

16.

INTRODUCTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Learning Objectives

- Apply strategies for writing strong opening and concluding paragraphs
- Avoid problematic opening and concluding paragraphs

Introductions

Picture your introduction as a storefront window: You have a certain amount of space to attract your customers (readers) to your goods (subject) and bring them inside your store (discussion). Once you have enticed them with something intriguing, you then point them in a specific direction and try to make the sale (convince them to accept your thesis). Your introduction is an invitation to your readers to consider what you have to say and then to follow your train of thought as you expand upon your thesis statement.

An introduction serves the following purposes:

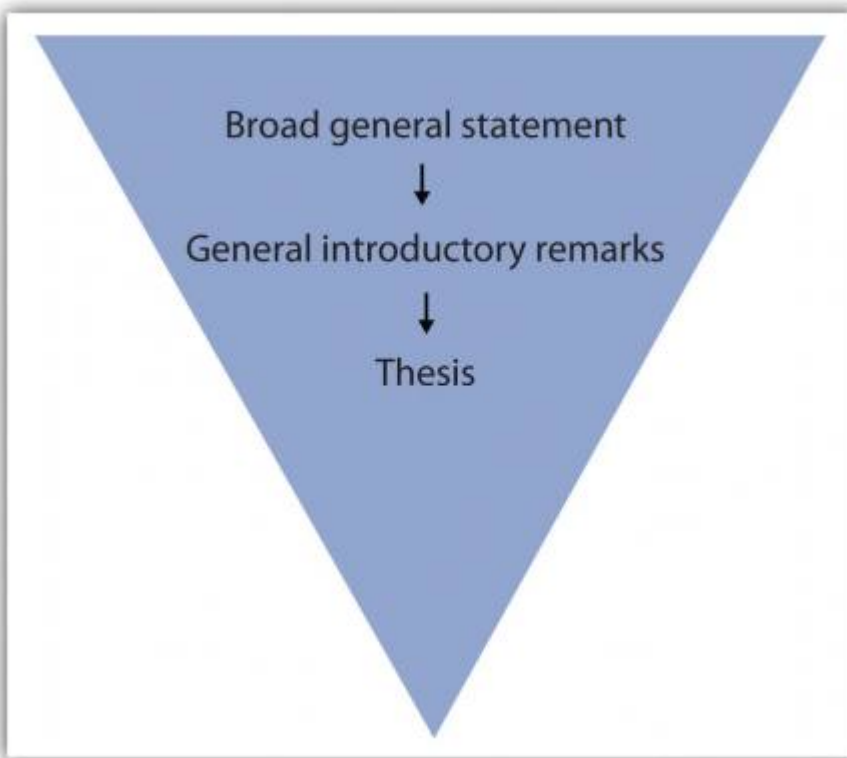
1. Establishes your voice and tone, or your attitude, toward the subject
2. Introduces the general topic of the essay
3. States the thesis that will be supported in the body paragraphs

First impressions are crucial and can leave lasting effects in your reader's mind, which is why the introduction is so important to your essay. If your introductory paragraph is dull or disjointed, your reader probably will not have much interest in continuing with the essay.

Attracting Interest in Your Introductory Paragraph

Your introduction should begin with an engaging statement, sometimes called “a hook,” devised to provoke your readers’ interest. In the next few sentences, you introduce them to your topic by stating general facts or ideas about the subject. As you move deeper into your introduction, you gradually narrow the focus, moving closer to your thesis. The sentences after your hook and before your thesis are sometimes called the “transition” portion of the introduction. Don’t make the mistake of presenting only a hook and a thesis; you need to guide your readers into your essay. Moving smoothly and logically from your hook to your thesis statement can be achieved using a funnel technique, as illustrated in the diagram in Figure 9.1 “Funnel Technique”.

Figure 9.1 Funnel Technique



Immediately capturing your readers’ interest increases the chances of having them read what you are about to discuss. You can garner curiosity for your essay in a number of ways. Try to get your readers personally involved by doing any of the following:

- Tell an interesting story
- Create a powerful image
- Ask a provocative question
- Provide a startling statistic or surprising fact
- Share a relevant quotation—something you found in your research or a quote you found on the Web by

someone your readers will know and respect

- Present a counterargument—something your readers might think that your essay will argue against—and concede the point or counter it
- Provide necessary background information
- Create a strong analogy or comparison
- Define a key term you'll use in the essay (but don't use a dictionary definition—see below)
- Emulate other opening strategies that you've seen in successful arguments

None of these strategies will work well, though, if you don't write them in a way that will engage readers. For that reason, you will likely need to revise your opening several times. Remember that your diction, or word choice, while always important, is most crucial in your introductory paragraph. Boring diction could extinguish any desire a person might have to read through your discussion. Choose words that create images or express action. Compare these two opening sentences for an essay arguing that teacher pay should be increased:

Opening 1: Public school teachers have a very difficult job. They work long hours and get paid very little.

Opening 2: Imagine waking every day at 5:30 AM to get to work by 7:30 AM, getting home at 5:00 PM and staying up until 10:00 PM, grading papers and planning the next day's lesson. This is what public school teachers do, and they do it for less money than one can earn managing a McDonald's.

Option 3: "But they get summers off!" many people say when the issue of teacher pay comes up, as if teachers spend their summers lounging by a pool or traveling the world or catching up on all the television they missed because they were up all night grading. The truth is....

Which of these three openings is more engaging? All of them could begin an essay, but the first one is not nearly as interesting as the other two, mainly because of the specific word choice.

What to Avoid

While your opening is what readers will read first, right after the title, you don't need to write your opening paragraph first. Sometimes, students think they have to write a perfect opening before they can write the rest of the essay, but you may be able to develop a better opening after you've written the rest of the essay. In addition, these opening strategies are best avoided because they are either over-done or don't work well to engage the reader (or both):

1. **The "beginning of time" opening.** As the funnel technique graphic above suggests, your first sentence needs to be more general than your thesis, but don't begin with such a general statement that you can't transition to the thesis effectively. Phrases like "throughout time" or "throughout history" are signs you're starting with a too-general statement.
2. **The dictionary definition.** Beginning with a definition can be an effective opening, but the wording in

a dictionary definition is not interesting, and dictionaries tend to offer very general definitions.

3. **Ask too many questions.** A provocative question—maybe even a couple of compelling questions—can interest readers, but don’t ask too many; doing so is likely to annoy your readers.
4. **Begin with a hook that doesn’t connect to your thesis.** Yes, you want to grab your readers’ attention with your opening, but you need to do so in a way that leads logically to your thesis. If your provocative quote or question doesn’t lead readers to the thesis, it doesn’t matter whether it grabs the readers’ attention.
5. **Reference your class or your assignment.** Even though you are writing for a specific professor and a specific class, you should be writing as if other educated readers—those who don’t know you or your assignment—are going to read what you wrote. You shouldn’t reference the assignment or assume your readers know what you’re supposed to write.

Conclusions

It is not unusual to want to rush when you approach your conclusion, and even experienced writers may write conclusions that fade out rather than leave the reader with a strong impression. But what good writers remember is that it is vital to put just as much attention into the conclusion as in the rest of the essay. After all, a hasty ending can undermine an otherwise strong essay.

A conclusion that does not correspond to the rest of your essay, has loose ends, or is unorganized can unsettle your readers and raise doubts about the entire essay. However, if you have worked hard to write the introduction and body, your conclusion can often be the most logical part to compose.

The Anatomy of a Strong Conclusion

An conclusion serves the following purposes:

1. It restates the thesis, in a different, perhaps more forceful manner
2. It answers the “so what?” question
3. It leaves the readers with a strong, positive impression of you and/or your argument

Keep in mind that the ideas in your conclusion must grow out of what you’ve discussed in the rest of your essay. The construction of the conclusion is similar to the introduction, in which you make general introductory statements and then present your thesis. The difference is that in the conclusion, you begin by stating your thesis and then follow up with general concluding remarks. These sentences should progressively broaden the focus of your thesis and maneuver your readers out of the essay. The funnel gets turned upside down.

Many writers like to end their essays with a final emphatic statement. This strong closing statement will cause your readers to continue thinking about the implications of your essay; it will make your conclusion, and thus your essay, more memorable. The following strategies can make for a memorably conclusion:

1. **Call readers to action.** Recommend your readers do something with the information you've provided. Make sure your tone isn't too demanding, though; suggest an action, don't tell your readers they have to do something.
2. **Look to the future.** Maybe you can imagine a future that will look different, based on what you've shared in the body of your essay, or maybe you can point to a change that is on the horizon—something that will be better or worse.
3. **Present a compelling quote.** Just as a quote in the introduction can inspire readers to read your essay, a quote in the conclusion can leave your readers with something to think about.
4. **Echo the introduction.** If you can return to a story you told in the opening or a comparison you made, your opening and your conclusion can frame your essay nicely, leaving the readers with a positive impression.
5. **Suggest topics for further research.** Many science papers end with a discussion of what more needs to be learned about the topic. This can be a way to end your essays, too.

As with opening paragraphs, some concluding devices have been overused; others create problems. You should avoid the following when writing a conclusion:

1. **Don't expressly state that you are drawing to a close.** Relying on statements such as *in conclusion*, *it is clear that*, *as you can see*, or *in summation* is unnecessary and can be considered trite.
2. **Don't introduce new ideas or evidence.** The conclusion is the place to wind down, so don't present more evidence or bring up a topic that you haven't already addressed in the body of the essay. Avoid adding statistics, new facts, and quotes from authorities (unless they are memorable quotes that create a sense of closure).
3. **Don't merely summarize your main points.** Especially in a short essay, it's highly unlikely that your readers have forgotten the points you made on the previous two pages. Summarizing what you just said, therefore, can strike the readers as boring and repetitive. If you do need to summarize your points, use fresh language and do so in a way that helps your readers understand the importance of what you've just discussed in the essay.
4. **Apologizing or backtracking.** You don't want to be wishy-washy in your conclusion. If readers think you're not confident about the information you've shared in the essay, they may dismiss your ideas. Stand by what you've stated in the essay!

Length

Both your opening and concluding paragraphs may be shorter than the body paragraphs, especially if your essay is only a couple of pages. For longer essays, though, you may need two paragraphs to introduce your topic, and your conclusion may run a little longer. In general, the length is not as important as the effects your opening and conclusion have on the readers. You want readers to want to read your essay and to remember what you've said in the essay. Like everything else with writing, no one formula exists to help you write powerful openings and conclusions for every essay, so writing good openings and conclusions will take time and effort.