

Effective Writing Center – Student Resources

Introductions

Every essay or assignment you write must begin with an introduction. It might be helpful to think of the introduction as an inverted pyramid. In such a pyramid, you begin by presenting a broad introduction to the topic and end by making a more focused point about that topic in your thesis statement. The introduction has three essential parts, each of which serves a particular purpose.

1. The first part is the “attention-grabber.” You need to interest your reader in your topic so that they will want to continue reading. You also want to do that in a way that is fresh and original. For example, although it may be tempting to begin your essay with a dictionary definition, this technique is stale because it has been widely overused. Instead, you might try one of the following techniques:
 - o Offer a **surprising statistic** that conveys something about the problem to be addressed in the paper.
 - o Perhaps you can find an **interesting quote** that nicely sums up your argument.
 - o Use **rhetorical questions** that place your readers in a different situation in order to get them thinking about your topic in a new way.
 - o If you have a personal connection to the topic, you might use an **anecdote** or **story** to get your readers emotionally involved.
 - o For example, if you were writing a paper about drunk drivers, you might begin with a compelling story about someone whose life was forever altered by a drunk driver: *“At 18 Michelle had a lifetime of promise in front of her. Attending college on a track scholarship, she was earning good grades and making lots of friends. Then one night her life was forever altered...”*
2. From this attention grabbing opener, you would need to move to the next part of the introduction, in which you offer some relevant background on the specific purpose of the essay. This section helps the reader see why you are focusing on this topic and makes the transition to the main point of your paper. For this reason, this is sometimes called the “transitional” part of the introduction.
 - o In the example above, the anecdote about Michelle might capture the reader’s attention, but the essay is not really about Michelle. The attention grabber might get the reader thinking about how drunk driving can destroy people’s lives, but it doesn’t introduce the topic of the need for stricter drunk driving penalties (or whatever the real focus of the paper might be).
 - o Therefore, you need to bridge the gap between your attention-grabber and your thesis with some transitional discussion. In this part of your introduction, you narrow your focus of the topic and explain why the attention-grabber is relevant to the specific area you will be discussing. You should introduce your specific topic and provide any necessary background information that the reader would need in order to understand the problem that you are presenting in the paper. You can also define any key terms the reader might not know.
 - o Continuing with the example above, we might move from the narrative about Michelle to a short discussion of the scope of the problem of drunk drivers. We might say, for example: *“Michelle’s story is not isolated. Each year XX (number) of lives are lost due to drunk-*

driving accidents." You could follow this with a short discussion of how serious the problem is and why the reader should care about this problem. This effectively moves the reader from the story about Michelle to your real topic, which might be the need for stricter penalties for drinking and driving.

3. Finally, the introduction must conclude with a clear statement of the overall point you want to make in the paper. This is called your "thesis statement." It is the narrowest part of your inverted pyramid, and it states exactly what your essay will be arguing.
 - o In this scenario, your thesis would be the point you are trying to make about drunk driving. You might be arguing for better enforcement of existing laws, enactment of stricter penalties, or funding for education about drinking and driving. Whatever the case, your thesis would clearly state the main point your paper is trying to make. Here's an example: "*Drunk driving laws need to include stricter penalties for those convicted of drinking under the influence of alcohol.*" Your essay would then go on to support this thesis with the reasons why stricter penalties are needed.
4. In addition to your thesis, your introduction can often include a "road map" that explains how you will defend your thesis. This gives the reader a general sense of how you will organize the different points that follow throughout the essay. Sometimes the "map" is incorporated right into the thesis statement, and sometimes it is a separate sentence. Below is an example of a thesis with a "map."
 - o "*Because drunk driving can result in unnecessary and premature deaths, permanent injury for survivors, and billions of dollars spent on medical expenses, drunk drivers should face stricter penalties for driving under the influence.*" The underlined words here are the "map" that show your reader the main points of support you will present in the essay. They also serve to set up the paper's arrangement because they tell the order in which you will present these topics.
5. A final note: In constructing an introduction, make sure the introduction clearly reflects the goal or purpose of the assignment and that the thesis presents not only the topic to be discussed but also states a clear position about that topic that you will support and develop throughout the paper. In shorter papers, the introduction is usually only one or two paragraphs, but it can be several paragraphs in a longer paper.

