

## Introductions

An introduction is like a handshake. If it's firm and to the point, then a person will trust you. If it's limp or it takes too long, then the reader will begin to disengage from what you have to say. An introduction is the first impression a reader gets of your essay and, as John Trimble says, "first impressions prove hard to shake."<sup>1</sup> A good introduction grabs the reader's attention and proves to the reader that the thesis of the paper is something worth caring about. There are many good ways to start an essay, but there are also several bad ways (according to me).

### Things to avoid:

- **Rhetorical questions.** Some writers can pull this off, but most intros that start with rhetorical questions sound silly: Do you like music? Have you ever thought about the connection between violence and media? Have you ever heard of racism? Just say no to rhetorical questions.
- **General comments that have almost nothing to do with your thesis.** Don't start like this: "Music has been an important part of humanity since the time of the cave people. They banged on rocks and sang in their guttural language to express themselves. Over the years, this has developed into the kind of music we love today. The music of Brittany Spears lets me know that I am not alone in this cold, heartless world." Why start with Neolithic people when you want to talk about Brittany Spears? Don't beat around the bush; get to the point.
- **Plot summary.** If writing about a piece of literature, don't summarize the plot in your intro. The teacher has read the piece. Get to your interpretation of the literature. That's what the instructor is looking for, not Cliff's Notes. A plot summary insults the teacher because it assumes that the teacher hasn't read the piece. It also makes it look like you are trying to pad your essay because you don't have enough to say.
- **Dictionary definition.** If you are writing an essay about anger don't start off with a quote from Webster's about what anger means. Most people know what anger is. And most people own a dictionary. Starting with a dictionary definition is one of the biggest clichés in essay writing. Don't do it.

### Things to try:

- **Narrative.** Try starting with a story that introduces your main topic. This story should be short and to the point; it shouldn't detract from the main argument. However, people enjoy a good narrative and a brief story is a way to grab a person's interest. Look at essays we've read and notice how many writers start this way.
- **Quote or statistic.** Sometimes starting with a relevant quote or statistic can be an effective way to start your essay. It can convey that you have done your homework and that you know what you're talking about. It can also give the impression that the topic of your essay has a broader appeal since other people have thought about it.

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<sup>1</sup> For a great discussion of intros, see the "Openers" chapter of John Trimble's [Writing With Style](#).

- **Provide background.** Sometimes the topic you are discussing requires background information to make it understandable to the reader. So maybe you want to start an essay by providing the context for the topic. Show how the topic fits into a larger framework or perhaps give the history of the topic.

- **Set up a problem or mystery.** Outline a problem worth solving or present a mystery worth exploring. This leads nicely into a thesis and explains the significance of the issue at hand. If you do this well, it makes the reader want to read the essay to see how you solve the problem or explain the mystery.

- **Make a comparison.** Sometimes you can compare your topic to another situation, subject, or historical event. Done correctly, this approach can underscore the importance and relevance of your topic. Also, the originality of an intriguing analogy can charm the reader and make them want to keep reading.

- **Work towards a climax.** Try putting the biggest punch of your thesis at the end of your intro. This can really help you to springboard into the rest of your essay and gives a nice climactic feel to the end of your intro.

- **Brief sentence.** Try opening with a short sentence of four to five words. "Television is lying to us." "Grades don't measure intelligence." "Always start an essay boldly." Short sentences convey confidence and they don't bore the reader like a long-winded sentence might. Also, if you are stuck and can't think of a good introduction, using a short sentence helps you get into the essay and quickly get to the point.

- **Put the thesis statement first.** A lot of you have probably been taught to put your thesis statement as the last sentence of your introduction. There's nothing wrong with this, though often it encourages student writers to take a long time in getting to the point. So instead, try putting your thesis statement in the very first sentence. Say what you think immediately.

- **Write your introduction later.** There is no rule stating that you have to write your paragraphs sequentially. As long as your thesis is clear and all your body paragraphs prove that single point, you can write the intro at any time. So if you are really struggling, it may help you to have the body paragraphs written before you attempt to introduce them.

All in all, it's better to use a "front door approach." Get to the point sooner—maybe even immediately—rather than taking the back door to wander to your thesis. Also, a good introduction relies on your knowing what you want to say and how you want to get there. If you are unclear about your opinions then it will probably show in your introduction. There is no stylistic trick that can make up for not knowing what you want to say.