

Introductions

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how to write an effective introduction to your academic research essay and why it's important to do so. Specifically, this lesson will focus on:

1. Role of Introductions

Introductions and conclusions can be the most difficult parts of papers to write. Usually, when you sit down to respond to an assignment, you have at least some sense of what you want to say in the body of your paper. You might have chosen a few examples you want to use or have an idea that will help you answer the main question of your assignment; these sections, therefore, are not as hard to write.

But these middle parts of the paper can't just come out of thin air; they need to be introduced and concluded in a way that makes sense to your reader. Your introduction and conclusion act as bridges that transport your readers from their own lives into the "place" of your analysis.

By providing an introduction that helps your readers make a transition between their own world and the issues you will be writing about, you give your readers the tools they need to get into your topic and care about what you are saying.

Similarly, once you've hooked your reader with the introduction and offered evidence to prove your thesis, your conclusion can provide a bridge to help your readers make the transition back to their daily lives.

2. Importance of Introductions

If you still find yourself wondering why you should bother writing a compelling introduction, here are three good reasons.

1. *You never get a second chance to make a first impression.* The opening paragraph of your paper will provide your readers with their initial impressions of your argument, your writing style, and the overall quality of your work. A vague, disorganized, error-filled, off-the-wall, or boring introduction will probably create a negative impression. On the other hand, a concise, engaging, and well-written introduction will start your readers off thinking highly of you, your analytical skills, your writing, and your paper.

2. *Your introduction is an important road map for the rest of your paper.* Your introduction conveys a lot of information to your readers. You can let them know what your topic is, why it is important, and how you plan to

proceed with your discussion. In most academic disciplines, your introduction should contain a thesis that will assert your main argument. It should also, ideally, give the reader a sense of the kinds of information you will use to make that argument and the general organization of the paragraphs and pages that will follow. After reading your introduction, your readers should not have any major surprises in store when they read the main body of your paper.

3. Ideally, your introduction will make your readers want to read your paper. The introduction should capture your readers' interest, making them want to read the rest of your paper. Opening with a compelling story, a fascinating quotation, an interesting question, or a stirring example can get your readers to see why this topic matters and serve as an invitation for them to join you for an interesting intellectual conversation.

3. Strategies for Writing Introductions

The following are several strategies that can help you write an effective introduction to an academic research essay. Once you familiarize yourself with them, you can decide which will work best for you and your assignment.

1. Start by thinking about the question (or questions) you are trying to answer. Your entire essay will be a response to this question, and your introduction is the first step toward that end. Your direct answer to the assigned question will be your thesis, and your thesis will be included in your introduction, so it is a good idea to use the question as a jumping-off point.

IN CONTEXT

Imagine that you are assigned the following question:

Education has long been considered a major force for American social change, righting the wrongs of our society. Drawing on the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, discuss the relationship between education and slavery in 19th-century America. Consider the following: How did white control of education reinforce slavery? How did Douglass and other enslaved African Americans view education while they endured slavery? And what role did education play in the acquisition of freedom? Most importantly, consider the degree to which education was or was not a major force for social change with regard to slavery.

You will probably refer back to your assignment extensively as you prepare your complete essay, and the prompt itself can also give you some clues about how to approach the introduction. Notice that it starts with a broad statement, that education has been considered a major force for social change, and then narrows to focus on specific questions from the book. One strategy might be to use a similar model in your own introduction—start off with a big picture sentence or two about the power of education as a force for change as a way of getting your reader interested, and then focus on the details of your argument about Douglass.

2. Decide how general or broad your opening should be. Keep in mind that even a “big picture” opening needs to be clearly related to your topic. An opening sentence that said, “Human beings, more than any other creatures on earth, are capable of learning” would be too broad for the sample assignment about slavery and education.

3. Try writing your introduction last. You may think that you have to write your introduction first, but that isn't necessarily true, and it isn't always the most effective way to craft a good introduction. You may find that you don't know what you are going to argue at the beginning of the writing process, and only through the experience of writing your paper do you discover your main argument. It is perfectly fine to start out thinking that you want to argue a particular point, but wind up arguing something slightly or even dramatically different by the time you've written most of the paper. By writing up all of your evidence first and then writing the introduction last, you can be sure that the introduction will match the body of the paper.

4. Don't be afraid to write a tentative introduction first and then change it later. Some people find that they need to write some kind of introduction in order to get the writing process started. That's fine, but if you are one of those people, be sure to return to your initial introduction later and rewrite it if necessary.

5. Open with an attention grabber. Sometimes, especially if the topic of your paper is somewhat dry or technical, opening with something catchy can help.

IN CONTEXT

a. An intriguing example: *The mistress who initially teaches Douglass ceases her instruction as she learns more about slavery.*

b. A provocative quotation: *Douglass writes that "education and slavery were incompatible with each other."*

c. A vivid and perhaps unexpected anecdote: *Learning about slavery in the American history course at Frederick Douglass High School, students studied the work slaves did, the impact of slavery on their families, and the rules that governed their lives. We didn't discuss education, however, until one student raised her hand and asked, "But when did they go to school?" That modern high school students could not conceive of an American childhood devoid of formal education speaks volumes about the centrality of education to American youth today and also suggests the significance of the deprivation of education in past generations.*

d. A thought-provoking question: *Given all of the freedoms that were denied enslaved individuals in the American South, why does Frederick Douglass focus his attentions so squarely on education and literacy?*

6. Pay special attention to your first sentence. Start off on the right foot with your readers by making sure that the first sentence actually says something useful and that it does so in an interesting and error-free way.

7. Be straightforward and confident. Avoid statements like "In this paper, I will argue that Frederick Douglass valued education." While this sentence points toward your main argument, it isn't especially convincing. It is much more convincing to tell your readers that "Frederick Douglass valued education" than to tell them that you are going to say that he did. Assert your main argument confidently. After all, you can't expect your reader to believe it if it doesn't sound like you believe it!



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that the **role of introductions** is to provide your readers with context for

your analysis. **Introductions are important** because they help you make a good first impression on your readers, provide a road map for your essay, and get your readers' attention. You also learned some **strategies for writing introductions** that will help you make them effective and engaging. The strategies you choose will depend on your topic and your personal preferences during the writing process.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This content has been adapted from Lumen Learning's "Introductions" tutorial.