



INTRODUCTIONS & CONCLUSIONS

The introduction and conclusion allow a writer to address the overall purpose and significance of an essay. In general terms, the introduction states the intention, while the conclusion defines the achievement of an essay. Together they constitute the frame for your paper, providing the first and last opportunities to convince your reader of its value. Because they occupy such rhetorically important positions in the structure of your paper, the introduction and conclusion should be crafted with care.

There is no single formula for writing introductions and conclusions. The strategy you adopt will depend on the nature of the assignment, the conventions of the academic discipline, and the internal imperatives of your particular argument. But the introduction and conclusion do typically accomplish certain things. They define the scope and focus of an essay. They situate your main point in a larger context. And they help your reader understand the value of your argument.

THE INTRODUCTION

The introduction typically serves several purposes:

- **It sets the tone for your paper.**

Remember that when you write the introduction, you are introducing not only your argument, but also yourself, the author. What kind of persona do you want to project? Presumably, you do not want to come across as dogmatic, impatient, or hostile toward your subject or others who have written about it. This kind of stance will likely alienate a reader, who may choose simply to stop reading. In academic writing, it is much more effective to present yourself as a thoughtful writer who has a good command of the subject, who can acknowledge complexity and nuance, who has made reasonable judgments on the basis of textual or factual evidence, and who is aware of alternative interpretations. In any case, the tone of the introduction is an important part of any strategy of persuasion.

- **It identifies and limits your subject.**

Your introduction tells a reader what you are writing about and defines the scope of your inquiry.

- **It orients your reader by explaining the specific context and rationale for your argument.**

Your reader looks to the introduction not only for the thesis statement or central idea, but also for orientation within the chosen area of inquiry. Take care, therefore, to provide any background or context that will help your reader understand how your work fits into the larger picture, and why it matters. Locate your work on the conceptual map.

- **It presents your thesis or central claim about your subject.**

There is no absolute rule on the length and placement of the thesis statement. But a good rule of thumb for a short (5-page) paper is to state the thesis in one or two sentences at the end of the first paragraph.

- **It engages your reader's attention and persuades her to keep reading.**
Your introduction should present an original thesis on a significant topic within a well-defined subject area. But there are different ways of accomplishing this in an engaging way. For example, you might approach your topic by
 - **moving from the specific to the general:** use an **anecdote, quotation, fact, or textual detail** that illustrates the larger issues
 - **moving from the general to the specific:** first present a somewhat wider view* of the subject, then focus in on the particular area of inquiry.

*Take care, however, that the “wide view” does not become an occasion for windy generality and vague abstraction. The wide view should itself be focused, concrete, and directly relevant to your particular topic. [See below, “Formulaic Introductions”]
 - **posing a significant question or problem** that serves to focus your inquiry
 - **challenging a commonplace interpretation**
- **Sometimes, especially in longer essays, the introduction describes the structure of your essay.**
A brief overview of the organization of your paper can help prepare your reader to follow your argument.

The Challenge of Writing the Introduction

Writing the introduction can be a daunting task, and it is natural to feel anxious about it. After all, you can write a good introduction only if you have a clearly defined thesis statement and a sure command of the relevant evidence. Since these things will emerge only after patient grappling with your texts, it helps if you first *prepare* to write your introduction by studying your materials, taking notes, gathering evidence, organizing ideas, and proposing a possible line of argument. Doing this preparatory work will make the task of writing the introduction much easier. Then you can revisit it as the paper continues to take shape. Some tips:

Be prepared to revise your introduction at any point during the writing process.

In the course of drafting the essay you may discover a *more* compelling argument than the one with which you began. If this happens, you will want to sharpen, adjust, or change your thesis statement and introduction so that they reflect your new focus. Again, this is a natural, perhaps even necessary, part of the writing experience. For while academic prose takes a linear form, the process that produces the best such writing is constantly recursive and dialectical. *The good introduction is the result of a process that includes preparatory thinking, provisional drafting, and ongoing revision.*

State your purpose early.

Many students worry that if they present their central ideas in the introduction, they will have nothing left to say in the body of the paper. But your reader is looking to the introduction for a clear statement of purpose; if it's not there, you may lose more in confusion than you gain in suspense. And remember that the strength of your paper lies not *only* in the introductory presentation of your

main idea, but also in the careful execution of a well-developed argument. Your reader will remain engaged both because you have a clear and interesting claim, *and* because you go on to justify that claim with compelling evidence and a detailed, disciplined argument. The point here is that you can present your central claim in the introduction without depriving your reader of the sense of ongoing discovery that arises from well-chosen evidence and cogent analysis.

Avoid formulaic introductions.

The formulaic introduction is usually a sign of poor preparation. If you haven't thought deeply and carefully enough about your subject, it will not be possible to generate an original thesis and a focused argument about it. The result will be a paper that relies on little more than vague generality and empty formula. Among the formulaic approaches you should avoid are introductions that present:

The history-of-the-world: "From the dawn of time..." This kind of opening gives readers the impression that you have not mastered your material sufficiently to say something substantive and specific about it.

The dictionary definition: "According to Webster's..." Like any general formula, this one evades the specific demands of your subject. If the definition of terms is important to your argument – and it usually is – take care to make distinctions and present definitions that are *specific* to your materials. This is especially important if there is disagreement about the meaning of key terms among those who have written about a given subject. It may be useful to consult dictionaries, but be sure that you remain sensitive to the specific meaning(s) of a term as it appears in your particular materials.

THE CONCLUSION

Like the introduction, the conclusion brings your central ideas into focus – but now, at the end of your paper, they appear in light of the foregoing argument. Obviously, then, the goal is to make your reader feel that the argument has fully achieved the goals you have set in the introduction. Your reader should feel convinced by your argument and satisfied that all has come full circle. It is a good idea, therefore, to write the final versions of the introduction and conclusion each with the other in mind – and to make any adjustments to them (or to the intervening argument) that are needed to make the declared goals match the actual accomplishment.

Writing the conclusion can be challenging, because now that you have completed the main argument, it may seem as if the only thing left to do is to summarize it. Certainly, the conclusion typically includes an element of summary, but an effective conclusion does not feel like *mere* summary. For even as you move to recapitulate and close your argument, it is important to sustain your reader's interest by using your conclusion to extend, and not just repeat that argument. Even in the conclusion you should strive to produce in your reader a sense of discovery and prospect.

There are different ways of doing this. For example:

- Indicate how your main point fits into a larger context. Show how your discoveries resonate within the larger subject area.
- Explain the implications of your research and interpretation. What difference might it make to the way we think about the relevant issues? Do your conclusions challenge common assumptions about your topic? How might your methods or findings apply to other problems?

- Consider making recommendations for future research on matters related to, but beyond the scope of this particular paper.
- You might incorporate key words and phrases from your introduction, presenting them now in a way to reveal their greater depth, nuance, or implication.

The length of both the introduction and conclusion should be appropriate to the length of the entire paper. Once again, there is no fixed rule, but as a general rule of thumb, one might devote one paragraph to each in a short essay, and up to several pages in longer papers like JPs. The introduction and conclusion in a Senior Thesis might each deserve a chapter.

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