

Writing Introductions



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Franklin & Marshall College
Writing Center

All excellent essays begin with strong introductions. A strong introduction engages the reader, outlines the remainder of the essay and concludes with a clear, cogent thesis statement. The goal of this worksheet is to teach you how to conceive, structure, and finally write a strong introduction.

*** Opening Sentence ***

Write a clear, assertive introductory sentence. You may even want to begin with one that contains as few as four or five words. Such a strategy allows you to then become more elaborative as you move towards the last, and hopefully the strongest, sentence of the paragraph. Here is an example: “*Good ideas are overrated.*” Others include “*Picture it.*” and “*All good art is indiscretion.*” These sentences promise development and thus compel readers to continue.

Also, try to avoid overly broad statements, such as “*Since the beginning of time...*” and “*In today’s society...*” These statements are simply too expansive to apply to any single argument.

*** Middle Sentence ***

The sentences that separate the introductory sentence from the thesis statement must engage the reader. During these sentences, you must prove that your essay will be insightful, imaginative, and intelligent. The middle sentences are vital to your grasp of the reader because, as John Trimble, a professor at the University of Texas, writes, “[i]f, at the very outset, a writer seems bored, unwilling to use his imagination, indifferent to his reader, and unclear in his thinking, he’s apt to remain that way” (26). There are many different ways to grab a reader’s attention. They include:

- Providing relevant background information
- Asking a provocative question or questions
- Giving a startling statistic or unusual fact
- Defining a particularly significant term
- Relating a relevant joke or anecdote
- Using an appropriate quotation
- Making an analogy

* Thesis Statement*

The thesis statement ought to appear at the conclusion of the introductory paragraph and reveal the main idea of the essay. A good thesis statement meets these criteria:

- It clearly introduces the point that will be argued in the body of the essay
- It contains no vague or undefinable words, such as “interesting”
- It is a generalization, not a fact
- It is ambitious

Thus, a strong thesis statement is limited, yet broad enough to encompass your entire argument, and specific, yet general enough to demand further development. Furthermore, it argues what the reader might not expect. Here is an example of a strong thesis statement:

Though some critics argue that Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness is a racist novel, it is actually one of the most compelling arguments against racism and imperialism ever written.

A strong thesis statement is NOT:

- 1) A statement that merely identifies the topic of the essay.
e.g., This paper is about Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness.
- 2) A description of background information.
e.g., Conrad, before completing his novel, spent eight years in an African jungle.
- 3) A question or a mystery.
e.g., What is so special about this novel? That is what I shall reveal in this essay.

* Example Paragraphs *

The first paragraph below manifests all the advice that appears on this worksheet. Its introductory sentence is short, its middle sentences engage the reader, and its thesis is clear, debatable, and succinct. By contrast, the second paragraph, although well-written, contains multiple empty sentences of plot summary and concludes with a rather pedestrian thesis statement.

He killed his brother. He married his brother's wife. He stole his brother's crown. A cold-hearted murderer, he is described by his brother's ghost as 'that incestuous, that adulterate beast' (I.v.42). The bare facts appear to stamp him an utter moral outlaw. Nonetheless, as his soliloquies and anguished asides reveal, no person in Hamlet demonstrates so mixed a true nature as Claudius, the newly-made King of Denmark. (qtd. In Trimble 28)

In both The Tempest, by William Shakespeare, and Antigone, by Sophocles, a ruler makes decisions that greatly affect his life. Prospero, the ruler in The Tempest, is king of a sparsely inhabited island. Creon, the ruler in Antigone, is the king of Thebes, a large city or area. Each of them has his own

philosophy of governing, guided by different values and circumstances. The decisions each make are based on these philosophies, and though the results of their decisions differ, this is not reason enough to call one philosophy more valid or correct than the other.

*** Helpful Hints ***

The following are useful tidbits of general advice from Trimble:

Before starting to write, do two things. First, ensure that you have a strong thesis. There's a good way to tell if you have one, but it takes courage. Write on some notepaper, 'I contend that –' and complete the sentence. Now study what you've written. If somebody else's essay were arguing the same thesis, would you be intrigued by it? Is it complex enough, or controversial enough, to allow for lengthy exposition? ... Second, have on hand a list of concrete details and apt quotations, and be ready to use them (29).

If you... feel discouraged with your opener, let it stand as it is, roughed out (if even that), and return to it after you've finished the first draft... Remember, writing involves discovery. Once the first draft is finished, you'll probably have found several points that deserve top billing (30).

*** Work Cited ***

Trimble, John R. *Writing With Style*, Second Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. 2000.

*** Other Sources of Help ***

Hacker, Diana. *Rules for Writers*, Third Edition. Boston: Bedford Books. 1996. Pages 21-24

Quitman Troyka, Lynn. *Quick Access – Reference for writers*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Simon and Schuster. 1995. Pages 14-15.

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