

INTRODUCTIONS

You don't have to write the perfect introduction before you start the rest of your paper. In fact, many successful writers write their introductions **last**, after they've really worked out what the rest of their papers are about. Others start with a few general sentences and rewrite them after the rest of the essay is finished. Whenever you write your introduction, you'll typically want to accomplish five things:

1. **Interest the reader.** This is essential for any kind of non-scientific writing, although it is not usually part of scientific writing. Never open a nonscientific essay or paper with a flat statement of generally-recognized fact, like "Most of the planet Earth is covered by water," or "Gun control is a very controversial topic." Your readers already know these facts, and who wants to be told what they already know? Instead, try a sentence or paragraph that will "hook" your readers by surprising, interesting, or emotionally involving them. Some ways of doing so are listed on the back of this page.
2. **Narrow your topic.** This is equally essential for the success of any kind of writing. If you're writing about gun control, for example, you might begin with a discussion of violence or civil liberties but you'll need to let your readers know quickly that your focus is on **specific** regulations regarding **specific** weapons.
3. **Include important background.** Most introductions place their topic in some kind of context. A paper on safe mercury levels in seafood might briefly note that fish consumption has increased significantly in the last decade, for example, while a paper on a World War I poem might mention the heroic war poetry that came before it. If you're writing about a text (such as a poem, story, essay, movie, or advertisement), you **must** name its author and title in your introduction.
4. **Announce your thesis.** In American academic writing, the introduction's last sentence usually announces the main point that the writer plans to make. Most teachers will require that you state your thesis clearly in your introduction, although some will let you save your main point for the end of your paper. Either way, most readers will look for a thesis at the end of your introduction, so be careful not to put other thoughts there that might confuse them.
5. **Provide a road map.** Many introductions end with a "sentence of division," often combined with a thesis, telling the reader what the main sections of a paper will cover. An introduction to a paper opposing a new superstore, for example, might end with a sentence claiming that the proposed business could harm the environment, drive down wages, and outcompete local businesses. The reader would then expect the paper to address those three issues, in that order.

How long does an introduction have to be? It varies. Some introductions do everything above in a single 5-7 sentence paragraph. Others use one paragraph to draw the reader in with a story, description or comparison, and then a second paragraph to accomplish the rest of the introduction's goals. In very long papers, introductory sections can last several pages.

What matters is that the length of your introduction be proportional (around 10-20%) to the rest of your paper. A 1-page introduction to a three-page paper is usually too long; a four-line introduction to a five-page paper is probably too short.

So how can you make your nonscientific introduction “hook” a reader’s attention and interest?

Tell a Story. Many professional articles (and speeches) begin with a brief story about someone who has been affected by the writer’s topic. Readers pay attention to stories, which can make abstract information seem personal and important. You can use your own story, if you’ve got a relevant one, or you can use the story of someone you’ve spoken to or read about. You can even make up a story, so long as you make it clear that that’s what you’re doing. (“The light turns green. Frustrated, the student inches ahead, peering between the parked cars for any glimpse of a space. Late again, she finally parks at Holt Arena and takes the bus down. While this student is imaginary, her experience is typical.”)

Describe a Scene. Describing a scene is a lot like telling a story, except that everything is happening at the same time. You might begin a paper about seatbelt laws by describing a car accident, for example, or a paper on a river dam by describing a lake or canyon.

Use a Vivid Quotation. If you open with someone else’s story, you can let them tell it in their own words. Alternatively, you can begin your essay with an interesting quotation from a book, movie, or other source and explain how it connects to the point you’re making. If you’re writing about a book or other text, you might choose to start with a quotation from it, instead. Do **not** open your paper with a dictionary definition.

Ask a Question. While this strategy is sometimes overused, it can still be a valuable one. It often works best when you show that you’re taking the question seriously by discussing possible answers to it, in your introduction or elsewhere in your paper.

Offer an Unexpected or Unfamiliar Fact. Most readers would like to gain some new information or insight from reading your paper, so their attention can be easily caught by an unfamiliar fact. A paper on criminal sentences given for domestic crimes, therefore, could begin with an observation like, “In 1910, it was legal in every state to shoot your wife if you caught her in adultery.”

Make a Paradoxical Statement. “Most law-abiding citizens break at least three laws a day.” Any opening sentence which makes your readers stop and think will accomplish your goal of getting their attention!

Open with the Opposing Viewpoint. Whether it’s “Skiing looks like a lot of trouble to learn,” or “Many people believe that they cannot get all the nutrients they need from a vegetarian diet,” opening with your opponent’s point of view can be a useful strategy. It helps you establish yourself a writer who’s aware of different positions and whose own opinion, therefore, is likely to be informed and thoughtful.

List a series of examples. You can build up to your thesis by opening with several examples of that claim in action: in a paper discussing gastric bypass surgery, for example, you might begin by naming several people who have had the surgery and the amount of weight each has lost--or the complications each has experienced.

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