

Introductions

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of the introduction, which is the most important part of any essay. We will discuss the basic requirements for what introductions need to say and do, as well as the many tasks that introductions have. Lastly, we will cover the concept of the hook -- the little something that distinguishes good introductions from great ones -- and explore several working examples.

Our discussion breaks down as follows:

1. Introductions: The Basics
2. Introductions: The Purpose
3. The Hook
4. The Hook: Examples

1. Introductions: The Basics

As mentioned above, introductions are the most important part of any essay. Why is this? Well, because it's true. Think about it: the introduction is the beginning of the essay. It's the first thing readers learn about the text, and as such, it's got the burden of convincing them to keep reading. If it fails, it falls to reason that it doesn't matter how well the conclusion is written.

As we explore how these important pieces of text come to be, the first thing we should do is debunk the myth that introductions have only one paragraph. This is true for the five paragraph essay format, but not necessarily the case in all texts. Ultimately, it's up to the writer to decide how much time and space he or she needs to introduce the subject, topic, and thesis of any given essay or writing project.

Another prevalent myth about introductions is that they should be written *first*. If anything, introductions should come later, as they can often become a barrier for students, especially on the very first draft. In all likelihood, after the rest of the essay has been written -- the body paragraphs, conclusions, and all -- chances are that whatever the old introduction says doesn't apply quite as well as you thought it would, and now you'll have to change it.



HINT

Save the task of writing introductions for when you know exactly what you're introducing, after you've written

the rest of the essay.

2. Introductions: The Purpose

So, what goes into making an introduction? There are two critical things introductions need to do:

1. Establish the essay's topic, including any conflict or controversy that the writer will be addressing
2. Include a clear articulation of the thesis

Often, especially in longer and more complicated essays, the thesis as stated in the introduction is itself a summary of the more detailed argument that will follow. Still, the introduction should introduce the thesis in one way or another. Often this includes stating the general line of reasoning that the body of the essay will take.



DID YOU KNOW

This statement of the general line of reasoning is called a nut graph. This part of the introduction tends to state things such as, "First I will explore x. Then I will expand on x by looking at y, and then I will demonstrate how y is really z," or something to that effect. It gives the reader a very quick outline of the essay's main points -- a map for them to use as they proceed through the text.

Let's review a few introductions and see what they are or are not doing. As you read the introduction below, look for how it establishes the essay's topic and where the thesis might be:

Modern life often means people work long hours to buy possessions that they don't have time to enjoy. But many people have decided to leave the rat race. A simpler lifestyle can reduce stress, teach self-reliance, and encourage family and social unity. I will show several of the benefits of simplifying your lifestyle, and use empirical evidence to demonstrate the ways in which the American workforce has been systematically trained to work harder and longer than it needs to.

It seems fairly straightforward, right? It introduces the topic, complete with a conflict regarding the choices we make about work, and it states the thesis in no uncertain terms, advocating for an alternative lifestyle.

In this next introduction, however, things get a little more complicated:

Every society in history has had criminals, which presupposes that they also had a notion of crime. But what is crime? Literally, crime is defined as whatever actions a government says are criminal. Simple, right? But to truly explain crime -- that is, to explain its nature, and why some acts are illegal while others are not -- is a much more difficult task. And that's why we need the death penalty.

In this example, it should have been fairly easy to identify both the topic and the thesis. Yet something is missing. There isn't any kind of reasoning yet, so it is difficult to know how or why the writer is connecting this broad topic of crime to the death penalty, especially given the historical stance the introduction seems to be taking. Therefore, take this as an example of how an introduction can technically do everything it needs to do and still fail in a very important way.

Here is one more, to provide some contrast:

As the end of yet another semester approaches, university students have one bright spot to look forward to in the midst of term papers and all-night cramming sessions -- selling back those heavy textbooks for cold, hard cash. But this process is not an easy one, rife with traps and pitfalls along the way. Selling back your old textbooks can be a hassle, but it is worth the effort if you manage to get through it relatively unscathed.

In this example, as you can see, the tone and subject are very different from either of the earlier, more traditional academic texts. Yet it still presents a topic and a thesis. Even though this introduction is much lighter, it's still presenting an argument, and doing so in a fairly effectively way.

