Introductions

An introduction provides an essay with relevance and direction by openly addressing the assignment. While formal assignments often demand a more structured introduction, personal narratives can contain a less formal opening. Regardless of assignment, your introduction should: a) spark interest; b) relate to the rest of your paper; and c) give a clear sense of what lies ahead. While there is no one right way to construct an introduction, it often contains the following features:

The Introduction

✓ RELEVANT BACKGROUND & OPENING MATERIAL

A good introduction provides relevant background, or introductory material, that helps explain the context or importance of the topic. It also spurs the reader's interest by following or leading into a thesis statement. Try some of these strategies for opening an essay:

OPEN WITH A QUESTION: "John Grisham had always hated English. In college, he even earned Ds in freshman English. So how did he become a writer with three suspense novels at the top of the charts?"

—Laura Faulkner

OPEN WITH A SHOCKING STATISTIC OR FACT: "Every day in the United States, roughly 200,000 people are sickened with a food borne disease, 900 are hospitalized, and 14 die."

—Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*

OPEN WITH DIALOGUE THAT INTRODUCES THE TOPIC: "I'm feeling so depressed," the patient says. "Eat two chocolate bars and call me in the morning," says the psychiatrist. Such advice sounds like a sugar fanatic's dream, but recent studies have confirmed that chocolate positively affects depression and anxiety. —Student Example

OPEN WITH A RELEVANT EXAMPLE OR QUICK LIST OF EXAMPLES: "A 200-pound teenager quits school because no desk can hold her. A 300-pound chef gets fired because he can no longer stand on his feet. A 350-pound truck driver breaks his friend's furniture. All these people are now living healthier, happier, and thinner lives, thanks to intestinal bypass surgery."

OPEN WITH A QUOTE FROM AN AUTHORITATIVE SOURCE: "How would you suspend 500,000 pounds of water in the air with no visible means of support? Answer: Build a cloud."

—Bob Miller (opening quote in K.C. Cole's "A Matter of Scale.")

OPEN WITH A SURPRISING BEFORE-AND-AFTER SCENARIO: "When I was seven, I thought my father was all-powerful and could do no wrong. But when I turned seventeen, I realized my father was a despicable, uncaring jerk." —Student Example

OPEN WITH A RELEVANT ANECDOTE: "Canada is pink. I knew from the map I owned when I was six. On it, New York was green and brown, which was true as far as I could see, so there was no reason to distrust the mapmaker's portrayal of Canada. When my parents took me across the border, I looked excitedly for the pink earth. Slowly it dawned on me: this foreign, 'different' place was not so different. I discovered that the world in my head and the world at my feet were not the same."

✓ A THESIS STATEMENT

Consisting of one or two sentences, a thesis statement clarifies the main idea, position, or point you're making. Then the rest of your essay works to support, argue for, or prove this thesis statement.

A THESIS SHOULD ALSO:

- Openly address the assignment or problem at hand;
- Be open to interpretation and debate. A thesis is always argumentative, prompting rational people to disagree;
- Be precise and focused.

✓ SUPPORTING INFO

A good introduction specifies how you plan to prove your thesis. This part of the introduction discusses what the essay will cover—and how those ideas will be addressed. You want to briefly answer the following: How will you prove your thesis? The answer to this question not only backs up your thesis, but also provides both reader and writer with a coherent outline of what the essay will address. If the introduction mirrors the body, and vice versa, you are well on your way to writing a precise and focused paper!

SOME INTROS *TO AVOID*

THE OBVIOUS INTRO:

"In this essay, I will discuss the topic I'm writing about."

THE "I HAVE NOTHING TO SAY" INTRO:

This vague opening references your topic without saying much about it.

RESTATED QUESTION INTRO:

Restating the assignment question can be useful, but it's not enough.

THE GENERAL INTRO:

This intro makes sweeping statements about the topic—often failing to connect to the thesis.

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