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Introductions

Invest in Your Introduction

Your introduction should announce your paper's purpose, define your paper's key terms, and offer your readers a clear contract of expectations. And in some disciplines, an introduction should seek to engage readers so that they will become invested in your writing. Readers want to know exactly what you intend to prove or precisely how you intend to answer a question: after all, they are typically just reading your paper for the first time, unlike you, who has read, reread, and likely rewritten the paper numerous times. They are trying to understand a complicated topic or argument that may be new to them. However, they will be in a position to understand your paper, and appreciate your work, if you take the time to lay out the argument or explain your paper in terms that are clear and that articulately express what you plan to prove or how you intend to answer a particular research question, or address some statement of purpose.

The more specifically you preview your paper in your introduction, and signal the topic and purpose, the more it looks like you understand your paper. Be specific, direct, and clear in an introduction.

What is an Introduction?

In most papers, an introduction represents a set of promises, often thought of as a “contract of expectations,” between you and your

readers. An introduction should also try to engage readers and excite their intellectual curiosity. There are many ways to construct introductions: “hook and return,” “inverted pyramid,” and “start with a quotation”: all have their place in academic writing, and all can work well to begin your paper. You may write an introduction in a paragraph, or several paragraphs, depending on the length of your paper, too. Rather than offering general information about a subject, the introduction should explain what this particular paper is about, and the introduction should provide specific information about how you are treating a particular subject. Readers follow clear arguments and expectations when you present them with an introduction that reads not like a mystery novel, but like an intellectual itinerary of your argument or research.

When to Write the Introduction:

Experienced writers construct introductions when they’re starting a paper, or in the process of writing their papers as they gain a clearer sense of their writing goals, or as the last piece of writing they do. You should discover when it works best for you and try different approaches. However, you should always be sure to check your introduction after you have produced the late draft of any paper to confirm that your introduction introduces the paper you actually wrote (see Reverse Outlines).

Five Points To Writing Effective Introductions:

Although introductions are different across the disciplines, effective introductions typically attend to these writing issues.

1. Announce the Topic of Your Paper

One of the important functions of an introduction is to **announce what you are writing about to your readers**. So as you review

and revise your introduction be sure your reader will be able to say fairly clearly what your paper is about.

2. Signal What is New or Different in Your Paper

In more advanced research writing, professors and TAs will expect you to **show what is new** about your position, or what need or gap your paper is addressing. Signal what's new or different about your research question or approach so readers will see where your work fits into the larger picture.

3. Define Your Terms and Key Words in Your Paper

There is one fundamental issue experienced writers regularly address in papers: they **define their terms**. For example, if you are writing a film studies paper about problems of love in relationships in French cinema, you will need to define the terms love. People know that there are many kinds of love in the world, for example the love between parents or partners or love between friends which is different from love between siblings. In your film studies paper, you will help your readers if you define the love about which you are writing. In this case, it may turn out to be a very special kind of “love-hate existential-love” that French bad guys exude and which tends to attract the wrong kind of significant other.

If the way you introduce your treatment of a subject sounds like it could introduce another example of the same subject (like another French cinema paper about love relationships), then you should revise to express specifically how you will approach this subject in your paper, perhaps even explaining how your approach distinguishes itself from other papers treating the same subject.

4. Build Up to a Thesis, Question, or Purpose Statement

You will often read them toward the end of an introduction: **the thesis statement** (which could also be a purpose statement or question). A thesis statement is the expression of your paper topic

as an argument, and you may compose a thesis in one or several sentences. If writers carefully define their terms and key words, and if they provide sufficient steps to help readers understand the how the writer is approaching a topic, then by the end of the introduction, when the thesis appears, readers will receive the thesis as the next logical step in your introduction.

5. Orient a Reader to Your Paper

Effective introductions **account for the reader's position**. Your readers are trying to understand a complex text that is new to them: your paper. They want to know what it's about, to care about the background information, and to understand your goals or purpose. They need to know what you're going to analyze, and they want to understand your argument. For them to understand the richness and complexity of your work, they need an explicit and detailed overview: this introduction-as-overview has an effect on the reader and will help you as the writer to set up the reader's expectations for your paper.

Let's look at a sample of an effective introduction

AN EXAMPLE FROM AN ADVANCED UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT (from an upper division History class on the French Revolution)

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A SAMPLE INTRODUCTION

What to notice: this introduction announces its topic by defining its key terms and builds up to an effective thesis. The result is an

introduction that ends with a precise expression of the ideas the writer intends to argue.

In 1789, Britain's eyes were fixed on France's turbulent political arena. In just a few decades, France's once-formidable divine-right monarchy had been reduced to a state of relative powerlessness by frequent warfare, burgeoning social unrest, and a pressing financial crisis from the nation's incessant militarism and the court's lavish expenditures. The country's somewhat surreal transformation from superpower to victim¹ under Louis XV and his successor Louis XVI captivated Britain, France's longtime enemy. As France's sociopolitical scene intensified, noteworthy events quickly found their way onto London stages with a flourish of historicity, drama, and hyperbole. These plays, consequently, provide a revealing lens for examining Britain's response to and interpretation of the initial events of the French Revolution. In particular, John Dent's *The Triumph of Liberty*, performed in 1790, and *The Royal Fugitives*, staged in 1791, offer intriguing samples of British sentiment surrounding the Storming of the Bastille and Louis XVI's flight to Varennes. Despite their decidedly French subject matter, the plays' intense professions of British nationalism and their inclusion of Englishmen in leading roles suggest that Britain celebrated the rise of liberty and democracy in France, but refused to honor the role of French citizens in promoting these virtues. Instead, the plays seem to interpret French radicalism as the product of an undercurrent of democratic sentiment initiated by Britain, thereby allowing Britain to take credit for such favorable circumstances as the fall of the Bastille and Louis XVI's recapture.

¹ Philip Anthony Brown, *The French Revolution in English History* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1965), 28-29.