3. The Hook

Even though we've covered what is required of an introduction, and explored two of them doing it successfully, there remains more to talk about. No discussion about introductions would be complete without mentioning hooks. If you recall, we started off talking about how introductions are the most important part of a text, because they come first, and therefore have the burden of convincing the reader to keep reading. Well, that's where hooks come in. Hooks are actions or strategies that introductions can use to try to catch the reader's interest.

A few of the most common hooks are:

- Provocative anecdote or situation
- Compelling quotation (though it should be mentioned that this hook, if overused, will have the opposite effect and bore readers, especially readers who are already familiar with the quote or the subject)
- Concession



Concessions are particularly useful in essays that will make a controversial argument, as this tends to help build ethos or credibility for the writer.

- Interesting fact or statistic
- Analogy

🔗 **EXAMPLE** Analogies can be used to compare something to another, as in, for example, voting for Obamacare is like stabbing yourself in the foot. This is an extreme example, but whether you agree or not, you're interested, right? And that's the point.

- Defining a key term



Typically when this works well, it's not just a dictionary definition, but also an explanation as to how the term's meaning is being debated or how it's central to the essay's claim -- something to make it clear why it's not only important to the essay, but to the reader as well.

4. The Hook: Examples

Let's look at some more example introductions and see if you can identify the type and effectiveness of the hook or hooks they used. It should be fairly easy to determine the type of this first essay:

Every morning, crews hose down Bourbon Street in the French Quarter of New Orleans. They cover the pavement and sidewalks with soapy water, washing away all evidence of the previous night's activities. Before the bars open and any of the tourists who left the spilled beer and daiquiris, crushed and lipstick-smeared cigarettes, and streaks of half-dried vomit manage to stumble out of bed, the streets will again be washed and ready, waiting for them and their money. Years of observation have taught me there's something about the way we behave when we know we're not going to spend much time in a place, especially when we're paying for it. It's the nature of tourism that changes our perceived responsibilities as humans, and the problem isn't just with tourists.

You can see how using Bourbon Street as an example -- a provocative anecdote or situation -- helps the essay establish its topic and also makes the reader more interested in reading about tourism.

Now, here's a completely different argument's introduction:

Racetrack Playa, in Death Valley National Park, is well known for the phenomenon of tracks left by hundreds of rocks plowing across the nearly flat playa surface. Rock movement by pebble to boulder-size pieces of dolomite and granite leave tracks in the playa surface, showing the direction of motion via grooves cut in the playa mud. Remarkably, multiple rocks commonly show parallel tracks, including apparently synchronous high-angle turns. The phenomenon of rock motion has excited considerable interest, and various mechanisms for rock motion have been proposed, but owing to the harsh nature of the playa surroundings, and the difficulty of access, there has been no unambiguous determination of the mechanisms for rock motion.

In this introduction, the author chose to foreground the mystery surrounding the subject, making the moving rocks of Death Valley more real because of it. If, for example, the essay had simply started talking about all the research and study, as well as the scientific experimentation that was done, chances are many readers would lose interest.

Finally, here is the last example, which might be familiar to you:

Commensalism is the name for a biological interaction in which one organism benefits and the other derives neither benefit nor harm. In a stable environment -- like that which occurs in isolated environments -- organisms evolve to lose anything that isn't necessary to their daily needs. But when that environment changes, and the organisms upon which others depend can no longer survive, entire ecosystems can crash. Though much less commonly known than the related terms of parasitism and symbiosis, commensalism is common when multiple species live together in non-predator-prey relationships.

In this introduction, there is a definition being used, introducing the relatively uncommon term around which the argument will be built, and simultaneously displaying the essay's topic. It's also implying that the reader's assumptions about symbiosis and parasitism are incorrect, which is a challenge -- another way to engage and hook readers.



BIG IDEA

Regardless of the hook used, the purpose of an introduction is to front-load the "so what" part of the essay, compiling all the reasons your readers need to know in order to believe whatever the rest of the essay will try to convince or tell them about.



SUMMARY

Today we learned about introductions, which are the most important part of an essay. We learned about an introduction's basic requirements, and its tasks and purposes, as well as the concept of hooks, which are actions or strategies that introductions can use to try to catch the reader's interest.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall