



Writing an Effective Introduction

What is an introduction?

An introduction is the first paragraph/section of an essay, and it plays an important role in writing an effective paper. The introduction allows the writer to begin the essay by gaining readers' attention, providing necessary background information, and by establishing the essay's main idea, purpose, and direction. An effective introduction will typically begin by discussing general ideas surrounding the essay's topic and then introduce the specific ideas that will be discussed in the body of the paper. For more on the body of the paper, see our handouts General Academic Essay Outline and Is Your Paragraph a Complete M.E.A.L.?

What should an introduction do?

- Make a strong first impression with an effective **hook**. This gains readers' interest and attention, creating incentive for them to continue reading.
- Provide essential **background information** about the essay's main topic. This creates a general context for the paper by telling readers everything that they need to know before reading the body of the essay. It should begin with general ideas and then progress towards one specific, focused idea (the thesis).
- End with a clear **thesis statement** that reveals the author's purpose for writing, expresses the essay's main idea/argument, and provides a direction or outline for the body of the paper. For more on thesis statements, see our handout Writing an Effective Thesis Statement.

Parts of an introduction (hook, background, and thesis)

- **Hook:** The hook grabs readers' attention and makes them want to continue reading. It can be in the form of a question, a quote, an anecdote, an interesting fact, or any other intriguing idea that gains readers' interest and motivates them to read further. Regardless of which form the writer chooses, the hook should be related in some way to the subject of the essay.
- **Background Information:** Background information creates context for the essay by providing a brief overview of the subject matter in the paper. It introduces the broad topic(s) that the essay will discuss, and eases the reader into the discussion by providing general information (concepts, facts, history, definitions, etc...) necessary for understanding the specific information provided in the body of the essay. In order to provide effective background information, it is important to know who the intended audience is and to consider what readers may or may not know about the essay's topic. This allows writers to provide readers with the information that they need to know before they read the rest of the essay.

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- **Thesis Statement:** Your thesis expresses the central idea or main argument of the essay and reflects the writer's purpose for writing it. It can also outline/list the major supporting points to be discussed in the body of the paper. It usually appears as the last sentence of the *introduction*.

How long should an introduction be?

This depends on the length and complexity of the essay. For shorter academic essays, the *introduction* will usually be one, well-developed paragraph. However, longer more-complex essays may require more than a single paragraph. Regardless, it should still contain the essential parts of an *introduction* (hook, background information, and thesis). Always refer to the instructor's length requirements for each particular assignment

When should I write the introduction?

There are two different perspectives about when is the ideal drafting point for writing the introduction:

- **Write it first:** If the writer has a clear idea of the essay's thesis, organization, and structure and prefers to write each section in chronological order, writing the *introduction* first is perfectly acceptable. However, it is important to have a clear outline in mind beforehand, so that the *introduction* can effectively and accurately set up the, yet unwritten, body of the essay. Later, when revising the essay, make sure that the *introduction* and body sections match and that the thread between them is consistent. In other words, be sure that the information presented in the body of the paper matches what the *introduction* previously indicated that the body would discuss.
- **Write it last:** The *introduction* can also be written last. This allows the writer to know exactly what is included in the body of the essay, beforehand, and write an *introduction* that matches and accurately reflects the essay's content. In other words, writing the *introduction* last allows the writer to know what he/she is introducing before actually introducing it.

Things to Avoid:

- **Don't** elaborate on your argument or provide specific supporting evidence, examples, or details in the introduction (save these supporting ideas for the body of the essay).
- **Don't** begin with a dictionary definition. This method is unoriginal, does not provide a relevant context for your essay, and readers are more interested in **your** definition/ideas than the dictionary's definition.
- **Don't** be too vague. While big/general ideas are encouraged, don't confuse readers with vague, ambiguous, or unclear ideas.
- **Don't** provide excessive or irrelevant information. Stay focused.

The example below presents an introduction paragraph for a cause/effect essay on global warming.

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What kind of world will we leave behind for future generations? The answer to this question will depend on our ability to successfully deal with the major problems confronting us today. Our world faces many obstacles such as disease, starvation, poverty, and war. However, one of the most significant challenges of our time is that of global warming and climate change. For this essay, global warming can be defined as the rapid increase of global temperatures, accelerated by human activity, and resulting in devastating environmental effects. Most scientists agree that global temperatures have risen dramatically over the past century, due to human activity, and that this rapid increase is having certain negative effects. If global warming continues on this course, it will cause a number of harmful effects including increased natural disasters, agricultural losses, and the destruction of habitats accompanied by the extinction of endangered species.

Notice how the first two sentences hook readers by asking an engaging question and proposing an answer. The next four sentences provide the reader with general background information in the form of facts, definitions, history, etc., which are necessary in order to understand the specific topics discussed in the body of the essay. The final sentence presents a clear thesis statement which identifies the main idea (global warming), reveals the author's purpose for writing (cause and effect), and outlines the 3 main supporting points (effects) that the essay will discuss. Also, notice how the paragraph begins with general information and gradually becomes more and more specific—this is a good approach to take when writing an introduction.

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