FOR LONGER PAPERS

Although for short essays the introduction is usually just one paragraph, longer argument or research papers may require a more substantial introduction. The first paragraph might consist of just the attention grabber and some narrative about the problem. Then you might have one or more paragraphs that provide background on the main topics of the paper and present the overall argument, concluding with your thesis statement.

Below is a sample of an introduction that is less effective because it doesn't apply the principles discussed above.

An ineffective introduction

Everyone uses math during their entire lives. Some people use math on the job as adults, and others used math when they were kids. The topic I have chosen to write about for this paper is how I use math in my life both as a child and as an adult. I use math to balance my checkbook and to budget my monthly expenses as an adult. When I was a child, I used math to run a lemonade stand. I will be talking more about these things in my paper.

In the introduction above, the opening line does not serve to grab the reader's attention. Instead, it is a statement of an obvious and mundane fact. The second sentence is also not very specific. A more effective attention grabber may point out a specific, and perhaps surprising, instance when adults use math in their daily lives, in order to show the reader why this is such an important topic to consider.

Next the writer "announces" her topic by stating, *"The topic I have chosen to write about..."* Although it is necessary to introduce your specific topic, you want to avoid making generic announcements that reference your assignment. This technique is not as sophisticated and may distract the reader from your larger purpose for writing the essay. Instead, you might try to make the reader see why this is such an important topic to discuss.

Finally, this sample introduction is lacking a clear thesis statement. The writer concludes with a vague statement: *"I will be talking more about these things in my paper."* This kind of statement may be referred to as a "purpose statement," in which the writer states the topics that will be discussed. However, it is not yet working as a thesis statement because it fails to make an argument or claim about those topics. A thesis statement for this essay would clearly tell the reader what "things" you will be discussing and what point you will make about them.

Now let's look at how the above principles can be incorporated more effectively into an introduction.

A more effective introduction

"A penny saved is a penny earned," the well-known quote by Ben Franklin, is an expression I have never quite understood, because to me it seems that any penny—whether saved or spent—is still earned no matter what is done with it. My earliest memories of earning and spending money are when I was ten years old when I would sell Dixie cups of too-sweet lemonade and bags of salty popcorn to the neighborhood kids. From that early age, I learned the importance of money management and the math skills involved. I learned that there were four quarters in a dollar, and if I bought a non-food item—like a handful of balloons—that I was going to need to come up with six cents for every dollar I spent. I also knew that Kool-Aid packets were 25 cents each or that I could save money and get five of them for a dollar. Today, however, money management involves knowing more than which combinations of 10-cent, five-cent, and one-penny candies I can get for a dollar. Proper money management today involves knowing interest rates, balancing checkbooks, paying taxes, estimating my paycheck, and budgeting to make ends meet from month-to-month.

- In the first line the writer uses a well-known quotation to introduce her topic.
- The writer follows this "attention-grabber" with specific examples of earning and spending money. Compare how the specific details of the second example paint a better picture for the reader about what the writer learned about money as a child, rather than this general statement: "As a child, I used math to run a lemonade stand." In the first introduction, this statement leaves the reader to guess how the writer used math, but in the second introduction we can actually see what the child did and what she learned.
- Notice, too, how the reader makes the **transition** from the lessons of childhood to the real focus of her paper in this sentence: "Today, however, money management involves knowing...."
- This transition sentence effectively connects the opening narrative to the main point of the essay, her **thesis**: "Proper money management today involves knowing interest rates, balancing checkbooks, paying taxes, estimating my paycheck, and budgeting to make ends meet from month-to-month. This thesis also maps out for the reader the main points (underlined here) that will be discussed in the essay.

Resources

Univ. of North Carolina – Introductions

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/introductions.html>

Hamilton University- Introductions and Thesis Statements

<http://www.hamilton.edu/academics/resource/wc/intros.pdf>

Hamilton University-Introductions

http://www.hamilton.edu/academics/Resource/WC/Effective_essays.html