

## Introductions

After reading this handout, you should be able to understand how introductions function, determine whether a writing strategy is effective or unhelpful, and evaluate introduction drafts.

### The Role of Introductions

Introductions and conclusions can be the most difficult parts of papers to write. Usually when you sit down to respond to an assignment, you have some sense of what you want to say in the body of your paper. You might have chosen a few examples you want to use or have an idea that will help you answer the main question of your assignment; this makes the body paragraphs easier to write. It may be helpful to keep in mind that an effective introduction essentially lets the reader know, “this is what I’m going to talk about” or “This is what my paper will discuss.” Similarly, a conclusion should remind your reader “this is what I/the paper discussed.” The middle parts of your paper need to be introduced and concluded in a way that makes sense to your reader.

Your introduction and conclusion act as bridges that transport your readers into the “place” of your analysis. Providing an introduction helps readers make a transition between their own world and the issues you will be writing about; it also gives your readers the tools they need to get into your topic and care about what you are saying. Once you’ve hooked your reader with the introduction and offered evidence to prove your thesis, your conclusion can provide a bridge to help your readers to transition back to their daily lives.

### Why Bother Writing a Good Introduction?

**You only have one first impression.** The opening paragraph of your paper provides your readers with their initial impressions of your argument, your writing style, and the overall quality

of your work. A vague, disorganized, error-filled, or boring introduction will probably create a negative impression. Alternately, a concise, engaging, and well-written introduction will allow your readers to think highly of you, your analytical skills, your writing, and your paper. This impression is especially important when the audience you are trying to reach (your instructor) will be grading your work.

**Your introduction is an important road map for the rest of your paper.** Your introduction conveys a lot of information, letting your readers know what your topic is, why it is important, and how you plan to proceed with your discussion. In most academic disciplines, your introduction should contain a thesis or claim (your main argument). It should also, ideally, give the reader a sense of the kinds of information you will use to make that argument and the general organization of the paragraphs and pages that will follow. After reading your introduction, your readers should not have any major surprises in store when they read the main body of your paper.

**Ideally, your introduction will make your readers want to read your paper.** The introduction should capture your readers' interest, making them want to read the rest of your paper. Opening with a compelling story, quotation, question, or an example to help your readers see why this topic matters.

### **Strategies for Writing an Effective Introduction**

**Start by thinking about the question(s) you are trying to answer.** Your essay is a response to this question and your introduction is the first step. Your direct answer to the assigned question will be your thesis/claim, and your thesis will be included in your introduction, so it is a good idea to use the question as a jumping off point. Imagine that you are assigned the following question:

*Education has long been considered a major force for American social change, righting the wrongs of our society. Drawing on the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, discuss the relationship between education and slavery in 19th-century America. Consider the following: How did white control of education reinforce slavery? How did Douglass and other enslaved African Americans view education while they endured slavery? And what role did education play in the acquisition of freedom? Most importantly, consider the degree to which education was or was not a major force for social change with regard to slavery.*

The prompt can give you some clues about how to approach your introduction. Notice that it starts with a broad statement and then focuses on specific questions from the book. Try using a similar model in your own introduction. Start off with a big picture sentence or two about the power of education as a force for change as a way of getting your reader interested and then focus in on the details of your argument about Douglass. While a different approach could also be successful, looking at the way the professor set up the question can sometimes give you some ideas for how you might answer it.

**Decide how general or broad your opening should be.** Keep in mind that even a “big picture” opening needs to be clearly related to your topic; an opening sentence that said “Human beings, more than any other creatures on earth, are capable of learning” would be too broad for our sample assignment about slavery and education.

When wondering how broad your opening should be, consider Google Maps or similar programs as an example. Imagine that you want to find out if El Paso is at roughly the same latitude as Rome. You might zoom out on the online map until you can see the whole globe. If you’re trying to figure out how to get from El Paso to Las Cruces, you probably would zoom in to the level where Texas and New Mexico meet (but not the rest of the world, or even the rest of the United States). If you’re looking for Sun Bowl Drive to get to UTEP, you may need to zoom all the way in. The question you are asking determines how “broad” your view should be. In the sample assignment above, the questions are probably at the “state” or “city” level of generality. The introductory sentence about human beings is definitely at the “global” level. When writing, try to place your ideas in context.

**Try writing your introduction last.** You may think that you have to write your introduction first, but that isn’t always the most effective way to craft a good introduction. You may not know what you are going to argue when you begin an assignment, but writing the paper helps you discover your main argument. The writing process is an important way to organize ideas, think through complicated issues, and develop your argument. An introduction written at the beginning of that discovery process may not necessarily reflect what you wind up with at the end. You may need to revise your paper to make sure that the introduction, all of the evidence, and the conclusion reflect your argument. Sometimes it’s easiest to just write all of your evidence first and then write the introduction last. That way, you can be sure that the introduction will match the body of the paper.

**Don't be afraid to write a tentative draft introduction.** Some people find that they need to write some kind of introduction in order to get the writing process started. That's fine, but you will want to return to your initial introduction later and rewrite it if necessary.

