

INTRODUCTIONS

Many students underestimate the power of introductions; they usually assume that introductions just say what the paper is about. Introductions actually provide a chance to be creative, poetic, or even moving. We have included different prototypes that illustrate the variety of introductions there are. Using the examples is a good idea, but you must remember to come up with your own ideas. These are not formulas.

You should begin to focus on introductions in the second draft stage. After you have a clear sense of audience and purpose, you will better be able to write moving introductions. Even if you are more of a one-draft, last-minute writer, taking a few minutes to polish or rewrite your introduction can significantly improve your paper.

1. Introductions presenting a general explanation of the subject

Such introductions usually stress the importance of the subject and state the writer's purpose in dealing with it. In addition, they indicate the general organization of the essay, or forecast what the essay contains. Obviously, an introduction of this sort is primarily concerned with preparing a reader for what is to follow. The chief shortcoming of this variety is that it may be boring.

Here is an example of an introduction which presents a general explanation of the subject. Note that its final three independent clauses clearly indicate the nature of the three main topics in the essay body which will follow.

Every day, astronauts explore the moon, physicists study a growing number of subatomic particles, and biologists discover the innermost secrets of the living cell. Obviously, we live in a scientific age, and no one can hope to understand our complex society unless he has some knowledge of science. Therefore, we shall examine three important aspects of present-day science education in most widespread use in American high schools and colleges. Second, we shall look at certain serious shortcomings in those methods of instruction. And finally, we shall consider some suggestions for improving the teaching of science.

2. Introductions presenting an example

Another common variety of introduction gives one or more examples of the subject, usually followed by a generalization. Such introductions are designed primarily to arouse the reader's interest so that he will wish to read the whole composition. The examples must be truly representative of the subject, but they must also be striking—presenting dull examples is an almost certain method of discouraging the reader from proceeding further.

Here is an introductory paragraph which makes effective use of striking examples:

For many years automatic vending machines have dispensed such products as cigarettes, soft drinks, and candy bars. Now these robot salesmen are becoming more versatile. The simple act of inserting a coin in the appropriate slot can now get you a toothbrush impregnated with toothpaste, a spray of French perfume, underwear, a cup of hot chicken soup, a live lobster, or an insurance policy. There are other machines which will shine your shoes, wash your car, take your blood pressure, give you a whiff of pure oxygen, or rock you to sleep. Clearly the once-humble dispenser of cigarettes has become one of America's star salesmen.

3. Introductions presenting a definition

When the subject of an essay involves an unfamiliar term, the introduction must contain a definition of the unfamiliar term. Such a definition prepares the reader for what is to follow. Nevertheless, there is always a danger that this kind of introduction will discourage the reader by making the subject seem dull or overly difficult. Therefore introductions presenting a definition often combine that definition with a statement expressing the importance of the subject. In this way they strive to hold the reader's interest.

Here is an introduction presenting a definition:

Many manufacturers are following a policy of planned obsolescence. Obsolescence is designing a product so that it will need to be replaced in a short time. Manufacturers trick consumers using obsolescence in several ways: they make frequent radical changes in the styling of their products so that the consumer will be dissatisfied with the "old model," lower the quality of their products so that they will wear out rapidly, and deliberately produce defective products that are useless when brand-new. Consumers need to be on guard against obsolescence.

4. Introductions presenting cause and result

Some introductions present one or more causes of a situation. Others present one or more results. Still others present both causes and results.

By presenting causes, a writer can improve a reader's understanding of the subject and hence prepare him for what is to follow. For example, an essay describing Carlsbad Caverns might be introduced by a brief discussion of those natural forces which produced the caverns.

By presenting results, the writer can stress the importance of the subject, thereby arousing the reader's interest. For example, an essay tracing the life cycle of the Japanese beetle might be introduced by a brief discussion of the effect this insect pest has had upon American agriculture.

Finally, by presenting causes and results, a writer can both increase the reader's understanding of the subject and also arouse his interest by showing its importance. For example, an essay describing a typical suburban shopping center might be introduced by an explanation of why such shopping centers have sprung up rapidly during the past quarter century and also what effect their development has had upon our national economy. Of course and introduction presenting both causes and results is likely to be rather long; therefore it can be used appropriately only if the essay body itself will be quite lengthy.

