince Maggie of her own agency. Stephen Guest, on the other hand, uses a discourse of determinism when trying to prove to Maggie that it is their fate to be together. Determinism is the opposite of free will, as it assumes that all events and choices are predetermined and their outcomes unavoidable. Maggie's difficulty in choosing one man reflects her larger struggle between believing in free will or submitting to determinism, but her final choice suggests that something entirely different guides her: a complicated faithfulness to those she loves.

History 254 - Note the specific opening sentence, strategic contextual information, logical progression of ideas, language like "significant" and "unprecedented" that highlights the topic's importance, and two-sentence thesis statement:

Upon the conclusion of the Second World War, Americans had good reason to be optimistic about the future. With the unconditional surrender of their opponents and a home front untouched by the war, it appeared that the United States was well poised to usher in an era of prosperity that Americans had not experienced since before the Great Depression. And yet, the end of the war caused a restructuring of global power that required significant readjustment for all. The United States enjoyed strength on the global stage that it had not known before; the Soviet Union, on the other hand, had lost an estimated 25 million people and suffered the consequences of battles it fought on home territory.1 Although ideologies would eventually define the Cold War, it came about first as a matter of the two nations struggling to navigate their postwar roles. Because the United States emerged from the Second World War a global superpower of unprecedented strength, it immediately attempted to fulfill what it perceived to be the responsibilities of such a position. However, given the Soviet Union's attempts to expand its influence, fulfilling the duties of a superpower forced the United States into a standoff with its former ally and brought about the Cold War in spite of American optimism for peace.

---

1 James T. Patterson, Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 82.

By Sarah Ostrow '18

Nesbitt-Johnston Writing Center, Hamilton College
Hamilton.edu/writing