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Writing Introductions & Conclusions

The Writing & Learning Studio Room 4301 Shoreline Community College

**Writing Introductions**

A good essay often begins with a one- or two-paragraph introduction that gets the reader’s interest, states the main idea of the paper, and provides any necessary background information. For a strong introduction, you must also consider your audience and your purpose for writing. Sometimes it’s easier to write an introduction **after**writing the body of the paper; you may think of a better way to introduce your ideas after you’ve spent time thinking about them and developing them.

**Writing a Strong Introduction: Strategies & Examples**

**1. Begin with a brief story or anecdote.** *Use a story relevant to your thesis that will appeal to your reader’s interests or values.*

The new kid walked into fourth-period English with his head down. He handed a slip to Mrs. Kuhlins, who announced, “Frankie is our new student, class. I trust that you will make him welcome.” With that, Frankie brushed a stray hair out of his eyes and shuffled to a seat in the back. His clothes were hopelessly out of date, and his hair was a mess. But as he passed my desk, our eyes met, and I saw something there. At that moment, I knew this new kid was special (Clouse, *Patterns* 60).

**2. Open with background information or a background story.**

Mikey always ate strange things as a kid. In second grade he ate a whole jar of white paste and a box of Crayola crayons. Once during recess he crunched two black ants with his front teeth and gulped them down. By the time he was in middle school, his strange eating habits had morphed into quantity over quality, and he challenged his friends to eating contests to see who could eat the most—of just about anything. I guess that’s why I wasn’t surprised that Mikey broke our state’s hot-dog eating record the day he turned 17.

**3. Open with a provocative question or questions.** *Starting with a question can get your reader thinking about your topic. This could be effective particularly if you’re giving advice or arguing for something.*

What do you do when you find yourself in the produce room cooler with your manager and he nonchalantly wraps his arm around your waist? Or how about when the guys you work with come out with a distasteful remark that makes you seem like a piece of meat? These are just a couple of problems you might face as the only female in a department. There are, however, ways of dealing with this kind of harassment (Lannon 47).

**4. Start with a short quotation related to your thesis.** *If you start with a quotation, clarify its relevance to your thesis immediately.*

Last week at his press conference, the governor said, “It is with regret that I announce a 20 percent cut in subsidies for higher education. I believe, however, that this cut is the least painful way to balance the state budget.” The governor is wrong; these cuts will have a catastrophic effect on the people of this state (Clouse, *Patterns* 61-62).

**5. Define something.** *But don’t start with dictionary definitions.*

 A grandmother is supposed to be a white-haired, chubby woman who rolls her stockings below the knees and spends her days knitting scarves and baking cookies for her grandchildren. However, someone forgot to tell my mother’s mother all this because, believe me, she is not the typical grandmother. In fact, most people are stunned to learn she has grandchildren (Clouse, *Patterns* 61).

**6. Start with a shocking or little-known fact or idea.** *The more unfamiliar it is to the reader, the more it might capture her/his attention.*

What your family doctor does not know may surprise you—or it may kill you. We assume our doctors are smart and caring, that they will do whatever it takes to keep us well. We put our trust in them and never question their advice or decisions. Unfortunately, such trust is often misplaced. For the best health care, we need to learn to question our doctors carefully (Clouse, *The Student* 62).

**7. Present a viewpoint and contrast it with your own.** *Be sure to use a transition when moving from one viewpoint to another*.

People opposed to putting warning labels on CDs with sexually explicit or otherwise offensive lyrics have their reasons. They cite free speech and say teens will be encouraged to buy the CDs with the advisory labels. Even so, I favor warning labels on certain kinds of CDs (Clouse, *The Student* 61).

**8. Describe a hypothetical situation.** *This kind of description can help your reader visualize your main point.*

Suppose you were in a serious car accident and became unconscious. Suppose further that you slipped into a coma, with little hope for recovery. Unless you had a prewritten health care proxy that designated someone familiar with your wishes to act on your behalf, your fate would be left in the hands of medical doctors who knew nothing about you or your preferences for treatment (McWhorter 143).

**9. Open with a vivid description.** *You can set a scene or create a mood with language that draws your reader into the moment.*

I hear waves slap the boat, the lonely cry of a seagull, and a steady murmur from the crowded beach a mile away. With three splashes my friends jump in. I follow. There is a splash and then silence. The water presses in, and all I hear is the sound of my regulator as I take my first breath. All I see is blue water, yellow light, and endless space. While the world rushes on, we feel suspended in time. Then my buddy taps me on the shoulder, and we begin a tour of a hidden world (Lannon 47).

 Works Cited

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**Mistakes to Avoid in Introductions**

1. Don’t make an announcement. (“This essay will be about ...” or “I’m going to explain my reasons for...”)

2. Avoid saying negative things that could influence your reader’s attitude. (“This explanation might be

complicated, but....”)

3. Don’t be too casual or chatty. (“Wow! You’ll never believe what happened to me!”)

4. Don’t write something that refers to your title as if it were part of the paper. For example, if your title is

“The Impact of Higher Education Budget Cuts,” don’t start your paper with “These cuts will make it

More difficult for people to get the education they deserve.” Instead, write “The proposed budget cuts

for higher education will make it more difficult for people to get the education they deserve.”

5. Don’t write a long introduction for a short paper. Likewise, a long paper might need a two-paragraph

introduction. Keep the length of your introduction balanced to the length of the paper.

6. Avoid an introduction that’s not in line with your audience, thesis, or purpose of your paper. For

example, if you were writing about a serious topic like animal abuse, a humorous anecdote wouldn’t be

a smart way to introduce your essay.

7. Don’t apologize. Saying things like “This is a complex issue, and I might not explain it clearly” can

distract the reader from your thesis and make the reader question your credibility.

8. Avoid opening with clichés or overused expressions. Expressions like “My throat felt dry as a bone” or

“The big, strong football player cried like a baby” have been overused, and they make your writing boring.

**Writing Conclusions**

Your essay should not end suddenly. Instead, it should leave readers with a sense that the essay is complete.

You should not, however, add new information to your conclusion or further develop your points. For long or

complicated essays, it can be helpful to summarize your main points and rephrase your thesis. But for other

essays, avoid doing that.

**Strategies for Writing an Effective Conclusion**

1. Refer to what was said in the introduction--either the context, historical background, or questions that

were raised.

2. Affirm why the issue is important or relevant to your readers.

3. Indicate broader implications of your thesis. These could be issues that your points raise but aren’t fully

addressed.

4. Look into the future. How might your topic/issue look in the future, or beyond the time frame of your essay?

5. Make recommendations. For example, you could encourage your readers to take specific actions.

6. Suggest solutions to the problem discussed.

7. Conclude with an anecdote, fact, or quotation that highlights your thesis.

**A Few Mistakes to Avoid in Conclusions**

1. Don’t repeat your thesis statement.

2. Avoid using routine phrases or transitions. Phrases like “To sum up,” and “In conclusion” are boring!

3. Don’t introduce new points. The important points belong in the body of your essay.

4. Don’t apologize for your writing, opinion, or ideas. (“Even though I’m only 18, I think I might have some

helpful ideas about good parenting.”

5. Don’t soften or change your position. If, for instance, your essay claims that people should be 18 years

old before being issued a driver’s license, don’t back down by saying, “Maybe if the person has a job,

s/he should be able to get a license.” Putting that idea in your conclusion just weakens your essay.