Here are two introductory paragraphs. The first presents causes; the second presents results:

- (1) According to the Coast Guard, motor boating accidents have increased rapidly in recent years. In part, this increase has been caused by the crowding of our nation's waterways, since more than forty million Americans have taken up boating. In addition, it has been caused by poorly-trained and sometimes careless or reckless operators, unseaworthy boats, and inadequate safety equipment.
- (2) For the past two summers, my father has covered the soil in his vegetable garden with long strips of black polyethylene film slit every few inches to let the growing plants poke through. The results have been amazing. The soil stays moist, and there are no weeds. Strawberries and tomatoes are free from the rotting that occurs if fruit touches the ground. And all of the berries and vegetables get bigger, stay healthier, and mature sooner than any my father ever raised before using the film.

5. Introductions presenting comparison and contrast

Many introductions make use of comparison and contrast to increase the reader's understanding of the subject and also to arouse his interest. Some introductions present similarities only, others present differences only, and some longer introductions present both.

Here are two introductory paragraphs, the first using comparison, the second using contrast:

- (1) Bees, butterflies and hummingbirds feed on nectar and in doing so carry pollen from flower to flower. In similar fashion, certain tropical bats feed on nectar and pollinate hundreds of species of plants, including the trees from which we obtain kapok and balsa wood.
- (2) The differences between my sister Beth and me are as great (if I may borrow Mark Twain's phrase) as those between myself and the lightning bug. She bounds gaily from her bed at 6:30 a.m., eager to greet the new day; I burrow my head deep into the pillow until the alarm

clock runs down and then drift blissfully back to sleep. She is always orderly and neat; I always look as if I had just gone through a tornado. Finally, Beth is always poised and tactful, but I was practically born with my foot in my mouth.

6. Introductions presenting a question

When a writer is especially desirous of gaining the reader's attention, he may compose an introduction which centers around one or more rhetorical questions. Of course, any introduction may contain the meaning relationship of a question, but the variety we are considering makes one or more questions the very heart of the introduction. Since each question theoretically requires an answer, the reader is forced to think about the subject.

Here is an introductory paragraph which asks a series of questions:

A discussion of cats is likely to produce a great many questions. Is the cat an affectionate pet, or does it merely tolerate the person who feeds it? Is its failure to learn tricks the result of sturdy independence or simple stupidity? Why does a well-fed cat continue to stalk and kill birds? Can a cat really see in the dark? And does it always land on its feet after a fall?

7. Introductions presenting narrative materials

Introductions which present narrative materials can be extremely effective in arousing the reader's interest. Narration is potentially the most vivid and dynamic form of prose, offering the reader movement, action, and sometimes dialogue.

Here are two narrative introductions. The first presents an opening incident in a narrative essay, setting the scene and preparing the reader for the main happenings which will be recounted in the body. The second begins a discussion of amateur authorship by offering an appropriate anecdote. Note that these introductions are comparatively long.

- (1) One warm afternoon last May, our English literature class was drowsily plodding its way through "Lycids." Professor Huggins was reading the poem aloud in a soft, hypnotic monotone, and more than one head was beginning to nod. "Next, Camus, reverend sire, went footing slow," he intoned, "His mantle hairy, and..." abruptly, Professor Huggins stopped reading and stared at the open doorway. There stood the Sigma Kappa fraternity mascot, a huge St. Bernard named Tiny. Ordinarily a lumbering, good-natured beast, Tiny was growling softly and swinging his head from side to side, as if annoyed. His eyes seemed unusually bright. "Hey, " said someone in a startled tone, "what's wrong with that thing?"

(2) A New York editor was once cornered in his office by a determined matron who wanted to discuss a first novel she was writing. "How long should a novel be?" she demanded. The editor squirmed. "That's an impossible question to answer," he explained. "Some novels, like Ethan Frome are only about 40,000 words long. Others—Gone With the Wind, for instance—may run to 300,000." The lady frowned. "But what is the average length of the ordinary novel?" she asked. "Oh, I'd say about 80,000 words," said the editor. With a cry of triumph, the lady jumped to her feet. "Thank heaven!" she exclaimed, "My book is finished!"