



The Art of the Introduction

Recommended ways to start your paper:

Specific to General. Start out with one or many specific examples that illustrate your topic before stating the topic itself.

Example: In the door of a department store, a woman jumps back to let a man in a wheelchair go by. On the street, a man forces himself to smile at a child whose face was disfigured by burns. Most people feel the need to hide their discomfort when they see someone who is disabled.

General to Specific. This is one of the most common types of introductions. Begin with a general statement about your subject and get more specific as you proceed with the introduction. It can be difficult to do this well. Be sure that your general statement is interesting and focused on your topic.

Example: In *East of Eden*, John Steinbeck describes a family that lives out the biblical story of Cain and Abel. Cal, the character who resembles Cain, is actually more likeable than his brother.

Caution: It's possible to be too general. If you're making a very general statement that just tells your reader something everybody already knows, you need to narrow your focus. See "common problems" below.

Anecdote. Tell a story that illustrates your topic and sets the tone for your argument.

Example: In *Columbine*, Ohio, two teenage boys were obsessed with a violent video game called *Doom*. Day after day, they mimicked the act of killing, until one day they made their game a reality.

Question. Start your introduction by asking a question you will answer in your paper.

Example: The media always talks about stem cell research and human cloning, but how much do these two issues really have to do with each other?

Caution: Do not make a long list of questions; simply ask one or two focused, considered questions that you plan to answer for your reader.

Correct a Common Misconception. If you are writing about an issue that is widely misunderstood, you can begin by clarifying it. This is an especially good idea if the members of your specific audience are particularly likely to misunderstand the topic.

Example: Contrary to popular belief, global warming is not theoretical; scientists have long since proven that temperatures on earth are rising. The controversy about this issue revolves around whether human activities, rather than natural processes, are causing our planet to heat up.

Begin at the Beginning. Essays about personal experiences can sometimes simply start by telling the beginning of the story—but be careful. You have to be sure you fit the thesis statement in. On analytical or research papers that don't have to be very formal, you can also describe how you thought about your topic when you were first introduced to it.

Example: Before I started *Moby Dick*, I did not expect to enjoy reading it.

Begin at the End. If applicable, begin by describing the results of the subject you're writing about. This method can make the significance of your subject immediately clear to your reader.

Example: Today, millions of women are powerful, educated, and productive members of our work force. Before the feminist movement, this was not the case.

Common problems in introductions:

Don't start by making a sweeping generalization, or a huge statement about something everybody already knows. If you write, "Throughout history, war has always existed" or "Many stories and novels describe the difficulty of living in a foreign culture," your reader will not be very interested in continuing. Sentences like these fill up space without communicating anything important.

Don't just start with your thesis statement. It's much more effective to establish what you're planning to talk about before you make your claim.

It is usually not a good idea to start your paper with a definition. Although it is important to make the meanings of your key terms clear, it is better to do this later, as the terms come up.

Many students begin papers by simply restating the question on the assignment sheet. This is generally uninteresting and uninformative.

When they are writing about an article, story, or novel, students often write first sentences that simply state the name of the piece they're analyzing, who wrote it, and when it was published. While it is necessary to fit this information into the introduction, it shouldn't be the only thing you say in the first paragraph.

The bottom line is that your introductory sentences should say something important or interesting. They should not just be there to fill space!

What to do if you're stuck:

Write a whole bunch of opening sentences, even if you think they sound stupid. Set a goal to fill a whole page or more with openings. You'll probably like one or two.

Try writing the body of the paper before the introduction. Sometimes you come up with a better idea of how to introduce your paper when you've already written it.

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Rev. January 08

If you aren't sure what to write about, it's not time to start the introduction anyway. You need to go back to the prewriting and brainstorming stage.

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