

Tips for Effective Introductions



An introduction informs your audience about what your topic is, why it is important, and what core claim (thesis statement) you plan to support with evidence. The type of introduction you write will depend on: the purpose of your essay, the length of your essay, your audience, the discipline you are writing in, and the assignment guidelines.

Checklist of What to Include:

Answer the questions “So What? Who Cares?”

You can start your essay by exploring the significance of the topic or the broader implications of your argument. The “So What?” is why the topic—and your essay—is important. The “Who Cares?” could be everything from who is affected by the issue you are exploring to who is currently researching a topic/who is working to address an issue. When brainstorming ideas for your introduction you might consider answering questions like the following:

- Why is this relevant to others?
- Who is most directly affected by this?
- Who are the key people discussing this/who are the researchers looking into this?

Preview the structure of your essay.

Your thesis statement should give a clear idea of the main points/ideas you will present in the body of your essay. And your introduction should preview the structure of your essay. Often it is easier to write your introduction last rather than first. After you have written your essay, you’ll have a clear picture of what your main points are and what relevant information you need to include in the introduction.

Plan a strong opening sentence that fits the type of assignment.

How you begin your essay will depend on the type of assignment, but you should start with a strong opening sentence (see below).

Effective Introduction Opening Sentences:

1. Surprising Fact

Starting with a surprising fact can grab the reader’s attention. It can also show that you have spent time researching and judiciously selecting facts that prove your claims. Facts and details can orient your readers to the broader context of your topic.

2. Interesting Question

Sometimes it may work to start your introduction with a thought-provoking question. Make sure that the question is one that your paper will answer. Another piece of advice: don’t directly address the reader in your question. For example, instead of asking “Do you know how much water cattle farms use to produce a pound of beef in CA?” you could ask “How many gallons of water is used to produce one pound of beef in CA?”

3. Quote

If you decide to start with a quote, make sure the quote is very directly tied to your main point. It’s also more effective to embed the quote in your introduction rather than using the quote as your opening sentence. Starting with your own words before a quotation serves two purposes: it keeps the emphasis on your own voice and it helps the readers know what to look for in the quote.

4. Well-written provocative statement

Oftentimes an insightful, well-written statement is the best option. Don’t feel like you have to start with a question, fact, or quote to interest your reader.



Introduction Tips: What's not effective

Checklist of What to Avoid:

- Avoid summarizing the history of life, the universe, and everything in between.**
A frequent problem with introductions is the tendency of the writer to put in too much. Your introduction should be limited in scope and scale; its only purpose is to show your reader **what** topic the paper is about, **why** the topic is relevant, and **what** you will say about the topic.
- Avoid including claims or information that won't be supported in the body of your essay.**
Avoid writing an introduction that isn't connected to your thesis. If your introduction mentions something, your paper should cover it.
- Avoid starting your introduction with your thesis statement.**
Warm your reader up to the topic by giving some context before stating your claims.
- Avoid assuming that your audience is already familiar enough about the topic to care.**
Your reader might not have the knowledge or context needed to feel personally invested in the topic. Your introduction should orient your reader to the topic. Sometimes it helps to imagine a reader who is intelligent, but not totally up-to-date on your topic. Emphasize specific key details (and potentially include numbers/statistics that define the scope of the topic) and avoid generalizations.

Moves that will weaken your introduction:

1. Too much history will weaken your intro:

Avoid trying to summarize the entire history of the topic you are writing about for college-level papers. Many students were taught in high schools to start with claims like: "Since the time of the Greeks, people have thought about...", etc. The problem with this is that if you start too broad in your introduction you won't have space to cover the more relevant/recent context that your reader might need. For example, if you are writing about how social media has changed the way teens communicate, don't start with the history of letters, phones, and then finally, the internet. Instead focus on what is relevant about recent trends on social media sites. Avoid statements like "Throughout all history."

2. Dictionary definitions will weaken your intro:

Dictionary definitions are boring. Additionally, your readers might feel that you are being lazy. If you feel it would be useful to define terms, try to add something new for your reader that shows you have a deeper understanding of the topic. For example, if you are writing about abortion, instead of defining it or mentioning the dates of the Roe v. Wade case, you could emphasize how the Supreme Court decision in Roe v. Wade was based on a woman's right to privacy and include a quote from one of justices. In general, you should try to replace dictionary definitions with a short relevant quote from experts in the field.

3. Quoting and citing too much will weaken your intro:

Quoting and citing too heavily will weaken your introduction. Keep your introduction mostly your own words and ideas. A good rule of thumb is to use at most either one short, impactful quote or a few paraphrased statistics.

4. Starting with your claim will weaken your intro:

Opening your essay with your argument can make your introduction feel abrupt. Orient your reader to the topic by providing some context first.