**Open with an attention grabber.** Sometimes opening with something catchy can help, especially if your paper topic is somewhat dry or technical. Consider these options:

- **An intriguing example** (I.e., the mistress who initially teaches Douglass but then ceases her instruction as she learns more about slavery)
- **A provocative quotation** (Douglass writes that “education and slavery were incompatible with each other”)
- **A puzzling scenario** (Frederick Douglass says of slaves that “[N]othing has been left undone to cripple their intellects, darken their minds, debase their moral nature, obliterate all traces of their relationship to mankind; and yet how wonderfully they have sustained the mighty load of a most frightful bondage, under which they have been groaning for centuries!” Douglass clearly asserts that slave owners went to great lengths to destroy the mental capacities of slaves, yet his own life story proves that these efforts could be unsuccessful.)
- **A vivid and perhaps unexpected anecdote** (for example, “Learning about slavery in the American history course at Frederick Douglass High School, students studied the work slaves did, the impact of slavery on their families, and the rules that governed their lives. We didn't discuss education, however, until one student raised her hand and asked, ‘But when did they go to school?’ Modern high school students cannot conceive of an American childhood devoid of formal education, illustrating the significance of the deprivation of education in past generations.”)
- **A thought-provoking question** (Considering all of the freedoms enslaved individuals were denied in the American South, why does Frederick Douglass focus his attention on education and literacy?)

**Pay special attention to your first sentence.** Create a strong first impression by making sure that the first sentence says something useful in an interesting and error-free way.

**Be straightforward and confident.** Avoid statements like “In this paper, I will argue that Frederick Douglass valued education.” While this sentence points toward your main argument, it isn't especially interesting. It might be more effective to say what you mean in a declarative sentence. It is much more convincing to tell us that “Frederick Douglass valued education.” Try to avoid sentences like “I think,” “I believe,” or “in my opinion” because the paper is already from your point of view. Imagine opening a textbook and the first sentence reads: “I guess the American Civil War had many casualties...” It is much more effective to assert your main argument confidently (“The American Civil War had many casualties...”). After all, you can't expect your reader to believe it if it doesn't sound like you believe it!

### **Evaluating Introduction Drafts**

Ask a friend to read your introduction. Have your friend tell you (or write a brief outline) of what s/he expects the paper will discuss, what kinds of evidence the paper will use, and what

the tone of the paper will be. If your friend is able to predict the rest of your paper accurately, you probably have a good introduction.

### The Five Kinds of Less Effective Introductions

- 1. The place holder introduction.** When you don't have much to say on a given topic, it is easy to create this kind of introduction. This introduction contains several sentences that are vague and don't really say much. They exist just to take up the "introduction space" in your paper. If you had something more effective to say, you would say it, but in the meantime this paragraph is just a place holder.
  - **Example:** *Slavery was one of the greatest tragedies in American history. There were many different aspects of slavery. Each created different kinds of problems for enslaved people.*
- 2. The restated question introduction.** Restating the question can sometimes be an effective strategy, but it's easy to stop there instead of offering a more specific, interesting introduction to your paper. The professor or TA will be reading ten to seventy essays in response to this question, so he or she does not need to read a whole paragraph that simply restates the question.
  - **Example:** *Education has long been considered a major force for American social change, righting the wrongs of our society. The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass discusses the relationship between education and slavery in 19th century America, showing how white control of education reinforced slavery and how Douglass and other enslaved African Americans viewed education while they endured. The book also discusses the role that education played in the acquisition of freedom. Education was a major force for social change with regard to slavery.*
- 3. The Webster's Dictionary introduction.** This introduction begins by giving the dictionary definition of one or more of the words in the assigned question. This introduction strategy is on the right track—if you write one of these, you may be trying to establish a key term or main idea. You may also be looking for an authority that will lend credibility to your paper, but Dictionary introductions can be ineffective simply because they are overused. Many graders will see twenty or more papers that begin in this way, greatly decreasing the dramatic impact that any one of those papers will have. It may be more interesting for you (and your reader) to develop your own definition of the term in the specific context of your class and assignment. If you are required to seek out an authority, try to find one that is very relevant and specific, such as a quotation from the source reading material.
  - **Example:** *Webster's dictionary defines slavery as "the state of being a slave," as "the practice of owning slaves," and as "a condition of hard work and subjection."*
- 4. The "dawn of man" introduction.** This kind of introduction generally makes broad, sweeping statements about the relevance of this topic since the beginning of time. It is usually very general and doesn't connect to the thesis. You may write this kind of introduction when you don't have much to say, which is why it's ineffective.
  - **Example:** *Since the dawn of man, slavery has been a problem in human history.*
- 5. The book report introduction.** This introduction gives the name and author of the book you are writing about, tells what the book is about, and offers other basic facts. You

might resort to this sort of introduction when you are trying to fill space because it's a familiar, comfortable format. It is ineffective because it offers details that your reader already knows and that are irrelevant to the thesis.

- **Example:** *Frederick Douglass wrote his autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, in the 1840s. It was published in 1986 by Penguin Books. In it, he tells the story of his life.*

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