

Writing Effective Introductions

Great writers know that effective and impacting essays begin with an interesting and engaging introduction that reveals their thesis and purpose, while capturing the reader's attention.

Introductions help writers...

- Reveal their essay's central idea or thesis
- Guide readers to important ideas in the body of the essay
- Provide relevant background information to help readers understand the essay's purpose and thesis.

Purpose and the Introduction

Before writing your introduction, it is important to determine whether your purpose calls for a formal introduction. For example, in narrative writing, it is often acceptable to start with the first event in your story, instead of providing background information. But, when writing informative or persuasive essays, it is important to provide an introductory paragraph that prepares the reader for what lies ahead. Any introduction, though, must clearly relate to the rest of the essay.

The Thesis Statement

In college writing, many professors will require that an introductory paragraph include a thesis statement, or a sentence (or sentences) that reveal the essay's central idea. Including a thesis statement at the end of your introduction will help you practice clear essay organization.

Strategies for Writing Introductions

An introduction should always include an introductory device that leads into the thesis and stimulates the reader's interest in the topic. The following examples are all excellent ways to gain your reader's interest in your topic.

Describe a scene or tell an anecdote

Welcome to French class, where you must learn to juggle irregular verbs, flying chalk, and the constant threat of bodily harm. At the age of forty-one, I am returning to school and having to think of myself as what my French textbook calls "a true debutant." After paying my tuition, I was issued a student ID, which allows me a discounted entry fee at movie theaters, puppet shows, and Festyland, a far-flung amusement park that advertises with billboards picturing a cartoon stegosaurus sitting in a canoe and eating what appears to be a ham sandwich.

--David Sedaris, "Me Talk Pretty One Day"

Provide relevant background information

To hold its own in the struggle for existence, every species of animal must have a regular source of food, and if it happens to live on other animals, its survival may be very delicately balanced. The hunter cannot

exist without the hunted; if the latter should perish from the earth, the former would too. When the hunted also prey on some of the hunters, the matter may become more complicated.

--Alexander Petrunkevitch, "The Spider and the Wasp"

Address your readers directly

You ask me what is poverty? Listen to me. Here I am, dirty, smelly, and with no "proper" underwear on and with the stench of my rotting teeth near you. I will tell you. Listen to me. Listen without pity. I cannot use your pity. Listen with understanding. Put yourself in my dirty, worn out, ill-fitting shoes, and hear me.

--Jo Goodwin Parker, "What is Poverty?"

Use a comparison, a contrast, or an analogy

I've finally figured out the difference between neat people and sloppy people. The distinction is, as always, moral. Neat people are lazier and meaner than sloppy people.

--Suzanne Britt, "Neat People vs. Sloppy People"

Use a startling remark or statistic

Divorce and out-of-wedlock childbirth are transforming the lives of American children. In the postwar generation more than 80 percent of children grew up in a family with two biological parents who were married to each other. By 1980 only 50 percent could expect to spend their entire childhood in an intact family. If current trends continue, less than half of all children born today will live continuously with their own mother and father throughout childhood. Most American children will spend several years in a single-mother family.

--Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "Dan Quayle Was Right"

Ask a question or present a problem

In grave discussions of "the renaissance of the irrational" in our time, superstition does not figure largely as a serious challenge to reason or science. Parapsychology, UFOs, miracle cures, transcendental meditation and all the paths to instant enlightenment are condemned, but superstition is merely deplored. Is it because it has an unacknowledged hold on so many of us?

--Robertson Davies, "A Few Kind Words for Superstition"

Use a quotation

"A name is a prison, God is free," once observed the Greek poet Nikos Kazantzakis. He meant, I think, that valuable though language is to man, it is by very necessity limiting, and creates for man an invisible prison. Language implies boundaries. A word spoken creates a dog, a rabbit, a man. It fixes their nature before our eyes; henceforth their shapes are, in a sense, our own creation. They are no longer part of the unnamed shifting architecture of the universe. They have been transfixed as if by sorcery, frozen into a concept, a word. Powerful though the spell of human language has proven itself to be, it has laid boundaries upon the cosmos.

--Loren Eiseley, "The Cosmic Prison"

Define an important term or concept

Long before I began Dumpster diving I was impressed with Dumpsters, enough so that I wrote the Merriam-Webster research service to discover what I could about the word Dumpster. I learned from them that it is a proprietary word belonging to the Dempster Dumpster company. Since then I have dutifully capitalized the word, although it was lowercased in almost all the citations Merriam-Webster photocopied for me. Dempster's word is too apt. I have never heard these things called anything but Dumpsters. I do not know anyone who knows the generic name for these objects. From time to time I have heard a wino or hobo give some corrupted credit to the original and call them Dipsy Dumpsters. I began Dumpster diving about a year before I became homeless.

--On Dumpster Diving, "Lars Eighner"

Open with a paradox

Human beings are the only animals that experience the same sex drive at times when we can—and cannot—conceive.

Just as we developed uniquely human capacities for language, planning, memory, and invention along our evolutionary path, we also developed sexuality as a form of expression, a way of communicating that is separable from our need for sex as a way of perpetuating ourselves. For humans alone, sexuality can be and often is primarily a way of bonding, of giving and receiving pleasure, bridging differentness, discovering sameness, and communicating emotion.

--Gloria Steinem, "Erotica and Pornography"

Challenge a widely held assumption or opinion

Remember that hole in the ozone layer over Antarctica, the one thought to be caused by chlorofluorocarbons? It may be on the mend, say Japanese researchers. They say the hole could be on its way to recovery more quickly than anticipated.

--Jeffrey Winters, "That Ozone Hole? Never Mind"

WHAT TO AVOID IN INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPHS

1. Don't be too obvious. Avoid bald statements such as "In this paper I will discuss the causes of failing oil prices."
2. Don't apologize. Avoid self-critical statements such as "I do not have much background in this subject" or "I am not sure if I am right, but here is my opinion."
3. Don't use overworn expressions. Avoid empty statements such as "Love is what makes the world go round" or "Haste makes waste."

Adapted from:

Simon and Schuster Workbook for Writers. Ed. Emily R. Gordon and Lynn Quitman Troyka. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990.

A Reader for College Writers. Ed. Santi V. Buscemi. 6th ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2005.